Book Reviews Comptes rendus

Richard Strier. *Resistant Structures. Particularity, Radicalism, and Renaissance Texts*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995. Pp. xiii, 239.

This is an exciting book in the tradition of criticism which has come to be expected from Richard Strier — that is, a forceful mode combining polemical energies with genuinely serious scholarship. In his previous writing, particularly on the poetry of George Herbert, he has made significant interventions into the critical debate, always eager to fight a corner (especially that of the Calvinist Herbert) but backing up his discursive blows with the support of carefully accumulated evidence and sensitive readings. All of these features are again to be discerned in *Resistant Structures*, but in the context of a new and largely appealing contention: that critical readers must break out of the fixed schemes and presuppositions by which historical periods are unnecessarily limited and literary texts are unhappily constrained. Strier the polemicist is undoubtedly at work, but his new book leads us in a more general critical and philosophical direction than his earlier studies.

The book's title refers to two types of "resistance" which are commended during his discussions. The first is simply the energy inherent in texts, which resists categorisation by the reader. The second is that which Strier seeks to encourage specifically in the reader, who must, in his view, avoid being coerced by *a priori* assumptions, ideologies, theories or any other totalising impulses. Inevitably, a resistant voice pops up in the reader — or this reader, at least — wondering whether this insistence upon an avoidance of coercion is not in itself a form of critical coercion. Strier, not surprisingly, anticipates this objection, and defends himself with the following claim: "I have tried to make my orientations explicit, and though I do a good deal of polemicizing against various critical and historical schemes, I hope not to have put forth any dogmas" (p. 8). There is evidently a distinction, in

Strier's mind, between dogmas and schemes (negative) on the one hand, and orientations and methods (mainly positive) on the other. "I have tried to keep my own claims methodologically modest," he points out, adding, with a good deal of self-knowledge, "Other forms of modesty I do not aspire to" (p. 8). There is an engagingly robust honesty here which sets the tone for the whole book: we know we are dealing with a critic who has abandoned any vestigial doubts and is outspokenly committed to the case he argues.

How, then, does Strier set forth his argument against "the totalizing impulse that tempts interpretive and explanatory hypotheses" (p. 4)? His book is divided into two parts, the first focusing on the critical schemes of individuals or movements which he considers damaging to the reading of English Renaissance texts, and the second concentrating on authors and primary texts from the seventeenth century. Fortunately, the second part is the more substantial since it contains the more original and enlightening discussions. The first exhibits a problem which is all too familiar in literary criticism; I am not at all sure that I want to read Strier's views on Empson's views of Tuve's views of Herbert's poetry. This catching of the sense at several removes can become wearying. Although the same objection may be made against the layer of opinion which I have just added — yet another "remove" from the original text under consideration — it could be said that such commentary is the explicit function of a review, whereas criticism, especially of Strier's polemical kind, ought to fulfil a more liberating and creative function.

The four "essays" in part one of *Resistant Structures* turn their attention, in sequence, to Empson and Tuve, Stanley Fish, "Theory" and New Historicism. In an attack on Rosemund Tuve's pre-emptive use of scholarship and convention to stifle the surprising in Herbert's poems, Strier importantly comments that we should beware of fixed notions of "tradition," which must necessarily be partial and may cover up critical special pleading. Although not denying the role of traditions as the "backdrop" of texts, Strier shares with Empson the wish to "taste" texts with "as clean a palate" as we are able, "rather than, following Tuve, with as full a mouth as possible" (p. 25). Perhaps, following this line of metaphor, the appropriate description of Stanley Fish's theory of "self-consuming" seventeenth-century texts would be that it suffers from a form of lock-jaw, since Strier lambasts it in his second essay as a fixed textual model which then becomes an inflexible criterion for value. For Strier the real danger of Fish's "bewitchingly attractive and oversimplifying schema" is that it disguises the textual nuances which signify "values." Strier argues urgently that the poems are not "endlessly ironic"; they espouse "positions" and (like Strier himself) "have moments of passion and earnestness" (p. 40).

Despite their clarity of approach and firmness of position, the essays in the first part of *Resistant Structures* are not without further weaknesses. The third essay attacks deconstruction as though it were the only form of literary theory, and focuses on just two books from the mid-1980s — *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*

(edited by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman) and Terry Eagleton's *Shakespeare*. He attacks the theorists, particularly Terence Hawkes (writing in Parker and Hartman), for needing a "straw man" to knock down (p. 54), but there are moments when Strier does precisely that in assuming that all readers except himself adopt certain naively rigid opinions of, for example, Empson's achievements, or methods of teaching *King Lear*. The fourth essay — commenting on the dangers of "untenable behaviorism" (p. 5) in New Historicism — reads ironically, both in its polemical condemnation of the polemics of this critical movement, and in the fact that Strier's volume is published in a series entitled "The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics." His clear-sighted comments on the relationship of the old historicism to the new, however, are heartening: a "strict pluralism is in order here" since the two modes "answer different questions" and, in fact, "need each other" (p. 69).

Though the first part of Strier's book contains a great deal that is stimulating, it is a relief to move on from its largely hostile tones to the more constructive second part, in which he puts into practice his system of reading with as open a mind as possible. This method — not, we should note, a dogma — involves suspending "many things that one knows (or thinks one knows) in favor of an initial experience of 'mere reading,'" after which knowledge can be "brought fruitfully to bear on the text" (p. 2). We see this creatively at work on some challenging texts: Herbert's "Church-porch" in relation to devout humanism; the "impossible radicalism" that close-reading can reveal in Donne's third satire and Shakespeare's *King Lear*; and a startlingly refreshing reading of Nahum Tate's *Lear* with as few literary or political preconceptions as possible. This last is the best essay in the book, and more than justifies Strier's view that "particulars will never alter one's generalizations if the particulars are never examined closely enough to reveal their distinctive shapes" (p. 232).

It would be wrong to try to summarize the detailed comments offered on the texts discussed in the second part of *Resistant Structures*. This is not only because their author believes in avoiding the misleading generalizations with which he considers criticism to be currently plagued, but also (the better reason, I think) because Strier's interpretations are astute and deserve full reading in their own right.

HELEN WILCOX, *Rijksuniversiteit Groningen*