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REVIEW ESSAY

Literature and Its Insistent Other

Mieke Bal

The Literary Guide to the Bible. Edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. Cambridge, Mass. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987. 678 pages. \$29.95.

The reader of this voluminous book is well advised not to read it from cover to cover. Begin with the first three of the general essays at the end and read Josipovici's essay on the Epistle to the Hebrews as another such general essay. These four articles thoroughly shake up our common conceptions of the Bible.

Josipovici demonstrates how Hebrews is an appropriation of the Bible yet is not monolithic; the Epistle as a text is contradictory, its stance impossible. Greenfield and Elsom present the Hebrew and the Greek Bibles respectively in their Canaanite and Greco-Roman contexts and in relation to genre, poetic techniques, and mythical elements. These presentations are more than merely useful; they are indispensable to begin thinking about the Bible not as the religious handbook it culturally has been assigned to be, but as a set of literary texts. Leach's analysis of a recurrent mythical structure proposes an even wider context and performs the master-stroke of showing that religious truth—his nice phrase is "mytho-logic"—requires in itself a tendency to unification; hence the similitude in various mythical materials. This similitude, then, undermines any pretensions to uniqueness and truth. And that seems a good starting point for a fresh perspective.

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Relations between biblical and literary scholarship tend to be limited to the question of "literary readings of the Bible"—to the question if, and to what extent, the Bible can, deserves, and needs to be read "as" literature. But that question is wrongly put and betrays an attempt to separate religious from secular concerns. Such an attempt is futile. The Bible, as at least partially a religious document, has been formative of Western culture. Contemporary culture carries the weight of the Bible with it, as it carries the rest of its foundational texts. And diverse forms and degrees of religiosity are part of that culture. Literature, the cultural need of literary texts and of literary "life"—in other words, the literary attitude, ideology, or way of life—is similarly an undeniable part of the same culture. Hence, the Bible is both entirely religious, whatever that may mean, and entirely literary.

What a "literary guide" to the Bible should bring us, then, is reflection not on the question of literature, but on the question of *reading*. It is through that question that biblical and literary scholarship can be mutually illuminating. Mutually: that is, without imperialist claims that "theory" is merely an "instrument" for "application." Mutually: that is, without imperialist claims that the Bible is "primary," "foundational," "true." Each of the terms in quotation marks is equally problematic. *Reading* is the term that can help undermine the false certainties, truths, and positivity of both disciplines—for the betterment of both.

In literary theory, influenced as it is by philosophical developments, the fact of reading has recently led to a thorough critique of the assumptions of close reading and structuralism (Culler 1975, 1981, 1983). The leading question in those debates is that of the location of meaning. New Criticism's claim that meaning is located in the text and only needs close reading to be "extracted" has remained the implicit presupposition of much biblical scholarship. Structuralism, which seemed a reaction to New Criticism but now looks much more like its offshoot, provides that claim with a "scientific" (because generalizing) view of language. The power of the text is still absolute for many a scholar and thus provides him or her with the appropriate veil covering "reading in," the projection of group-bound and interest-oriented meanings on a text.

According to more recent developments, meaning is a product of the act of reading. Radical reader-response critics deny the very existence of the object named "text," as Stanley Fish's famous book title, *Is There a Text in this Class?* suggests (see Suleiman and Crossman; Tompkins). As Culler has demonstrated in "Stories of Reading" (1983), however, this radical position easily inverts to its very opposite whenever the critic writes about meanings. Although meaning is located with the critic, the

critic "at work" protects him—or herself by claiming that the meanings one puts forward are more "plausible" than others because the text "lends itself" to these meanings. Hence, we float back into the textual positivism before we know it. The opposite is true as well; to defend their views, textual critics ultimately need to claim that their meanings are the most "adequate" because the text "suggests" them to the reader. Hence, the meaning resides with the reader.

The most interesting challenge to biblical interpretation by current literary theory is in this evasiveness of the location of meaning. For this instability leaves us with the responsibility to account for our meanings in other than positivistic terms. Not only does a literary perspective force us to endorse what we want to say as our own response to the text, it also enables us to exploit that very instability by opening up the text to issues, interests, and perspectives that positivism tends to close off. The best essays in the *Guide* exemplify this. The four essays I recommend as a starter loosen up the text and our fixed assumptions about it; they thus make room for other meanings to be brought in, not as another truth but as responsible responses that address the position of the text in a social context. A *literary* guide should do precisely that. The question is: to what extent is this book helpful in that respect?

The general reflections proposed by the four essays mentioned above offer enough guidance to then begin with a few selected pieces that give the best idea of what such *literary* approaches can offer: Polzin on speech-acts in Deuteronomy—the very best one of the book—Ackerman on irony and intertextuality in Jonah, Alter on poetic techniques in Psalms. The combination of the four general and the three specific essays together makes for a quite exciting reading experience. But if we want to evaluate the book not only as the collection of good and not-so-good essays but also as the realization of the project spelled out in its title, then we must wonder how such an enterprise, a literary *guide* to the Bible, is possible.

The question is multiple: who guides whom to what, and on which authority? Who: forty scholars with specific literary views. According to the General Introduction and to most authors, they believe in the unity of the text, in its complexity, and in the specificity of its language as the three features that make it literary. They oppose historical criticism on the one side and critical approaches focusing on ideological problems on the other, while Deconstruction—written with a capital letter—is the personified enemy. This view of literature, which is closer to good old New Criticism than to any contemporary critical view, constitutes the unity of the book, and to that unity the reader is guided. In

other words, the reader is guided in precisely the opposite direction from the questioning and repositioning of meanings that a truly literary guide should offer.

Such a view would be innocent enough—even if less than exciting in 1988 (when the book appeared)—if it did not inevitably entail exclusions, which the editors present almost proudly in their general introduction. The exclusions are not only unwarranted, but insistently contradicted. The explicit exclusions are threefold. First, the view that the text originates in ideology or social structure is rejected. Yet Alter, one of the authors of the general introduction where the exclusions are stated, uses the word ideology three times on pages 12 and 13, calls biblical literature “a kind of ideological literature that incorporates a reflex of ideological autocritique” (24), and calls the relation between text and (views of) reality a “sadly neglected question” (620). Second, Marxism and psychoanalysis are excluded, the former because it is judged relevant only for historical questions—which implies the unwarranted statement that historical questions do not belong to the domain of the “literary”—and the latter for no reason at all. Yet Sasson on Ruth appeals to social history throughout. Third, the idea that literature somehow serves for illumination is excluded, with Deconstruction and feminism as the examples. Yet Josipovici’s contribution is clearly a deconstructionist approach (e.g., 516), and Gunn is the exceptional author who does not shy away from feminist statements (313).

The exclusions cover everything that today’s literary debates are engaged with. The book’s project is thus to avoid debate and thereby to increase the authority of the guidance. Does the return of the excluded views prove that the book is better than its project? Yes and no.

The inevitable return of the repressed makes the book slightly better. For example, the book lacks almost all references to literary theory, does not consistently address the question of what makes a text or a reading literary, and does not further state which view of literature is held by each of the authors, while the remarks in the Introduction to this effect are extremely vague. Yet there are discussions of these issues, or at least statements about them in the seven pieces I recommended for a beginning, precisely to the extent that they transgress the limitations stipulated by the editors.

Take Polzin’s article on Deuteronomy. Why is this a good piece? Polzin presents Deuteronomy as a set of speech-acts oriented toward the question of narratorial authority. The text is not presented as a message but as evidence of the urgency to utter one. Thus, he addresses the question of the ideological effect of form. He sees in the book a play of

quotations, and thus he presents literature as embedded in a culture to which it responds. He presents characters as divided against themselves. His double Moses (97) is revealing and demonstrates the literary complexity of the text in relation to this ideological urgency. Polzin knows about literary theory and is able to put it to a use that helps seeing, not *that* the text is literary—in whatever vague sense of complex, painful, problematic—but *why* it is and had to be so. The literariness of the text, which Polzin locates in the dialogical form of embedded and crossing quotations of different voices, is not a petrified feature of the text but an effect of the interaction between the text’s structure and the reader who assigns meaning to that structure. Polzin emphasizes and exploits the text’s “difference within,” opening it up for considerations of interests, instead of denying or ignoring that interest-boundness. He thus achieves exactly what a literary guide should do, but what the General Introduction insists the *Guide* will not do.

But in other respects the contradiction produced by explicit exclusions that cannot be sustained does not make for a better book. It proves in the first place that the book is—to appropriate in my turn the editors’ appropriation of the deconstructionist phrase—“divided against itself”; hence, it is an object for deconstruction. Second, because the exclusions are impossible, yet attempted, we must wonder about the motivations for this attempt. Third, the contradictions suggest something about the guidance promised and imposed. But addressing these questions requires more information about the book; hence, I will first give a quick sketch of some of the specific essays, raise some critical questions, and speculate about the motivations and assumptions behind these problematic aspects of the essays.

Some essays are good, illuminating without simplifying, like Alter on Psalms—Alter is much better in his critical practice than in his defensive theoretical statements—and Ackerman on Jonah. In general, the essays tend to be better when they do not rest on an *a priori* unique principle. Damrosh on Leviticus presents a generic mixture—the narrative side of which I find a little light—but most contributors follow a simple (and simplistic) technique, mainly the pursuit of symmetry or so-called ring-composition.

This simple technique yields mixed results. Let me give some examples. Gunn begins with a somewhat flat thematic presentation of Judges, but then moves on to discuss how speech-acts kill women. Rosenberg presents a fascinating description of character in Samuel but falls short when he fabricates a symmetry where there is none and when he buys the ideologically suspect argument that the rape of Bathsheba is

"just" an etiological tale. This raises a question of a more general impact.

The argument of etiology is so general, and so often applied, that the real question is not whether etiology is a possible explanation of the insertion of a story into the canon, but why this explanation is appealed to. Etiology is invariably alleged when a story is critical of a hero—David, Jephthah—and thereby embarrassing for the critic committed to redeem such a hero. The interesting question then becomes: what exactly embarrasses the critic in a story that makes the argument compelling? This argument invariably shows up when a story is about how men deal with women; Jephthah's daughter is the most obvious case. It is significant in this respect that both editors use such a story as an example in their introductions to the two Bibles.

Savran on Kings provides a complex portrayal of Ahab. He, too, comes up with a symmetry, of which the middle part—supposed to be a climax—consists of no less than 18 chapters. This is hardly convincing and in fact unnecessarily complicates an otherwise interesting analysis. Alonso Schökel provides a good analysis of lyrical and rhetorical, mainly metaphorical, aspects in Isaiah. A special compliment is due to both him and his translator for the brilliant English rendering, via his Spanish, of a Hebrew sound imitation of an earthquake (182).

Sasson's view of Ruth is irritatingly unargued. He claims without any justification that Levirate marriage is not at stake. His view that Boaz's words to the anonymous redeemer imply that Boaz would acquire Ruth is unargued, yet implausible; I claim they threaten the redeemer that he would have to take Ruth in the package. The view of the conversation between Ruth and Boaz at the nightly surprise visit flattens out all that makes the story interesting and unnecessarily turns Boaz's compliment into an (ironic?) rebuke. Sasson belittles the female characters unnecessarily.

Landy on the Song of Songs wants to discuss the obvious love theme without reductionism. For him, the Song is ultimately about the limits of language and the paradoxes of literature they entail, and love makes the best case to demonstrate these issues. Talmon on Daniel manages to discuss three separate approaches: imagery, structure (a 3+1 pattern), and the plot of successful exile. Kermode on John compares the passion narratives in the gospels and makes good points about the narrator, whom he identifies on textual grounds as the beloved disciple and presents as a moveable narrative focus (464). Goulder deconstructs the Pauline epistles, in which the use of images is highly contradictory; he finds that normal in Paul's writings.

So far, the results are mixed. Would the book have been better without the explicit, yet impossible, exclusions? I think so. Let me briefly take feminism as an example. A more open application of, or reflection on, feminist criticism would have made the book better. A few examples of how some essays could have been improved must suffice. Landy begins by defining the Lover as the man and the Beloved as the woman, thus assuming the ideology of active versus passive genders. He explicitly states that the woman is waiting for Prince Charming—thus setting a neat context for his onesidedness, but at the cost of anachronistic and ethnocentric distortion; the Song is not a fairy tale. He then is baffled by the text's "complexity" when it does not obey this assumption. The woman in the Song is, of course, not in the least a Sleeping Beauty but rather a very active lover, and the subject-object relations shift constantly. Had Landy been informed by recent feminist discussions on the non-essentialist subject (see Lemaire), he would not have had to write naively: "What is striking here is the primacy of the woman" (313), and he would have been able to turn *his* occasional surprises into the *text's* systematic complexity. This raises the question of the location of meaning again. I am not claiming the text's "right" against Landy's "wrong," as a radical autonomist would do, nor would I suggest that he should have come to the text loaded with explicit feminist baggage, as a radical reader-response critic might. I would suggest that acknowledging interestedness in himself would have opened the text up to him; it would have enabled the text to interact more actively with a critic whose position and authority is no more fixed than that of the text. If only Landy had allowed the text to interact with contemporary issues like feminist discussions of the subject, he would have done a better job as a *literary* analyst.

As I mentioned earlier, Alter turns Jephthah's horrible sacrifice into a reassuring etiological tale. He thus misses the link with Achsah's story, which his own concept of type-scene should have allowed him to see. He persists in the conventional but, I think, erroneous view that Jephthah's mother, called *zonah*, is a plain harlot, and in order to save this contemptuous view he needs to attribute to Jephthah's hostile brothers the gentleness of euphemism at the very moment that they kick him out because of this mother—hardly plausible and absolutely uninteresting. This interpretation is based on the sheer automatic endorsement of a negative view of the female character. More importantly within the framework of the present discussion, this view fails as a literary reading. First, it is anachronistic—projecting contemporary views of gender on a foreign text. Second, it flattens the text out, blurs its apparent contradic-

tions, and thereby fails to render it *interesting*. An open eye to the strange aspects of the social status of female characters in Judges could have suggested alternative views. For example, it can be argued that the kinship problem at stake here is much more profound; the women called *zonah* or *pilegash* in Judges belong to a different marriage system, where the woman remains with her father after the marriage (Bal). This argument explains many incomprehensible facets in the stories of Achsah, Jephthah, Samson's first marriage, and the horror story of Judges 19. Explaining the sacrifice story away as an etiological tale obscures the interconnections among the three stories in Judges in which a young woman is murdered. Alter's own concept of type-scene almost imposes itself then. By the same token, Alter's forgetfulness of that concept displays its problematic status. Unlike the claims of the author of *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, the concept of type-scene is a tool by which the critic is enabled to argue for a structural similarity s/he perceives, not a fool-proof feature of the text. Therefore, the etiological explanation fails as a literary approach even on the author's own terms.

Sasson tries to "normalize" the tension in Ruth; he discusses characters as real people, projects onto them his views of how real people should behave, and thus evades the problem of linearity in the story. Similarly, Rosenberg mistakenly projects Hannah's problem with her fellow-wife Peninnah on Sarah and Hagar, while the comparison with Rachel and Leah would have been more to the point. Rachel and Leah compete for children and the husband, and trade the one for the other. The case is relevant as a subtext for Hannah's story because of the role played by the husband and his "love." In the case of Sarah and Hagar the husband's affection is not an issue, only the children's status.

In all of these cases, a feminist perspective would have yielded better results in three respects. It would have opened the text up to insights into interestedness of critic as well as of the writer and the culture in which the text emerged; hence, the result would benefit more from contemporary literary theory. It would have accounted for more complexity; hence, the result would be better according to the book's own view of literariness. And some plain mistakes could have been avoided.

The same can be said of the more implicit exclusions. I consider as such the avoidance of discussions that a literary reading would naturally raise when a different text is at stake. Monotheism, for example, is underilluminated, and the ways in which the text constructs it—by no means a univocal message—could have been analyzed in terms of the ideological urgency that Polzin evokes in a different context. A good analysis of the construction of monotheism would have been illuminat-

ing for the *literary* aspects of many books; an obvious example is Judges. Another obvious example of implicit exclusion is the problem of canonization. This subject is discussed, but only in a defensive way. In addition to Kermode's witty yet plainly ideological defense of the canon, the canon should have been challenged. In relation to the problem of canonization, at least an argument for the exclusion of the apocrypha would have been called for, precisely because some of these books are so popular in the *literary* afterlife of the Bible. What made the stories of Susannah or of Tobias so fascinating for later Western culture? Are they "literary" in a way different from the canonical books? What does this say about our concept of the literary? These would have been good questions to discuss.

But exclusions, especially the untenable ones, which are ideologically motivated, go with unification; and there lies precisely the deeper relation between the innocent looking concept of literariness and the ideological project, the real *guidance* this book proffers. This imposed, defensive unity is ideological. It is precisely in its refusal to deal with ideology that the *Guide* betrays its own commitments. The concept of symmetry or ring-composition, the outcome of much analysis of motifs, can demonstrate this.

A motif, apparently a verifiable literary unit, is interpreted as (part of) a message: e.g., active kingship *versus* decline and death (Rosenberg or Samuel; 137), or gift becomes blessing, (Fokkelman on Genesis; 52). Thus motif becomes motive, becomes motivation, both for the projected authorial intention and for the reader-guide. The alleged symmetry in Samuel, with a climax of 18 chapters, points to divine intervention; that of Genesis to the valuation of brotherhood. As we saw in Polzin's essay, form, or structure, is not meaningless; nor does it come unmotivated. The structure of symmetry proclaims its own message, its own meaning; that development and change are less relevant than identity, that the text is more stable, reliable, and important than its readings; that the structure goes back to the beginning, which ultimately means back to God. The ring becomes the wedding-ring of these authors' commitments. The unity of the text coincides with its ideological message, which is time and again projected as an intention. The very insistence on intention betrays the uneasiness that comes with projection. This projected message leads far away from the literary concerns. In fact, it unmistakably leads back to religious preaching. Thus, Genesis, in this literary guide, is all about brotherhood, a concept feminists have learned to suspect. Whatever the ethical, religious, or ideological value of brother-

hood as message, or whatever its status as meaning, in its simplicity such an outcome seems hardly a plausible result of literary analysis.

It now becomes clear why it was impossible to repress the master-symptom of the book's basic problems: the spelling of Deconstruction with a capital letter. As the view most appropriate to see through these inevitable but implicit problems, deconstruction is the enemy par excellence; it is the Devil. Indeed, it is hard to deny that a deconstructionist, or, for that matter, Marxist, feminist, or psychoanalytic perspective on this book would be tough to accommodate; but who said it should be easy?

Other symptoms of these problematic relations between overtly anti-ideological—but covertly deeply ideological—literary views surface regularly. They show inadvertently that the stake of this self-enclosed method is to convey a sense of authority, which turns my initial question—Who guides whom to what?—into an urgent one. Thus Alter's chapter on poetry begins with the word "precisely" and ends with the word "truth." As I hope to have demonstrated, the *Guide* does indeed have a stake in its own truth, and that truth requires the establishment of the authority of the authors at the cost of the excluded. That very fact makes the exclusion of women as such authorities a serious matter: thirty-nine authors are men, one is a woman. I do not speak of feminists here, but of just a few of the by now numerous good literary-biblical scholars who are women.

The authoritative status of this *Guide* is further conveyed by its physical presentation, whose pomposity lacks any self-irony. The book looks like a Bible. Its jacket imitates the appearance of a medieval manuscript. The abundant gold adds an effect of preciousness. The cover itself lets the words "The literary guide to the" fade out in front of the much bolder and larger characters of "Bible." It has the size and the number of pages of a Bible; all that lacks is the ribbon bookmark. And indeed, it is so much *like* the Bible—in a certain holistic, appropriated reading of it—to be a good guide to the Bible.

This book should not be mistaken for what it is not. It is religious rather than literary; it provides no explicit discussion of what a literary approach can be; it does not demonstrate how a literary reading of the Bible can be useful, enriching, even for those who are interested in the Bible as religious document. Despite the plurality of different contributors, it does not propose, but imposes, an exclusive and rigid view of literature. Maybe a literary guide to the Bible cannot be written; maybe we don't need one. Maybe the uneasy collocation of "literary" and

"guide" is a *contradictio in terminis*. Current debates in literary theory suggest as much.

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