

readerly/writerly/Foucault

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 16 Dec 1999

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Jonathan Laidlow — 16 Dec 1999, 10:20

More boring stuff on literary theory I'm afraid folks. If we go on much longer we'll take it to email. Sorry in advance!

I prefer Foucault's term "discourse" which is somewhat above the level of the statement, though you have to plough through _Archaeology of knowledge_ to work this out (one of his last structuralist books thank goodness). Discourse is what is formed by the archive, the set of rules which determine what can be said, remembered, appropriated, re-used or forgotten. Anyway, the point is that there is authority in discourse, it frames simply what can be said or how it is said. His examples are madness, criminality, and sexuality.

I dunno. I always found that unless I was doing linguistics (*shudder*) 'discourse' became one of those nebulous mis-used terms that could actually refer to just about anything. If we stick with referring to material objects like books then we can keep ourselves grounded in actual discussion of the work at hand. Of course it helps if your research (like mine) actually concentrates on the differing authorities presented by physical features in books by Laurence Sterne (black pages, footnotes, marbling etc) You also end up making sweeping generalisations about 'discourse' which may well be true, but also leave you open to further deconstruction by post-structuralists keen to reveal that there is some basic contradiction in your argument that unravels you and (probably) erases you from existence....

structuralist theory was always the weakest point. What intrigues me is the scope for questioning concepts of authorship and authority which are too often taken for granted. That doesn't mean we must erase their existence, merely understand the way we read the 'new Gene Wolfe novel' in different ways to the 'new Jeffery Archer novel', and the way the presence of the author has a bearing on our reading of their narrators.

This seems useful.

I hope so. I'm not a Foucault expert at all, but I have done extensive research on theories of authorship (most of it now sadly replaced in my mind by useless trivia I'm sure) and I think one of the dangers of using big name critical theory is that you end up either taking it at face value or dismissing it wholesale. Perhaps its that I'm de- radicalising it, or missing the point somewhat, but we have to find where such theories actually become useful and intersect with 'real- world' (for want of a better world) applications, whether it be the study of literary texts or, indeed, post-modern geography.

What is it Foucault says about the 'author function' [checks draft of thesis on hard disc - inserts section from an early draft which keeps things simple:]

Foucault defines the 'author' as a 'limiting practice', 'the regulator of the fictive'. Rather than the originator of the significations of a text, Foucault suggests that the 'author' is a function of the text,

'by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction'.

In the repetition of the word 'free' we can perhaps begin to see that Foucault is aspiring towards a new form of literary discourse which allows signification more liberty, more plurality. Yet Foucault also recognises that all texts have features which limit the free play of significations. Nevertheless, this desire for pluralism reduces the utility of the concept for our own purposes, for it taints the idea of the 'author function' with a utopian desire for the excision of the author from critical work.

It appears unlikely that Foucault was, in the above passage, calling for a 'death' of the author, when so much of his work is concerned with the construction of authors and authority. Rather, he appears to be establishing that alongside the originating (and elusive) figure of the author, there is a feature of texts which is also the author: the author function.

What this formulation of the 'author function' does for literary studies is that it historicises the very notion of authorship and recognises that the term 'author' has changed its meaning at various points through history. The 'author' is merely another feature of the text, rather than the privileged originator of all its meanings. The actual function that it performs he describes as follows:

"The author's name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author's name, that one can say 'this was written by so-and-so' or 'so-and-so is its author,' shows that this discourse is not ordinary everyday speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status."

(quotes taken from F's essay, 'What is an Author?', reproduced in various places - most handily in the 'Foucault Reader' published by Penguin in the UK,)

Would appreciate any suggestions on the above, as its part of my work that, er, *doesn't* work correctly. Quite hard to squeeze it into my arguments that the materiality of the physical book is important.

Thanks again Jonathan. If you're in Chester next week I'll buy you a pint!
I'll be home for the holidays.

Chester UK? Or Chester USA? Both are a bit far from the wet and windy west midlands!

Jonathan
Visit Ultan's Library - A Gene Wolfe web resource
<http://members.tripod.co.uk/laidlow/index.htm>
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