

Defending literature

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Accepted 18 May 2006

David Schalkwyk, *Literature and the Touch of the Real*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2005, 262pp.

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Keywords: Language and literature; Postmodernism; Saussure, F. de; Derrida, J.; Wittgenstein, L.

David Schalkwyk is Professor of English at the University of Cape Town. His book reads like that of a man desperately seeking some quasi-philosophical justification for the study of ‘literature’. Scare quotes because, although the concept is frequently invoked, it is never defined, or even seriously discussed. That makes it difficult to decide how relevant much of the book actually is; for if one is looking for justifications one needs to be clear what counts as ‘literature’ and what does not.

The modern intellectual landscape in which Schalkwyk’s search is conducted is a landscape dominated by three giant figures: those of Saussure, Derrida and Wittgenstein. Conspicuous by their absence are Marx and Freud. To be exact, Freud is referred to in passing on two or three occasions, usually in connexion with Wittgenstein, while Marx gets a solitary mention of a no less second-hand character.

The ‘touch of the real’ alluded to in the title comes from an essay by one of Schalkwyk’s minor heroes, Stephen Greenblatt, hailed as ‘the founder of the New Historicism’. By incorporating it into the title of his book, Schalkwyk reveals his deepest fear; namely, the dismissal of ‘literature’ as something superfluous to intellectual requirements because it is marginal, non-serious and remote from ‘the real’.

From the first couple of pages of the Introduction, where we are reminded of Alan Sokal’s notorious spoof article in *Social Text*, and the feminist writer Elizabeth Grosz is ridiculed for denying that the body is a physical object, readers might think they are in for a hilarious denunciation of all the imbecilities of postmodernism. Not so. Schalkwyk

is prepared to take on board all kinds of imbecilities provided they come from the right gurus. But can it be that Grosz actually believes that her physical body was brought into existence by language? Schalkwyk quotes her verbatim and comments: ‘That’s what the sentence says.’ Verdict: guilty. In retrospect, it seems an odd way of convicting her, as if we, the jury, could all see ‘what the sentence says’. For that, it emerges eventually, is one of the last things Schalkwyk wants to assume where language is concerned.

Like many contributions to the debate over postmodernism, Schalkwyk’s book leaves the reader in no doubt about ‘where it is coming from’, but considerable difficulty in seeing ‘where it is going’ – if anywhere. Schalkwyk’s point of departure is a dichotomy between what he calls ‘constructivism’ (of a ‘neo-Saussurean’ variety) on the one hand and ‘realism’ on the other. He presumably opts for the label ‘constructivism’ because, in his view, the main plank in the constructivist platform is the contention that reality is in some sense a linguistic construct, whereas for ‘realists’, it seems, reality is – well, just real, quite independently of what human beings say or think about it.

My problems with Schalkwyk’s scenario begin here. For philosophy offers many different brands of ‘realism’, and it is unclear which of them Schalkwyk has in mind. And ‘constructivism’ is not exactly a happy choice either, in view of the established usages of this term in epistemology, ethics and mathematics, to say nothing of the history of art. So I am left uncertain exactly what stands opposed to what.

What is clear from the start, however, is that Schalkwyk’s constructivism is ‘neo-Saussurean’ and a Bad Thing. His opening chapter on Saussure arraigns the sage of Geneva on a motley variety of charges.

I here have to declare my own stake in the matter, since I am one of the Saussurean commentators whom Schalkwyk briefly discusses, although he does not seem to have read my *Saussure and his Interpreters* (2000), which would have been grist to his mill.

Schalkwyk claims to be presenting a ‘close reading’ of the *Cours* (Saussure, 1922). But it is not what I would call a close reading at all. At least three quarters of the *Cours* he says nothing about whatever. He begins by endorsing my interpretation – in *Reading Saussure* (1987) – of what Saussure meant by claiming that in linguistics ‘it is the viewpoint that creates the object’. So I am hardly the person to criticize him on that score; but I do have doubts as to whether what Saussure meant – as Schalkwyk suggests in a footnote – corresponds to the point Bréal thought Humboldt was making to the effect that ‘there is no language outside of us’. Manifestly, for Saussure there *is* language outside of us, if by ‘us’ we mean individuals. Saussure even goes out of his way to insist that *la langue* is not complete in any individual, but only in the collectivity (*Cours*, p. 30). As an integrationist, I attach much more importance to what Bréal says immediately before his mention of Humboldt; namely, that languages are things that ‘we create [...] at every moment’. Did Saussure take this point and realize its full implications (both theoretical and methodological)? I do not think so; but to discuss that would take us a long way beyond Schalkwyk.

I agree entirely with Schalkwyk when he says that both Jakobson and Eco perpetuate a crude misreading of Saussure as a theorist who tarted up the ancient distinction between *signans* and *signatum*. But I begin to worry when Schalkwyk seems to slip into a careless way of using the term *language* to cover both *langue* and *langage*. When he speaks about Saussure’s ‘definition of the essence of language (as an object *not* given in nature)’ alarm bells start to ring. Defining the essence of language is not on Saussure’s agenda at all: that would be asking the impossible, since language (*langage*) is a manifold utterly devoid of

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