

Review of Barbara Johnson, *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness*; Edited by Melissa Feuerstein, Bill Johnson González, Lili Porten, and Keja Valens. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

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What does it mean to be surprised by otherness? Literary theory has trained us to be watchful and suspicious readers, always wary of hidden ideologies, often retreating to the defensive stance of the “resistant reader.” Yet this position has its limits; while the hermeneutics of suspicion have done much to open texts and readings, they have also closed down certain questions, readings, and relations. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, for example, called for “reparative reading” as an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion, which she deemed paranoid (2002, 123-52). Another approach to non-paranoid reading begins with a posture of openness to surprise, alterity, and change. This is exemplified by Barbara Johnson, whose work is gathered in the aptly-named *The Barbara Johnson Reader: The Surprise of Otherness*.

Johnson (1947-2009) was a literary scholar, theorist, and translator; she wrote extensively on literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and law. She is also widely known as the translator of Jacques Derrida’s *Dissemination* (1981). Trained in French theory by the Yale School but never limited by it, Johnson approached texts both carefully and playfully. Throughout her career, she returned to questions of language, difficulty, meaning, and difference, especially sexual difference. The goal of such readings is not simply surprise—though there is much to surprise and to delight here—but rather to see what surprise can *do*; or as Johnson herself puts it, “How can that surprise be put to *work* in new ways?” (2014, 327, emphasis original.)

This is evident across the *Reader*. Edited with care by her students and bookended by an introduction by Judith Butler and an afterword by Shoshana Felman, the volume contains 27 pieces by Johnson. The essays range in date from the late 1970s to the mid-2000s, and include journal articles, chapters from anthologies and edited volumes, introductions to Johnson’s translations, and even lectures. Johnson returns to the same core of texts and writers, mostly French, across the essays: Derrida, Lacan, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and de Man. On the American side, she especially engages Poe, Thoreau, and Hurston. Other texts and voices appear according to the demands of each essay. What unites Johnson’s various readings, beyond her sympathies for French theory, is the lightness and grace she brings to each hermeneutic encounter.

The volume is organized into four parts. The first section, “Reading Theory as Literature, Literature as Theory,” includes many of Johnson’s classic pieces engaging French philosophy, including her translator’s introduction to *Dissemination*, which presents an admirably lucid account of deconstruction

(another strong contender is Johnson's introduction to *Freedom and Interpretation*, included in abridged form in Part III). Part II, "Race, Sexuality, and Gender," engages questions of identity, difference, and literature. While gender and sexuality reappear across the volume, Johnson's work on race is concentrated in the handful of essays here. Part III, "Language, Personhood, and Ethics," takes up a number of philosophical concerns, including freedom and the law. Unusually for a literary theorist, Johnson offers readings of legal cases and legal theory, touching on, for example, the issue of abortion. She also uses literature to offer an approach to law, as in the essay "Anthropomorphism in Lyric and Law" (235-61). The final part, "Pedagogy and Translation," brings together essays on teaching and translating. Unlike so many ponderously practical essays on teaching, Johnson brings her deconstructive spirit and commitment to openness and play to her pedagogy as well. The translation essays, meanwhile, touch on many of the same questions as the opening essays on literature and theory, though from a slightly different perspective.

As this overview suggests, the *Reader* is a volume that can be entered into at any number of points. Many of the pieces are short, around ten or fifteen pages, making it so easy to read "just one more." Johnson's skill as a stylist has much to do with this, and her essays are lessons in the value of a light touch. At the same time, reading the essays together reveals a handful of structures that repeat across her work. She is fond, for example, of beginning an essay with one text or question, only to pivot, gracefully, to another set of texts or questions that form the core of the piece. "Using People: Kant with Winnicott" (262-74) makes such a movement with the two thinkers named in the title. I am partial, however, to "Muteness Envy" (200-16), which begins with Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" and builds from it to a theory of gender, power, and the female voice while analysing Jane Campion's film *The Piano*. Another of Johnson's favourite moves is to uncover the instability in seemingly opposed binaries. In "The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida" (57-98), Johnson moves carefully through "The Purloined Letter," Lacan's reading of Poe, and Derrida's reading of Lacan, showing that each level of interpretation is to some degree guilty of that which it promises to expose in the other texts. Johnson finds a similar tendency in Barthes' reading of Balzac in *S/Z*, as she argues in "The Critical Difference: BartheS/BalZac" (3-13).

I have not yet mentioned the Bible, and indeed, Johnson herself references it only rarely, primarily in a discussion of Sigmund Freud's and Zora Neale Hurston's representations of Moses ("Moses and Intertextuality: Sigmund Freud, Zora Neale Hurston, and the Bible," 126-40).¹ She also occasionally refers to Genesis (e.g. 28, 169, 383). Still, I would suggest the *Reader* is as valuable and illuminating volume for biblicists as it is for scholars and readers generally. More than Johnson's comments about biblical texts, it is her practice of close and careful reading that provides an inspiring example for readers of the Bible, as indeed for readers of any text. The *Reader* has the added advantage of bringing together essays from across Johnson's career that circle around the same handful of texts. This provides a model for how to do new work with the same limited canon.

¹ Johnson discusses Moses at length in *Moses and Multiculturalism* (2010), a work not included in the *Reader*.

Passing time with Johnson's work is also valuable for thinking about teaching. Johnson's brief essay "Teaching Deconstructively" (347-56) begins simply: "Teaching literature is teaching how to read" (347). While Johnson's own pedagogy tends toward the deconstructive, she offers reflections that are useful to any reader of literature. Even the most strident New Critic or materialist critic of deconstruction will find much of value in her concise account of the challenges of "ambiguous words" (348), "undecidable syntax" (349), and various "incompatibilities" of words and meanings (349-50). Of course, Johnson herself anticipated—and described—the ways in which deconstruction, in separating itself from New Criticism, eventually returns to it. In "Taking Fidelity Philosophically," she observes, "It is as though, through our excursion into the exotic, we had suddenly come to remember what it was that appealed to us in what we were being unfaithful to" (372).

For this reader, at least, this is also an apt description of the experience of reading Johnson. From the perspective of biblical studies, Johnson's essays may well seem like an "excursion into the exotic," that is, into the heart of "Theory." And yet the very experience of reading them leads us "to remember what it was that appealed to us in what we were being unfaithful to"—the Bible. Here again, surprise is put to work, not simply to put new wine in old wine skins (a favourite disciplinary cliché), but to reencounter the literature of the Bible with openness, uncertainty, and delight. It only took Johnson to show us it was so.

Bibliography

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