

Academic discourse semiotically re-contextualized

A few weeks ago I read the following:

The main theme of the works of Rushdie is the role of the writer as reader. Habermas suggests the use of subcapitalist socialism to attack class divisions. Thus, if Saussurean semiotics holds, we have to choose between postcultural discourse and the capitalist paradigm of consensus. Lyotard uses the term 'neostructuralist objectivism' to denote the bridge between sexual identity and narrativity. However, Marx's model of Saussurean semiotics implies that art serves to exploit the Other...

This text appeared in the Winter 99 issue of *The Author*, the journal of the Society of Authors in the UK, as a quotation within a wide-ranging round-up by the editor, Derek Parker, who noted: 'Though this reads very like a book review in one of our great literary journals, it was in fact written not by human hand (thank God! comes the cry) but was randomly generated by the Dada Engine.' This device, he added, was created by Andrew C. Bulhak of the School of Computer Science and Software Engineering at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, and the quoted text is entirely without meaning.

However, Bulhak's Engine comes entirely too close for academic comfort. Parker's worthy piece took me back over a year, to an article in the *International Herald Tribune* (24 Mar 99) by the US historian Richard Pells: 'For Academics, Too, It's All in the Telling.' There he noted that, according to several recent commentators, 'most American academics write miserably', and do so on purpose, through fear of rejection and the need to conform: '[A]cademic neophytes adopt an esoteric language designed to please their mentors... They learn to use trendy post-modernist words like "discourse" and "contextualize", and to mention everything ever written about their subject.'

Pells also noted that academics 'reject the idea that a widely read book might be good.... There is no harsher epithet in a scholar's vocabulary than to call a book "journalistic".' His own view is that 'even scholarly writing is public performance, like movies and plays' and 'if scholars thought of themselves as writers, their sensitivity to their audience would intensify.' And by no means only in the US. It is a subject of worldwide communicative interest, it needs more airing, and *ET* would be a good place to do it in.

Tom McArthur

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