

Readerly and writerly texts

The Urth list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 09 Dec 1999

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Jeremy W. Crampton — 09 Dec 1999, 16:29

Hi,

I've had some disturbing thoughts lately...

A distinction sometimes made in poststructuralist lit-crit is between the readerly and writerly text. I wonder how/if this could apply to Wolfe's work.

Writerly text: is ourselves writing (eg., surfing the Web, the narrative that is created).
Self-consciously aware of its own artifice and its (failed) attempts at realism.

Readerly text: meaning is stable, transmitted to the reader, dominating

For you lit-crit types, you know that these terms come to us from Barthes:

<http://web.uvic.ca/~ckkeep/hfl0250.html>

If we approach a text as a writerly text it is not possible or desirable to start identifying fixed meanings or metanarratives ("Wolfe just does track the gospels"). In a writerly text, the reader is in control.

--Is it possible to achieve the writerly text or is it dependent on the prevailing social relations?
Barthes is supposed to have identified the readerly text as the dominant mode under capital.
--Is this list itself a writerly text?

According to Foucault ("The death of the author," 1969):

..implies that the notion of the author is a historical construct (prior, we looked at heroes, presumably actors in Greek myth and tragedy)

..efforts to contain a text are problematic..what is a work? is a work that authored? and when is an author accepted as such? a text is not unitary but can escape into notes, appendices, and commentaries (cf Sev. explaining this, or even our disagreement over Vol 5 as being part of BoTNS or not).

..historically, authors emerged as a category when they became subject to punishment for their work. Texts were owned (this varied over time and between different fields, eg between literary and scientific works. at first, sci works had to have a marker to be accepted as true, even if that marker was an ancient authority). then in 17th/18th C. sci works began to be received for themselves not by reference to their author, and it was literary works that now needed an author. ..relevant to today's efforts at erasing the author (double blind peer review) which is actually just an acknowledgement of the power of the author (and the author always sneaks back in anyway).

For Foucault, neither texts (discourses) nor authors are "unitary"--neither the subject nor discourse is stable.

Does any of this apply to Wolfe/us?

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Michael Straight — 10 Dec 1999, 09:08 · follows Jeremy W. Crampton

On Thu, 9 Dec 1999, Jeremy W. Crampton wrote:

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It seems to me that the reader is always in control. I can read, or not read. I can read every other chapter. I can use a text to illustrate a discussion of Freud. I can read every event as having an allegorical meaning. I can even read with the goal of trying to understand what the author meant to say.

The text, like anything else in life, may cause me to have unexpected thoughts or emotions, but what I do with those is up to me.

Lit-Crit types talk like some ways of reading are more "valid" than others, when what they really mean is "I like to read this way."

How we read Wolfe depends on how we want to read Wolfe. Some of us on this list are interested in Wolfe's intentions as a part of reading his books. Others are want to read the text without reference to Wolfe's biography or alleged intent. Some are interested in reading his works as Christian allegory. Some are not interested in allegorical interpretations. Some like to use imagination to fill in perceived gaps in the narratives (what we've sometimes called "fan fiction"), others prefer a more strict approach, reading with Occam's Razor in one hand.

I suspect many of us enjoy reading and discussions using more than one of these approaches, although some may prefer sticking to one approach at a time.

We can argue about which of these approaches is best, but like most aesthetic arguments the discussion would be mostly descriptive ("I like x because it contains y and z, which I like") if it didn't descend into name-calling ("Pearl Jam Rocks!" "Pearl Jam is stupid!").

-Rostrum

Jim Henley — 11 Dec 1999, 01:10 · follows Michael Straight

Hey, Jeremy:

-----Original Message-----

From: urth-errors at lists.best.com [mailto:urth-errors at lists.best.com]On
Behalf Of Jeremy W. Crampton

I've had some disturbing thoughts lately...

Let me try to alleviate those for you!

Writerly text: is ourselves writing (eg., surfing the Web, the narrative that is created). Self-consciously aware of its own artifice and its (failed) attempts at realism.

Readerly text: meaning is stable, transmitted to the reader, dominating

First off, repeat after me:

"Il y a beaucoup de merde dehors le texte."

Second, "dominating" is precisely what we readers want a lot of the time. As Dana Gioia once said introducing the poet Nina Cassian, "What we really want to do when we read a new poet is surrender."

If there were not an enormous kick in being "dominated" by an author, I doubt we'd read much.

If we approach a text as a writerly text it is not possible or desirable to start identifying fixed meanings or metanarratives ("Wolfe just does track the gospels"). In a writerly text, the reader is in control.

--Is it possible to achieve the writerly text or is it dependent on the prevailing social relations? Barthes is supposed to have identified the readerly text as the dominant mode under capital.

Cause readerly texts are bad and capital(ism) is bad. If one comes out of the Stalin-besotted milieu that gave us Barthes' generation of French intellectuals, that is. But I think the real problem with this particular theory is that poststructuralists don't really get the texture of pleasure. To wit:

Wolfe compares the writer/reader relationship to the torturer/client relationship, perhaps somewhat tongue in cheek. I would offer a different comparison: bondage of the sexual kind. Meaning the consensual practices that dominants and submissives get up to when they find each other, including the whole apparatus of safe words and trust-building measures that take place before and/or outside "the game." The dominant is certainly, um, dominant. And the submissive is dominated. That's what the submissive wants. That is what the submissive permits. It is, moreover, the dominant's duty.

In other words, the relation of dominant to submissive is not simple. When Gioia says he wants to surrender to Nina Cassian, that he has surrendered to Nina Cassian, he means he does so in what we all understand are circumscribed and delimited - if thrilling - ways.

What poststructuralists decry as the "authority" of a text is precisely what most of us want most of the time. We want a sense that the writer knows what the hell he or she is talking about. Indeed, textual authority tends to vary inversely as the number of books thrown across the room in disgust. ("CHRIST! No one can get around the Washington DC Beltway in half an hour!")

--Is this list itself a writerly text?

Sure.

Is this list a unitary text at all? If this list is a "writerly" collection of texts in a way that TBOTNS itself is not, which is "better?" Is it relevant that this list could not exist without TBOTNS but TBOTNS could do quite nicely without this list?

[See, I criticize PoMos, but that don't mean I can't litter my text with scare quotes!(Parentheticals too.)]

According to Foucault ("The death of the author," 1969):

..implies that the notion of the author is a historical construct (prior, we looked at heroes, presumably actors in Greek myth and tragedy)

The prizes at the Athenian dramatic festivals went to the - well, they went to the authors. They venerated "blind Homer" too. And whether one believes that Homer existed or composed either of the works that bear his name, it was precisely as an author that they venerated him.

BTW, in a trivial sense, the notion of the author is a historical construct - used to be there were no authors (no writing frex), then there were. But what have we really said when we say something is a historical construct? I think the answer is, Sometimes a lot; Sometimes not much. In the case of the notion of the author, I favor the latter.

..efforts to contain a text are problematic..

Efforts to contain a weasel are also problematic. Doesn't mean it can't be done. By the same token, it doesn't mean it should be. I'm not trying to be (merely) flip; I think texts may be a lot like weasels - it's not a trivial matter to contain them, nor is it necessarily a good idea in any given case. But it might be. And you might want to switch containers now and then too. Stick TBOTNS in the hard sf cage today, the Christian apologist cage tomorrow and the worldly-messiah critique cage next week.

Weasels can even give us a handle on the textual property of multiplicity - there may be a bunch of cages suitable for any given weasel. But there will be a lot more where the weasel doesn't fit, or fits poorly, or gets lost in all that room.

what is a work? is a work that authored? and when is an author accepted as such? a text is not unitary but can escape into notes, appendices, and commentaries (cf Sev. explaining this, or even our disagreement over Vol 5 as being part of BoTNS or not).

There's an interesting discussion along these lines in the intro to the Gregg Press edition of DHALGREN. The writer points out that the "texts" of sf (and other) books do not come to us pure. There's cover art and dust jacket matter. (Unless you have the Gregg Press edition, but the very austerity of those plain green bindings was its own metamessage.) There may be reviews and word of mouth. All of these things (e.g. the irrelevant cover copy on the Bantam edition of DHALGREN) influence a reader's approach to a text.

It was a pretty interesting intro. But it was not more interesting than what Delany said years later in a completely different forum: The more traditional sectors of SF readership pitched a fit at DHALGREN'S difficulty and outre sexuality, but the book sold extremely well. Why? Delany quotes a young woman who told him "I like it because it's about people like me and my friends."

..historically, authors emerged as a category when they became subject to punishment for their work.

Maybe. One might ask Aeschylus and Hesiod about this one. But I'm not sure Foucault doesn't have this one backward in any case. It might be possible that coopers emerge as a category when they become subject to punishment for their work too - the law and the state will interest themselves in every sphere of activity, so if you do something you are probably subject to punishment for what you do. ("Bad barrel!") If no one was making texts or barrels before and now they are, then they weren't punishable before and now they are.

..relevant to today's efforts at erasing the author
(double blind peer review) which is actually just an
acknowledgement of the power of the author (and
the author always sneaks back in anyway).

Hey, good point! But if the author sneaks back in, does that mean the author isn't dead after all?

For Foucault, neither texts (discourses) nor authors
are "unitary"--neither the subject nor discourse is stable.

Does any of this apply to Wolfe/us?

Nah.

<gdr>

Best,

Jim

"There will always be Costello/
a little larceny Bacharach,
in everyone" "My Thief"