

IN CLASS WITH BERTENS & CO.: A VERY BRIEF (COMPARATIVE, CRITICAL, AND CASUAL) HOMAGE

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In fall 2006, during my visiting professorship in Canada, I had the pleasure of teaching MLCS / C. LIT/ EASIA 507, an introductory course in literary theory. It looked a bit complicated as the course was meant for a very heterogeneous group of graduate students. This group consisted of MAs and PhDs deriving from three different departments: Modern Languages, Comparative Literature and East Asian Studies. "Heterogeneous" meant that not only were the backgrounds of students diverse, but so was their previous knowledge of literary theory—and their willingness to indulge in it. Moreover, the course had existed already in a well-established format, using as mandatory readings J.Wolfreys's *Literary Theories: A Reader & Guide* (1999), and H.Bertens's *Literary Theory: The Basics* (2001), in addition to L.Tyson's *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (1999) as a recommended addition. In a way, this teaching experience reminded me of the discipline of parallel slalom which is fairly widespread in my ski-loving homeland, Austria. Or shall I call it "figure skating," with my students as an occasionally über-critical audience and I as a referee? Analogies aside, I shall sketch the outcome of this informal competition in Comparative Theory in the following essay.

To begin, I would not have chosen Wolfreys, but instead the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (or one of the available Blackwell readers). There are several reasons for this. First, I have always loved the "Bible" format of the Norton anthology project as it is a reader that stays with you almost all of your life (or at least for most of your studies) due to the immense comprehensiveness of its widespread theory canon it escapes the dangers of an overly-specialized choice. The *Norton Anthology* is so multi-functional that it invites its employment in several courses and not only in critical theory. Second, I very rarely agree with the choices Wolfreys has made.

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Central theoretical texts are missing—perhaps due to copyright issues?—and/or are replaced by texts less representative of a certain theoretical school. In general, Wolfreys's reader is too partisan poststructuralist. This is made visible when it comes to the "Cultural Studies" section, in which the theory of John Hillis Miller becomes authoritative in an essay excerpt. To me this seems akin to somebody who, before going on a longer vacation, is looking for a professional pet sitter and chooses the local knacker for this job. *Mais bon*, this should not be my major point of concern here. But perhaps this should: my students were merciless in almost univocally suggesting on my reading evaluation forms that I remove Wolfreys's compilation from the future course syllabus.

What I found even more interesting was the "race" that took place between the introductory works of Hans Bertens (U of Utrecht, Netherlands) and Lois Tyson (Grand Valley State U, US). In the long run of their *tour de force* through the manifold schools of literary and cultural theory—which is, if you excuse the pun, something like the *Tour de France* for the authors of introductory textbooks—Bertens took the lead. Whereas Tyson passes the various schools, approaching them more arbitrarily (his intention might have been a chronological ordering), Bertens develops a more convincing structure: he starts with the chapter "Reading for Meaning" (1-29) and then proceeds to "Structuralism," which allows him to mention in passing several micro- and macro-structures of literary texts such as signs, tropes, *fabula* / *syuzhet*, binary oppositions, genres, etc. (even with a brief introduction to narratology). Thus the reader is (re-)introduced to the basics of literary studies and interpretation before s/he is thrown into the cold pleasures of pure theory. This didactic approach to theory draws the reader's attention to the very literariness of literature from the beginning, to the fact "that we are dealing with language and not with the real world" (Bertens 34), the crucial secret of representation that stays alien to many of our students throughout their careers. 235

There are stages where Tyson gains ground in the CompLit 507 theory race. Bertens, for instance, has no special section on reader-response theories in his book (like Tyson, 153-96), and is a bit short on approaches that focus on gender and sexuality (such as queer theory, cf. Bertens 217-36). Bertens does not say much either about the transition from literary to cultural studies; but in this respect Tyson stays fairly tacit as well, summarizing the cultural turn in the "New Historicism" chapter under the term of "cultural criticism" (292-99). Both authors could easily fill these gaps in future editions of their helpful books in order to avoid accusations of being too conservative, philologist, hostile (or resistant at the very least) to the theoretical frameworks of cultural (and other) studies which might contribute to the rejuvenation of literary studies.

In other respects, Tyson and Bertens are fairly similar. Both introductions to literary theory offer concluding summaries at the end of each chapter as well as suggestions for further readings. Tyson scores again insofar as she also offers student questions. What was intended as another surplus, however, became questionable in

the eyes of my students. Tyson offers interpretations of *The Great Gatsby* in each section according to the respective approaches that are discussed, because “the novel is fairly short, quite readable, and familiar,” and “many of [her] colleagues who teach critical theory have indicated” this particular text “for its literary applications” (xiii-iv). Using one particular literary text as a frame of reference for discussing and applying theories is a widespread teaching device indeed (I chose *Madame Bovary*), but it can be questionable as well. First, it runs the risk of being too “-centric” (in this case Americocentric). Second, it might undermine its purpose by becoming boring. And third, a larger variety of textual applications would be more desirable since one singular text can hardly exemplify all theoretical schools (in my case, attempts at postcolonial readings of *Madame Bovary* become rather awkward).

236 A last category of comparison could be the personal approach of Bertens and Tyson, in other words, their individual style of presenting theories. In this respect I found Bertens more compact and portable than Tyson, who uses more words, and thus is probably more didactic in the American sense of the word. Just one little example, but a very demanding one, quasi the pinnacle of teaching theory: namely the attempt to convey the deeper meaning of that nihilistic gnosis of postmodernism called “deconstruction”. Whereas Tyson divides the topic into four aspects (“Deconstructing Language,” “Our World,” “Human Identity,” and “Literature,” 241-53) and starts with an example (i.e., analysing the sentence *Time flies like an arrow*, 242-43), Bertens dares to give an attempted definition as early as the second paragraph:

Deconstruction takes its name from Derrida’s practice: his strategy of analysing and dismantling texts or, more usually, parts of texts in order to reveal their inconsistencies and inner contradictions [according to decon. theory, they actually dismantle themselves, CR]. At the heart of deconstruction is [thus] the effort to dismantle the cover-ups that texts use to create the semblance of stable meaning; their attempt to create privileged “centres”—implicit or explicit binary oppositions—with the help of all sorts of rhetorical means. (131)

When arriving at this definition (whose shortcomings we might find excusable), Bertens seems to have followed in the footsteps of Jonathan Culler by naming central features of deconstruction: “presence/absence,” “binary oppositions,” etc., and before that the catchy title “Poststructuralism: the Cretan paradox and its Albany solution” (119), a good example of the nicely dry humor of the author which is never overdone.

Thus, after having spent a Canadian fall with these texts, in the eyes of this teacher it came down to the (hopefully also excusable) blunt equation that Bertens is more “European” in his take on literary theory while Tyson is more “North American”. And, however you might assess the importance of the points made here by my students and me, with this introduction, Bertens has once more shown his distinction as a stimulating researcher in the field of CompLit, but also as a didactically solid teacher of theory who does not need to shun the comparison with Eagleton’s bestsell-

ing *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (which is very entertaining, but less systematic). Or, as one of my students wrote in his evaluations: “Thank you, Uncle Hans”.

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