

Lecture 18

Bridging Structuralism and Poststructuralism: Roland Barthes

Hello and welcome back to another lecture on literary theory. Today we will move from Structuralism to Poststructuralism and we will make this transition with the help of the writings of Roland Barthes who stands like a connecting figure bridging the structuralist insights of people like Saussure and Lévi-Strauss and poststructuralism, which both dismantles the edifices of structuralism as well as builds upon them. So before we enter into a discussion of the theories proposed by more strongly identified poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes will provide us with the necessary prelude.

Roland Barthes

Barthes was born in 1915 in northern France and graduated from the University of Sorbonne in Paris where he studied grammar and philology. Throughout his career he held a number of teaching positions both in France as well as abroad in places like Romania, Egypt and America. Today he is most widely known for his essay which declared, and some would say declared rather scandalously, “The Death of the Author”. It was first published in an American journal named *Aspen* in 1967 and was available to the French public at large only in 1968. And in that particular year, the essay’s radical denunciation of the controlling figure of the author in a text resonated perfectly well with the fiery student movements in Paris and its disenchantment with any form of authority. Indeed, this particular essay evoked two very important responses from Foucault and Derrida who represented in 1968 the face of the new generation of intellectuals. Thus, Foucault wrote his seminal piece “What is an author?” in 1969, which many believe was an attempt to critically engage with Barthes’ pronouncement of the author’s death. Derrida in

turn referred back to “The Death of Author” when writing homage to Barthes after his death which he titled “The Deaths of Roland Barthes”. But as we will see, the essay announcing the death of the author forms only a small part of the theoretical work produced by Barthes.

However, before we try to get a somewhat more comprehensive view of Barthes’ work, I would like to refer to a highly publicized debate between Roland Barthes and a Sorbonne professor by the name of Raymond Picard.

The Picard Affair

In 1963, Barthes published a book length work titled *Sur Racine*. It was a book length study of the seventeenth century playwright Jean Racine who is widely regarded as one of the greatest figures of the French literary tradition. This study reflecting Barthes unique variety of structuralist criticism was received as a key text of what was looked upon as the changing face of literary criticism identified at that point of time in France as “New Criticism”. Now please do not confuse this critical approach to literature represented by Barthes with the earlier school of critical thought that we have studied as Anglo-American New Criticism. Barthes criticism builds upon the work of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss in a way that the works of critics like Eliot or Richards did not. However, coming back to Barthes’ book on Racine, it created such a big uproar in the academic world that Raymond Picard chose to write a pamphlet against it, attacking the book as a representative of a new kind of critical development that he considered to be rather dubious. Therefore, the name that Picard gave to this 1964 pamphlet was *New Criticism or New Fraud?* Barthes, in his turn, retorted back by publishing in 1966 a book-length defense, titled *Criticism and Truth* in which he argued that the “old criticism” as represented by Picard was actually not criticism but simply judging. Barthes on the other hand considered the purpose of criticism to be different. He states that:

Books of criticism are [...] born, offering themselves to be read in the same manner as the strictly literary work, although the status of their authors is that of critic and not writer. If new criticism has any reality, it is there: not in the unity of its methods and even less in the snobbery which, it is so comfortably asserted, supports it, but in the solitude of the act of criticism, which is now declared to be a complete act of writing [...].

Barthes adds that in the changed circumstances, the author and the critic are no longer regarded as “the superb creator and the humble servant”, but rather they both have as their common *métier* the language. In other words, the critic’s work as well as the author’s work both involve engaging with language as a medium of expression and doing so by “perceiving, [...] separating, [...] dividing”.

Now these words perceiving, separating, and dividing should remind you of the structuralist technique of approaching a narrative that we discussed in our previous lecture on Lévi-Strauss. But let us for a moment go back to the long quote that I just read out. In this quote, which you can now see in the slide, Barthes talks about critics working *as* authors in engaging with language. He also says that works of criticism are “complete acts of writings” which exist in “solitude” and demands attention above and beyond the literary work they might be commenting upon. The stress on language shows that we are dealing here with the same long tradition in criticism that the “linguistic turn” inaugurated at the beginning of the 20th century. But the stress on completeness and on solitude speaks of something more. It tells us that by the 1960s, especially in Paris, there was a concerted effort by intellectuals like Barthes to cut free criticism from the role of simply explicating literary texts. Critics were no longer to be “servants” to the authors, but be authors themselves. Now since within the discipline of English literary studies we

identify “theory” as precisely these intellectual currents that emerged in France during the 1960s and that then went on to create a wide network of legacy bearers, we often end up treating theory as separate from literature. I have already expressed my views about this in the introductory lecture to this course. Here I just wanted to point out what might have been one of the sources of this thinking that theory is a field of study that is independent of literature.

Politics of Structuralism

But now let's come to the actual literary criticism done by Barthes which earned him such resentment of people like Picard. As I suggested before, this criticism was primarily built upon the structuralist insights provided by Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. And as far as the structuralist technique of reading a narrative is concerned, Barthes did not make any major innovations. However, the important thing that Barthes did was that he revealed how this structuralist reading could have political implications and could be used to critique the existing power structure. To understand this, let us go back to one of the very important insights provided by Saussure, which is that signifiers and signifieds are connected only randomly. Indeed, the meaning making ability of a particular signifier or a constituent unit within any structure is not gained by being integrally connected to content outside the structure. Rather it gains meaning through the relationship of difference that it shares with other constituent parts within the structure. Now for Saussure this was true only of the linguistic structures. But as Lévi-Strauss had shown, this structuralist way of thinking about the meaning-making process can be extended to other things like the kinship structure of a society for instance or the mythic narratives. The structuralist mode of reading can be extended even further to understand how meaning is generated in other more mundane situations like driving down the road for instance. While driving down a crossing, if we see that

the traffic sign is red, we stop our cars because we interpret the red light as a halt sign. On the other hand, if we see the green light we continue to drive as we read it as a signal that the road is clear for movement. Now the reason why we interpret red as *halt* and green as *go* is not because there is any “natural” relationship between these signals and the ideas of halting or going. Rather green and red mean what they do within the structure of the traffic sign through their mutual relationship of difference. This means that any of the sign systems that surround us, starting from the rudimentary system of traffic signals to the more sophisticated sign systems of literary language, all relate to the external world through convention. And conventions are tentative since they are conventions that exist within particular social, cultural and political milieus. Yet each particular socio-political order makes it appear that the conventions through which meanings of any sign system is interpreted within it is universal, eternal and perfectly natural. This was precisely the insight that Barthes brought to bear upon structuralism. The structure of meaning making at any given point in time tended to “naturalise” the conventions arising out of the world view of a particular socio-political dispensation. This is precisely what Barthes showed in his book *Mythologies* which is a fascinating collection of structuralist readings of things ranging from wrestling matches, to cinematic representations, to a show of striptease. In this book, Barthes shows how the meanings of things that surrounded people in the France of 1950s were not “natural”, “universal” or “eternal” but were rather meanings generated out of the bourgeois conventions since it was the bourgeoisie that represented the major socio-political dispensation within a capitalist world.

Poststructuralist Barthes

The way in which Barthes uses his criticism to produce a commentary on the political status quo already starts taking us out of the confines of structuralism as we have known it through the works of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. It starts bringing us closer to what we now refer to as poststructuralism. Indeed, we will see in our future lectures how this exploration of the element of political power goes on to become a powerful concern in the poststructuralist criticism of someone like Michel Foucault. But Barthes' writings not only prefigure the poststructuralist position of Foucault but also some of the thought processes that would underline the kind of poststructuralist criticism that would be inaugurated by Jacques Derrida. This Derridean kind of poststructuralism is best anticipated by Barthes in his famous essay "The Death of the Author".

So the first question that we need to ask with regards to this essay is why does Barthes announce that the author is dead? So when we talk of an author we usually think of a real living individual who stands prior to a particular text and pour his own emotions, sensibilities, and ideas into it. In other words, the text is regarded as an expression of an author's self and of his intention.

Therefore, the author is evoked as the ultimate arbiter of what a text "actually" means because he is regarded as the generator and controller of meaning within his text. Now according to Barthes, the author is not a reality but a bourgeois fiction. And just like the other bourgeois fiction that he exposed in his book *Mythologies*, the fiction of the author too presents itself as not only real but also as natural, universal, and eternal. The reason why Barthes believes that the presence of a real life author behind a text as the final arbiter of meaning is an illusion is because like a true structuralist he considers meaning to be a product of the internal relationships of difference that signifiers have with each other. In other words, meaning cannot be poured into a text, which is

ultimately a collection of signifiers, from outside of it by an author. A text therefore cannot be an expression of someone's personality because that someone is always outside the meaning-making process of a language structure. Barthes, by pointing this out, declares the death of the author figure. But does this mean that Barthes believes that texts get produced by themselves and without any human agency? That would of course be a ridiculous assumption. Indeed, Barthes does state that texts are produced by writers. But he also emphasizes that this writer cannot be regarded as an author. A writer does not or rather cannot pour his own ideas and sensibilities within a text but can only act as a kind of dictionary – that is to say a repository of a language that is always already present before the writer—from which he cites to produce a text. In Barthes's own words,

“Succeeding the Author, the writer no longer contains within himself passions, humors, sentiments, impressions, but that enormous dictionary, from which he derives a writing”

So rather than defining a text as the expression of the inner self of an author, Barthes in his essay defines it as “a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture”. This is because the writer cannot but use pieces of a language that has already been used and reused by others. Writing is therefore not original but a series of citations which recycles the same signifiers that has already been used before.

With Barthes nullifying the presence behind the text we arrive at the verge of Derridean poststructuralism. We will take up for discussion this particular strand of poststructuralism in our next lecture. Thank you for listening.