

by those who have appropriated Derrida for literary-critical purposes. Nevertheless I think it must be said that no self-respecting philosopher could have written this book and that it could only find an audience at a time when many literary critics have abandoned their *métier* to take to bad philosophizing. Staten says in his introduction that he will emphasize the kinship between Wittgenstein and Derrida because the differences are obvious. In fact the differences are so obvious and emerge as so overwhelmingly outweighing any affinity that his own book cannot fail to highlight them. First of all, as he concedes, Derrida's language is far more implicated in that of traditional metaphysics and of transcendental phenomenology than Wittgenstein's, so much so that, in Staten's words, it is in danger of coming 'to seem too much like another version of what it seeks to distinguish itself from'. This is, of course, because Derrida arises out of the continental hermeneutic tradition which sees philosophy as the commenting upon texts. For Wittgenstein philosophy is an activity which grapples with problems directly, not with problems as mediated through texts. Wittgenstein's problems arise from the situation created by advances in logic since Frege which have matched natural languages against artificial ones, and by a measuring of the world of everyday life against the world of modern science in a way which parallels that of Husserl, but uses totally different methods.

For Derrida, then, philosophy consists of somewhat rambling ruminations on texts plus what Staten calls 'dazzling readings of some of the most difficult modern writers such as Mallarmé, Valéry, Artaud, and Blanchot'. Indeed for Derrida the whole of philosophy could be said to be 'a text which is not exhausted in the history of its meaning' (*Margins of Philosophy*, p.268), a metaphoric text 'indefinitely constructing its destruction', the end of whose discussion can be endlessly deferred. Staten quotes as the epigraph for his book Wittgenstein's remark in *Culture and Value* 'Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense' without taking the spirit of the remark. As sections 119 and 524 of *Philosophical Investigations* show Wittgenstein has the therapeutic aim of preventing us from continuing to talk nonsense. Derrida, as a conversation with Henri Rouse published in 1972 shows, is quite prepared to be entangled 'in hundreds of pages of a writing simultaneously insistent and elliptical', a 'meaning-to-say-nothing'. With Derrida and his followers we may be assured that though a 'meaning-to-say-nothing' may not be 'the most assured of exercises', it will assuredly never come to an end.

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English anatomized

The English Language by Robert Burchfield (Oxford University Press, 1985, pp.xiii, 194, £9.50).

THIS BOOK SCANS the English language rather like a neurological scanner which takes pictures of the inside of your brain — a slice at a time at different angles and levels of depth. Neurologists find such pictures immensely illuminating, because of all the novel information they contain. They also find them immensely frustrating, because of the far greater amount of equally relevant data which they omit. Whether you take the first view or the second about Robert Burchfield's book will depend on what you already know about the life and times of the language.

Burchfield begins with a vertical (i.e. historical) slice through the language, dividing it into three parts; the earliest developments, 'from runes to printing'; a middle period,

'from Caxton to Washington'; and a recent period, from 1776 to the present day. He then cuts a largely horizontal slice, looking at literary and ritualistic (e.g. biblical) uses of language. The next four slices are largely vertical: the recording of English in dictionaries and grammars; vocabulary; pronunciation and spelling; and syntactic arrangement. And the final chapter again presents a horizontal slice, on 'dispersed forms of English' around the world.

As you might imagine, there are many basic facts about the history of the language in here; and if you've not read anything on this subject before, you will find, as Anthony Burgess reports on the cover, that the book 'instructs' very well. You may even agree with him that it 'compels wonder'. But if you are looking for a freshness and individuality of approach, I fear you will be disappointed. I do not get much of a sense of Burchfield himself, in this book. Too much of it could have been written by anyone well-versed in English language studies.

The best bits do indeed display Burchfield's massive erudition and experience as Chief Editor of the Oxford English Dictionary for many years, when he gives detailed illustrations of lexical change, innovation, and loss (e.g. pp.18, 44, 118). And if you search hard, you will be rewarded with some lovely flashes — my favourites are his reference to people 'suffering from the "split infinitive" syndrome' (156), and his comment that the 'time is close at hand when this moderately useful device should be abandoned' (25). (He is talking about the possessive apostrophe, as in *it's* and *boys'*.) But much too often, Burchfield gives us only tantalising glimpses of the language awareness stored inside his head.

This is presumably one of the constraints of writing an Opus book, which is a 'concise, original, and authoritative introduction' to a subject (blurb). Concise it certainly is, with around 170 pages of text, plus notes, bibliography, and index, set in large type and with wide margins. It doesn't leave much room to be original — not when you're a lexicographer, and used to dealing with language matters meticulously and microscopically. I imagine Burchfield found this a very difficult book to write.

However, you do get a real insight into the author's interests and prejudices from this book — which to me is its main strength and fascination. Chapter length is a good guide: vocabulary 35pp. (the longest chapter), pronunciation/spelling 17pp., syntax 9pp. Vocabulary is where he is most authoritative — awesomely so. Syntax, and especially linguistic approaches to syntax, is where he is least convincing — at times, to this reviewer, depressingly so.

I found Burchfield's characterization of modern linguistic attitudes little more than a crude pastiche. He presents a stereotype of the subject, as if it were peopled only by unfeeling, perverse generative grammarians and post-structuralists. He spends valuable space outlining an approach to transformational grammar which is nearly 30 years old, and today practised by no one. He seems to think that these grammars are intended for the 'educated general public' (153), and that their aim is to produce 'a grammar of English' (154). I am no practitioner of this approach to language study, but I cannot condone such misrepresentation. Transformational grammars are accounts of language structure in general (not just English); they are theoretical models, not pedagogical ones.

The space would have been better used to refer to the many linguists — probably the majority, these days — who try to take into account social context and social history in their approach to language structure. Burchfield would find many friends in the world of linguistic science, if he looked beyond the gurus. And his account of language would have been more complete, if he had reported more systematically and positively on current thinking about such topics as language variety, pidgins and creoles, and language learning and teaching. A few more scans would have made this a more

satisfying book, and a better reflection of the information about the English language which must be lurking inside Robert Burchfield's brain.

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