

needs to be supplemented with a perspective which makes room for other factors:

My point is that reflection on 'ourselves' whenever we presume to confront ourselves with 'others' is not just matter solely of texts and critical analyses of discourse. Self-reflection is not solely an epistemological affair, and I do not believe that the fabric from which our dealings with 'other' people are made will be properly elucidated that way (Voestermans 1991:222)

A critical engagement with the problematic as Voestermans sets it out could have benefited Van der Merwe's study, and would have tempered the tendency to generalisation in the study, which is one of the functions critical theoretical engagement is supposed to fulfil.

But maybe one should also not be too critical of Van der Merwe, seeing his study in context. Afrikaans literary scholarship is still struggling to free itself from the grip of formalism, a painful process for most (aesthetically inclined) literary scholars. Just at this level a lot of opposition still exists with regard to sociologically orientated study, and if Van der Merwe's study helps to break this barrier, it would have served its purpose, despite its shortcomings.

Introducing Literature Criticism and Theory

*An Introduction to Literature Criticism and Theory:
Key Critical Concepts*

by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle

London, Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995, 238 pp

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This text has been prescribed for the first time for the English I students at the University of Durban-Westville as their text for the literary theory part of their course. It is a very different text from the usual introductions to literary

theory that seem to have been written with undergraduate students in mind, such as Raman Selden's *A Reader's Guide to Literary Theory* (in its various editions), and Roger Webster's *Studying Literary Theory*. The book represents a near quantum leap advance in innovative thinking regarding the kind of literary theory that should be taught at universities (particularly to undergraduate students) and a more purely academic and theoretical level, and the nature of the relationship between literature and literary analysis and theory.

Bennett and Royle's text is far more user friendly than the kind of introductions to literary theory (or theory 'primers') that are currently on offer. Gone is the old chronological arrangement that gives an account of the historical development of the different theories, and which, whilst providing students with a map of the terrain, reveals a tendency to put theories into different pigeonholes, which to some extent falsifies the degree to which the various theoretical positions are the products of all kinds of interesting dialogues and cross-fertilisations. I would argue that rigid classifications here are often counter-productive when it comes to teaching literary theory to students whose conceptual development within the field is at issue, and whose initial question upon meeting literary theory for the first time is, invariably, 'How does it assist me in the analysis of the prescribed texts?'

This is exactly the kind of question that Bennett and Royle's text answers, though their 'answer' is a lot more open-ended than the askers of such questions would seem to expect. The authors' refusal to deal with theories in a historical, compartmentalising manner is compatible with their clear intention not to separate theory and literature, to make the study of the two things so interconnected, as to be all part of one study. Theory is, obviously an ongoing process, and the authors have successfully captured both a sense of the openness of the discipline (that there will always be change, developments and even the new Copernican revolutions), as well as a sense in which the advances in theories have changed the perspectives that we have on the relationship between text and reader and text and world, and the way in which we talk about and conduct our practice within the discipline.

Whilst it is abundantly clear that the text has absorbed the most important developments in deconstruction, semiotics, gender criticism and cultural studies, what is most surprising and delightful about this text is the innovative and imaginative way in which such theories have been used to demystify the whole area of the literary, whilst at the same time addressing the deeper and more 'religious' issues regarding literature, such as its social and political role, and its relationship to such powerful ethico-religious categories such as 'evil' and the 'sacred'.

What Bennett and Royle have provided here is a map for wandering and self-exploration across the only recently recharted map of the 'fields' (forgive the pun) of literary theory and literary studies (the latter subsuming

the former). Indeed, as they point out in their introduction, the book need not be read in a linear fashion at all: the student, they suggest, should feel free to read the chapters in whatever order she or he finds most interesting or profitable. The book is also singularly free from any of the authoritarian and mechanistic tendencies that bedevil some theories and critical positions; here their most radical insight regarding the relationship between text, reader and meaning is that readers are 'made' by texts, as much as texts (in the now traditional post-structuralist wisdom) texts are 'made' by readers.

Here Bennett and Royle's vision of the reader has very important implications for the teaching of literature to university students. Their idea that readers become textually engaged at a very deep level of subjective identification, and are often acted upon and changed as a result of this, has important implications for how the teaching of literature is conceptualised, and raises important issues regarding the presence and role of literary theory, the choice of prescribed texts, and the way in which these texts are taught. The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from their view of how important the reader/text interaction can be, is surely that the student should become the primary focus in all of these areas I have just mentioned, and that student input should be elicited at the level of primary planning.

Though the examples that are cited in the text are wide-ranging, including both high literature and popular literary and other cultural forms, they presume a cultural capital comparative with that of the British undergraduate to whom (and to whose teachers) the text is primarily addressed. Although the text does not have a Eurocentric bias at the level of theory or of cultural politics, because of its primary audience many of these examples presuppose a basic knowledge of literature and of contemporary cultural world, that South African students do not possess. This is, unquestionably the greatest drawback of this otherwise quite excellent text. The British undergraduate who has probably heard of Ozymandias, and who probably saw the film *Falling Down* and knows of the satirical *Absolutely Fabulous* television programme (three of the cultural examples the authors use) does not have many South African counterparts. The only reference to African or South African material is to Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*: three separate references that include a brief comment on the way in which the text explores the social and political aspects of 'story', and two comments on the tragic dimension to Achebe's narrative.

Profoundly influenced by Bakhtinian and psychoanalytical thinking, the authors have provided very different angles on some of the key ideas in literary theory, which serve to connect hitherto seemingly quite disparate critical ideas and methods of analysis. The unusual choices for the thematic focuses of some of the chapters in the book clearly reveals the authors' receptivity to new thinking and approaches. They do not seem to be afraid to

present the more radical implications of the new thinking—such as the impact on the literary institution and its concern with serious ideas and serious literature, especially of a canonical kind, of a thoroughly relativising and irreverent post-Bakhtinian politics of laughter.

Ultimately, as their marvellous little chapter on the postmodern makes clear, the authors present a view of literature that is thoroughly postmodern: that eschews certainties and master narratives, emphasises fluidity and offers a critique of the institution as too rigidly bound to categories that literature, the object of its whole pedagogic and discursive activity, would seem to confute and subvert. It could well be argued that it is this kind of postmodern critique, that asks basic questions and puts untested assumptions and preconceptions on the line that is particularly relevant to the South African situation with the popularity of theoretical (and political) models that are beset by a conceptual and categorial rigidity.
