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Decentring the Centre: Optimism and Constraint in Post-Structuralist Literary Theory

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'The Center is not the center' (Derrida 279)

Despite being presented at a conference that sought to clarify and define structuralism, Jacques Derrida's essay 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' (1967) generally marks the inception of post-structuralism. In this essay, Derrida criticises the way in which structuralist discourse is preoccupied with a 'centre' that organises the structure and which therefore inhibits and restricts the play of meaning. Absent, perhaps significantly, from the same conference, Michel Foucault's lecture 'What Is an Author?' (1969) is widely considered to be a response to Roland Barthes' seminal essay 'The Death of the Author' (1967). In his essay, Foucault assumes a more moderate position, engaging with Barthes' notion that the author is 'dead,' instead arguing that although we should not view the author as the origin of the text's meaning, the author nevertheless functions as a principle that shapes, structures, and limits discourse and meaning. Derrida sums up the 'event' or paradigm shift from structuralism to post-structuralism by writing that '[t]he absence of a center is here the absence of a subject and the absence of an author,' an observation that resonates with Foucault's concern with the author's central position in regulating discourse (287). Both Derrida and Foucault decentre the structure of Western philosophy and discourse, and indeed the literary text itself, to differing extents and effects. Ultimately, this essay argues that Derrida's approach is more optimistic than Foucault's, although it inevitably neglects the pervasive and shifting power dynamics that Foucault recognises and exposes.

Although both Derrida and Foucault locate a 'centre,' whether that be in philosophy or discourse, Derrida concerns himself with the notion of a centre in its broadest sense, whereas Foucault situates this in the figure of the author. In his essay, Derrida criticises the structuralist preoccupation with establishing the centre of a structure, writing that '[t]he function of this center was not only to orient, balance, and organize the structure . . . but above all to make sure that the organizing principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure' (278). This centre, for Derrida, has 'always designated an

invariable presence,' citing 'eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia, (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendental, consciousness, God, man, and so forth' as examples from the Western philosophical tradition (279-80). Derrida applies his criticism of centres such as these to the centralised structures of literary discourse that invariably control and restrict the play of meaning. The implicit, and indeed optimistic, assumption of Derrida's approach is that each and every structure can be decentred, including the position of the author. Where Derrida optimistically concerns himself with the centre in all its dimensions, Foucault focuses on the figure of the author as the central locus of discursive control. For Foucault, authorial attribution controls discourse by 'permit[ting] one to group together a certain number of texts, define them, differentiate them from and contrast them to others' (147). It is the name of the author that 'serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse,' an assertion that defines Foucault's concept of the 'author-function,' a principle whereby discourse is classified, delimited, and regulated through the figure of the author (147). Foucault, however, does recognise that the author is not the 'origin' of meaning, but its 'function,' thereby relocating the centre from the role of the author as creator of meaning to that of one who merely shapes it. Where Derrida optimistically argues that there is in fact no centre that governs meaning, Foucault recognises a constructed one in the 'author-function' that determines the production and shaping of discourse.

If Derrida and Foucault understand the centre differently, Derrida radically deconstructs the structure by decentring it whereas Foucault relegates the role of the author to a less central one. After establishing that, paradoxically, '[t]he center is not the center,' Derrida explains that 'it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center . . . that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play' (279; 280). Derrida theorises that the field of meaning is one of 'play' in which the decentring of an absolute centre allows a new but unstable centre

to perpetually take its place. 'Play [therefore] is the disruption of presence,' and it is this lack of a stable structure whose centre is at once substituted and supplemented that reveals the total absence of the centre's presence (292). For Derrida, deconstructing a text involves recognising that, because the centre exists elsewhere, meaning is never fully determined and is subject to the play of its constituent and relational elements, that is to say its *différance*. Culminating in the free play of interpretation, Derridean deconstruction is fundamentally optimistic in that it fully liberates the play of meaning from the constraints of a fixed centre. Foucault, on the other hand, does not deconstruct in the same sense as Derrida, but he does decentre the author to an extent through the concept of an author-function. Foucault, like Barthes and Derrida, acknowledges that 'we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers' (145). This 'space left empty' recalls Derrida's absence of presence of the centre, however Foucault negotiates this space not through an infinite substitution like Derrida, but by re-evaluating the central role of the author. For Foucault, 'the author is not an indefinite source of significations which fill a work; the author does not precede the works, he is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes, and chooses' (159). In this way, Foucault recognises that the figure of the author 'marks the manner in which we fear the proliferation of meaning,' however Foucault does not liberate this proliferation of meaning insofar as he understands how the principle of the author-function 'limits, excludes, and chooses' (159). Foucault does indeed decentre, in that the author becomes 'function' rather than 'origin,' however this function still plays a significant role in the shaping and limiting of discourse and meaning.

By decentring or reconfiguring the centre to varying degrees, both Derrida and Foucault theorise the different effects that this lack of an absolute centre might produce. After establishing how it became necessary to think that there was no fixed centre, Derrida asserts

that '[t]he absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely' (280). This decentring of the 'transcendental signified' that results in the infinite play of meaning and the free-play of interpretation is radically optimistic because it results in the endless proliferation of meaning. Although this lack of a centre might be interpreted nihilistically, creating an absence of absolute meaning and truth, Derrida understands it as a 'Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation' (292). In this way, instead of viewing it as a loss, Derrida frames this absence as a vacuum of hope in which signs play without constraint and meaning proliferates infinitely, allowing for the joyous free-play of interpretation. Where Derrida's optimism is most evident in his complete liberation of (free-)play, Foucault concludes his lecture rather pessimistically. Foucault, criticises the Barthesian and Derridean ideal of a 'culture in which fiction would not be limited by the figure of the author,' writing that '[i]t would be pure romanticism . . . to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction . . . would develop without passing through something like a necessary or constraining figure' (159). Although Foucault appreciates that the 'author function will disappear,' he suggests that 'fiction and its polysemic texts will once again function according to another mode, but still with a system of constraint' (160). This represents a stark contrast to Derrida's position, as Foucault pessimistically maintains that meaning will still be limited by another central mechanism, effectively replacing the space left by the absence of the author. Where Derrida's substitution of the centre reveals its instability and lack of presence, thus liberating the play of meaning, Foucault's hypothetical replacing of the centre points towards the presence of centres that succeed and replace one another, infinitely controlling and limiting the play of meaning.

In conclusion, these approaches represent a critique of structuralism in that both Derrida and Foucault challenge the notion of an absolute centre that organises structure, creating and governing meaning. Both approaches decentre this centre; however, they diverge in scope and effect. Derrida's more optimistic approach of deconstruction radically reveals that the presence of the centre is completely absent, allowing other elements to take its place, thus liberating the play of meaning and free-play of interpretation. Foucault's approach decentres the role of the author by reframing it as a 'function' rather than as an 'origin' of meaning, however it still plays a significant role in the shaping of discourse. The greatest point of contention between these two approaches is Foucault's pessimistic insistence upon the persistence of a centralising principle that would inevitably be replaced were it to be removed. In this way, Foucault's approach is more realistically aligned to the natural human tendency to create structure and establish stable meaning, revealing that Derrida's approach is perhaps too naively optimistic in his neglecting such considerations.

Works Cited

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