

Discussion / Bespreking

The editors have received the following response to Nicholas Visser's reply (*JLS/TLW* 6(3): 370–375) to John Higgins's article, which was published in *JLS/TLW* 6(1/2): 62–76:

**“In Short, Poststructuralist Freudianism”:
Reading through as Misreading.**

John Higgins

Nicholas Visser's reply to my article, “A Missed Encounter: Raymond Williams and Psychoanalysis”, is an interesting example of a certain kind of misreading which I shall call “reading through”. Visser does not read my essay; he reads through it. He reads through it in order to discover something beyond it: in this case, a position he calls “poststructuralist Freudianism”. He reads through it to discover something beyond which he already knows is wrong: poststructuralist Freudianism. He reads through it in order to construct the advocacy of the position he knows is wrong and wishes to criticise: poststructuralist Freudianism. In the end, my essay serves as no more than the pretext for Visser's fulminations against the demon of his own naming – and, at least as regards my essay, his own creation: poststructuralist Freudianism.¹

What is poststructuralist Freudianism? According to Visser it is “the ‘version’ of Freudianism developed by Althusser and Lacan”. Its central tenet, in Visser's words, is that “We are constituted as subjects in and through language, and *nothing else*”. According to Visser, my criticisms of Williams are that he refused to accept or endorse such a position, not realising that poststructuralist Freudianism (always in Visser's definition of course) is incompatible with both Williams's own cultural materialism and with Marxism *per se*. In Visser's eyes, I am therefore guilty of a “serious misrepresentation” of William's work because I fail or refuse to recognise that Williams had in fact criticised just the position which Visser (not Williams) defines as poststructuralist Freudianism in *Marxism and Literature*.

Does Visser have any evidence to offer that I advocate his, Visser's very own, version of poststructuralist Freudianism or that I criticise Williams for not holding it? “I have tried to avoid putting words in Higgins's mouth” he writes; “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.” Of course, a great deal turns – as Visser surely knows – on just whose definition of “a poststructuralist Freudian

dimension" is accepted. I shall accept Visser's definition of it here in order to show that his attribution of that position to me is incorrect.

Does the reader have to assume and believe what Visser assumes and believes about the arguments of my essay? The first question to ask is whether Visser can produce any substantial evidence in support of his beliefs and assumptions – without, of course, "putting words into (my) mouth". Just what is his evidence? Visser writes that such evidence is available "at several points" in the essay; and he picks three quotations – where presumably the evidence is strongest – to support his arguments:

He (Higgins) speaks for instance of the "psychoanalytic conception of language as deeply constitutive of human subjectivity" (65). Later he asserts: "that which belongs to the metapsychological theory and concerns the construction of the subject in language . . . is absent (from Williams)" (69). The point is made most clearly and forcibly 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" (69).

The careful reader will note how Visser's choice of the verb "to speak" rather than "to write" immediately enacts – in a classic example of textual parapraxis – precisely the interpretive error of "putting words into (my) mouth" which he claims he is seeking to avoid. And this initial slip should alert the reader to the central issue here: Visser's method of (mis)reading.²

First, it is important to realise that the best textual evidence he can find to support his assumptions about my views are all and only phrases, fragments of sentences from the essay as a whole (though Visser carefully represents his third fragment as a complete sentence; for details see footnote 3). In ordinary scholarly practice, whole sentences – because sentences make statements – are the primary textual evidence for the attribution of views or beliefs to someone, though even here the question of context is likely to be crucial. But for Visser, perhaps because he lacks any such primary evidence, the very existence of certain phrases in the essay is proof enough for him to assume that I maintain the doctrine of poststructuralist Freudianism as he understands it, as he defines it, and as he refutes it. And Visser does not in any case bother to read these phrases; he prefers to read through them. And this is hardly surprising. For when read attentively rather than merely read through, Visser's own carefully selected evidence suggests just the opposite of what he assumes and what he wishes his reader to assume.

I am willing to grant that perhaps one of the phrases selected by Visser could be read as complicit with, though not necessarily advocacy of, Visser's PF. That is the second phrase he chooses, where I write of "the construction of the subject in language"; but even then, in the context of Visser's own essay, it only draws the attention of the careful reader to the ways in which the two other phrases seek to distance themselves from the implications which Visser insists on seeing on all three. I do indeed write of the "psychoanalytic conception of language as deeply constitutive of human subjectivity"; but Visser ignores or misreads that "deeply". To have written of language as "constitutive of human subjectivity" would have implied Visser's poststruc-

turalist Freudianism of language as *entirely* constitutive; the modifier “deeply” limits that constitutivity: it implies that however deep the constitutivity of language may be, it is not total. Similarly, the phrase “the constitution of the human subject in and through language” consciously avoids the totalising implications that the phrase “the constitution of the human subject in language” would have: “and through” has all the implications of the agency which is denied by Visser’s PF. So that for any attentive reader, that phrase also stands as a corrective to and certainly not an amplification or repetition of “the construction of the subject in language”.

At this point it is perhaps worth mentioning the oddity of Visser’s reference to Brenkman’s *Culture and Domination*. Visser’s footnote implies that Brenkman’s study is in some important sense a more satisfactory account of Freud and Lacan than my own. I would certainly agree that Brenkman’s account is certainly longer and more detailed; but what is crucial in this context is that Brenkman and I seem to agree on the point that is fundamental to my essay. For both of us – as of course for a whole generation of other progressive scholars in literary and cultural studies – Lacan’s work revises Freud in such a way as to make psychoanalysis more interesting to Marxists, mainly because of Lacan’s emphasis on language. As Brenkman puts it: “The importance of Jacques Lacan’s ‘return to Freud’ lies in its transformation of the psychoanalytic problematic into a theory of subjectivity as it is constituted by and through language” (*Culture and Domination*: 142). Indeed, Brenkman’s very own formula – which it would appear Visser would endorse since he endorses Brenkman’s study – differs from mine only in the substitution of “by” for “in”!

All in all, can we say that Visser’s attempt not to “put words into (my) mouth” works? It depends on how you interpret that phrase. In the trivial sense that the words Visser quotes do exist in my essay, Visser succeeds in his obviously difficult attempt. But in its more usual and more serious sense, Visser does fail; he is guilty of “putting words into my mouth” because he misreads the sense of those words. And he does so, in part at least, because he can find no other evidence either to support his assumptions, or to persuade his readers to accept them. In this circular and dogmatic exercise, Visser’s method of (mis)reading is to read through, rather than to read attentively, what I have written. Visser reads through my essay to such an extent that it becomes totally transparent to him. Reading through it, seeing through it, he in the end becomes blind to it.

Or perhaps he is blind to it from the beginning. It would be a tedious task to go through every single distortion and misrepresentation of my arguments which Visser makes in the course of his reply, and *JLS* readers are certainly equipped to do so for themselves without my help and perhaps with more chance of intellectual pleasure than I am likely to find.³ One further example of such distortion should suffice and I choose it because it is, astonishingly, the only moment in Visser’s reply which even touches on the central arguments of my essay. I hope the *JLS* reader will forgive me for only being able to answer Visser’s witty and amusing dismissiveness with an academic and somewhat pedantic precision.

The one and only moment in which Visser pays any attention to the real argument of my essay is over and done with in a paragraph. Visser claims to paraphrase the central argument of my essay as follows:

Williams's *error* was to depend on "second-hand" versions of Freud, "never encountering Freud's work as such" [sic] (74) ... and that what he crucially *lacked* was "any direct encounter with Freud's own writing" (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*" (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*. All this leaves us in a somewhat awkward position since to Higgins's *accusatory* question regarding "what particular version of Freud's work Williams derives his views from, the answer must in good measure be: from Freud's version of Freud's work". (emphases supplied)

This may be an amusing paragraph, but no amount of humour can make its central contention – that Williams derived his views of Freud's work from Freud's work – true. Visser suggests there are two moments of self-contradiction in my argument. The first concerns Williams's quotation from Freud's *Introductory Lectures* in *The Long Revolution*; and the second, Williams's familiarity with Freud's later works. Both of these points are gross misrepresentations of my actual arguments, aided and abetted by Visser's very careful selective quotation, and his extraordinary attribution of violent polemic to my writing. Of course, all the violent terms – "error", "lacked", "absolving", "culpable", "transgression", "unpardonable" and so on are Visser's own; and they serve, I think, a double function. First of all, they add to the humour of the paragraph in such a way as to distract the reader from the actual issues involved; and secondly, that violence is necessary to seek to sustain Visser's self-appointed role as the gallant defender of Williams's intellectual honour.

What I do argue – and provide substantial evidence for – is the view that Williams developed his views on psychoanalysis largely during his reading in the nineteen-fifties for *Culture and Society* and *The Long Revolution*; and that these views were based primarily on his reading of the work of writers such as Alick West, Erich Fromm and, above all, Christopher Caudwell. Indeed, Williams's remarks on psychoanalysis in *The Long Revolution* are on occasion almost a word for word repetition of Caudwell's opinions. The single quotation Williams takes from Freud's work comes up in his discussion of Herbert Read. Since Williams is discussing an essay by Read in which the same passage is quoted, its reappearance in Williams's text does more to suggest that Williams was getting his Freud, in this, the single extensive quotation from Freud in the whole of Williams's *oeuvre*, from Herbert Read. In other words, in the context of my argument, Williams's reference to the passage does not suggest that Williams drew his views on Freud from Freud, but, in this instance, from Herbert Read, and, more generally, second-hand.

Visser's second point – that I demonstrate that “Williams worked through Freud's later writings” – is equally erroneous. First, it ignores my central argument, which was that even if Williams did study later writings like *Civilization and its Discontents* intensively, this would not have helped him to meet the challenge of the new work being done on Freud in the seventies. This new work was more interested (for reasons Metz, whom I quote, sums up) in the Freud of the *Studies on Hysteria*, the great Case Histories, and the Metapsychological Papers: in other words, in Lacan's Freud. What interested me in the essay was that Williams's version of psychoanalysis, picked up in the forties, was conceptually incompatible with the new Lacanian paradigm. Of course, in order to convict my work of “mere eclecticism”, Visser has to blind himself to the central explanatory role played by the concept of conceptual incompatibility in my essay.

It would seem that Visser and I may have very different notion of what constitutes reading and working through in literary and cultural studies (from the evidence of his misreading of my essay, we certainly do). To refute my arguments, Visser would only have to supply evidence of Williams's reading and working through Freud in the sense that critics usually give to these terms. There is, for instance, plenty of evidence that Williams read Orwell and even Hume; read, that is, in the sense of making a detailed analysis and interpretation – precisely, in critical parlance, a reading – of their work, as of so many others. That evidence is Williams's critical writing on their work. But where in Williams's work is the essay on Freud or psychoanalysis? Even Williams had to admit, for a moment at least, in a section of *Politics and Letters* which I discuss in the essay, that his entry on “The Unconscious” in *Keywords* was substantially mistaken.

But this is becoming tedious. In the end, all there is to say to *JLS* readers is that I trust they will read my essay for themselves rather than read through it in the way that Visser recommends. Visser misreads my essay with such an intensity that it is difficult to decide whether this misreading is deliberate and wilful, the product of Visser's own polemical agenda, or accidental and woeful, the result of laziness and inattention.

I almost prefer to believe that it is the former.

Notes

1. I shall occasionally abbreviate this awkward and unwieldy term to PF in the course of this response. The real reason for its existence is that it allows Visser to shift from the conceptual grounds of my essay – the terms of Williams's hostility to psychoanalysis; to the grounds of Visser's argument concerning Williams and language theory, and his opposition to Saussurean and post-Saussurean thinking. We might say that Visser's misreading begins with the very title of my essay – not, as Visser's reply would demand “A Missed Encounter: Raymond Williams and Poststructuralism”, but, much more specifically, “A Missed Encounter: Raymond Williams and Psychoanalysis”.
2. Even more interesting for the careful reader is Visser's statement of concern regarding the accuracy of his descriptions of Williams's position. “Circumscribing my discussion in this way” he writes, “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." Since concern for such accuracy is or should be standard academic procedure, why should Visser feel the need to reinscribe it here, unless he was aware on some level that he was betraying just that procedure elsewhere in his reply, in fact, with regard to my arguments? It is precisely the dynamics of the denial and repression involved in such awareness "on some level" that make a category like the "textual unconscious" so productive.

3. For instance: my point on page 69 is not – as Visser is eager to construe it – that Althusser was right and that Williams was wrong in regard to the question of ideology; but rather that in Williams's critique of Althusser's positions "a whole dimension of assessment – that which belongs to the metapsychological theory and concerns the construction of the subject in language – is absent, is never encountered as such", and that this weakens and limits the force and interest of Williams's criticisms of Althusser; the third phrase he quotes ends "with its consequent emphasis on the constitutive discourses of human social life" – which refocuses the entire question away from language and onto discourse; *pace* Visser, every mention I make of Althusser and Lacan is intended to emphasise their distinctiveness (hardly surprising when my essay "Raymond Williams and the Problem of Ideology" discussed this matter at some length; etc, etc . . .

Reference

Brenkman, John
1985

Culture and Domination. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.