

Introduction to Literary Theory
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Lecture - 18
Bridging Structuralism and Poststructuralism: Roland Barthes

Hello and welcome back to yet another lecture on Literary Theory. Today we will move from structuralism that we have been discussing in our previous lectures to Poststructuralism and we will make this transition with the help of the writings of Roland Barthes. And Roland Barthes is especially important as a figure of transition because he stands like a connecting bridge, whose works allow us to move from the structuralist insights provided by people like, Saussure (Refer Time: 00:56) or Levi Strauss to post structuralism which both dismantles the edifices of structuralism as well as builds upon them.

So, before therefore, we enter into a discussion of the theories proposed by more strongly identified post structuralist figures like Jacques Derrida, for instance or Michel Foucault. Roland Barthes will provide us with a kind of necessary prelude and as usually preludes are this will be a comparatively short lecture which will be compensated by a longer one on Derrida.

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Roland Barthes
(1915 - 1980)



Source: Wikipedia

So, Roland Barthes was born in 1915 in northern France and he graduated from the University of Sorbonne in Paris where he studied grammar and philology. Now, throughout his career he held a number of teaching positions, both in France as well as abroad in places like Romania, for instance 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. And this particular essay was first published in an American journal called Aspen in 1967 and was made available to the French public at large in a French version which was published in 1968.

So, as you know this date 1968 is very important as far as this lecture series is concerned and we have been encountering this date for quite a number of times in our lecture series and in that particular year in 1968, Barthes essays radical denunciation of the controlling figure of the author in a text resonated perfectly well with the fiery student movements that were unfolding in the streets of Paris and their resentment against authority as such any authority. Indeed this particular essay evoked two very important responses from Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who represented in 1968 the face of new generation of intellectuals in France.

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Michel Foucault
(1926 - 1984)



Source: Wikipedia

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.

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Jacques Derrida
(1930 – 2004)



Source: Society for US Intellectual History

On the other hand Derrida referred back to the essay the Death of the Author when he was writing an 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 somewhat more comprehensive view of Barthes (Refer Time: 04:28). I would like to refer to a highly publicized debate that took place between Barthes and a Sorbonne professor by the name of Raymond Picard and I want to refer to this debate because this gives us an idea about the radically new kind of thing really that Barthes was doing, the radically new kind of criticism that he was putting on the table.

Now, in 1963 Barthes published a book length study which was titled in French *Sur Racine*, which in English literally translates into *On Racine*. And, it was a book that explored the 17th century playwright, the works of the 17th century playwright Jean Racine who is widely regarded as one of the greatest figures of the French literary tradition. Now, this study reflecting Barthes unique variety of structuralist criticism was received by the public at large and was recognized as a key text of what was then looked upon as the changing face of literary criticism and was at that point identified as new criticism.

Now, here please do not confuse this particular critical approach to literature that was represented by Barthes with the earlier school of critical thoughts that we have studied as

angular American new criticism because Barthes criticism builds upon the work of Saussure and Levi Strauss in a way that the work of critics like Eliot for instance or Richards never did. So, the criticism that is represented by Eliot by Richards for instance that is what is now known as new criticism Barthes today would be referred to either as a structuralist or as a post structuralist, but during the 1960's structuralism was new, the kind of thing that Barthes was doing with literary criticism was new and that is why it was referred to locally as the new criticism.

So, please do not confuse between the two. Now, 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 and he chose to attack that book as a representative of a new kind of critical development which he considered to be rather dubious.

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Raymond Picard wrote "Nouvelle critique ou nouvelle imposture?" (1964, translated as "New Criticism or New Fraud?") as a criticism to Barthes *Sur Racine* (1963).

Barthes, in his turn, retorted back by publishing a book-length defence titled *Criticism and Truth* (1966).

And therefore, the name that Picard chose for his 1964 pamphlet was this, "New Criticism or New Fraud". So, clearly he considered the criticism the variety of literary criticism that Roland Barthes was doing as a kind of fraud.

Barthes in his turn retorted back by publishing in 1966 a book length defense of his own position and he titled that defense "Criticism and Truth". In which he argued Barthes argued that the old criticism against which his new criticism was being compared and which was represented by figures like Picard for instance was actually not criticism it

was simply a way of judging, passing judgment on a particular set of literary texts for instance.

Now, Barthes on the other hand considered the purpose of criticism to be different from this old school of judging a literary work and he writes about this when he states and I quote “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.

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“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 [...].”

(Criticism and Truth, Barthes)

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. Now Barthes adds that in the change circumstances the author and the critique are no longer regarded as and I quote “the superb creator and the humble servant”, but rather they both have as a common métier the same language.

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Barthes adds that 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 critics work as well as the authors work involves engaging with language as a medium of expression and doing.

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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”.

So, by and I quote it again “perceiving, separating, dividing.” Now these words perceiving separating and dividing should remind you of the structuralist technique of approaching a narrative that we have discussed in our previous lecture on Levi Strauss, but let us for a moment go back to the long quote that I just read out and which you can

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Barthes 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.

Now, see in this slide. In this quote note that Barthes talks about critics working as authors. Critics are like authors in engaging with language and he also says that the works of criticism are “complete acts of writings” which exist in what he calls “solitude” in isolation and demands attention above and beyond the literary work they might be commenting upon. So, the stress on language here shows that we are dealing with the same long tradition and criticism that was initiated by the linguistic turn inaugurated at the beginning of the 20th century we have already talked about this linguistic turn. So, this should be a familiar idea to you.

But the stress on completeness and on solitude speaks of something more. It tells us that by the 1960’s especially in Paris, there was a concerted effort by intellectuals like Barthes to cut free criticism from the role of simply judging or explicating literary texts. Critics were no longer to be servants to the authors, but they were to be authors themselves or the equivalent of authors.

Now since within the discipline of English literary studies we identify theory precisely with these intellectual currents that emerged in France during the 1960’s and that then went on to create a wide network of legacy bearers. We often end up treating theory as separate from literature or as a parallel tradition almost. And I have already expressed my views about this about treating theory as separate or as equivalent or as parallel to literature in my introductory lecture in this series.

But here I just wanted to point out; that what might have been one of the sources of this thinking that theory is a field of study that is independent of literature can be found in the writings of Roland Barthes. But now let us come to the actual literary criticism done by Barthes which earned him such resentment of people like Picard.

As I have suggested before his criticism, Barthes criticism was primarily built upon the structuralist insights provided by Saussure and Levi 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 the structuralist reading could have political implications and could be used to critique the existing power structure.

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Ferdinand de Saussure
(1857 – 1913)

• *Cours de Linguistique Générale*
(1915)



Source: In My Own Terms

To understand this let us go back to one of the very important insights provided by Saussure because it is on that insight that Barthes then builds his version of criticism which has this political angle that I want to show you. So, the insight that I am talking about is that signifiers and signified's are connected only randomly. So, if you go back to our Saussure lecture you will see that we have talked about how signifiers and signified's the word sound tree and the thing with a wooden trunk and leafy appendages are randomly connected together there is no inherent connection between the two.

And indeed the meaning making ability of a particular signifier or a constituent unit within any structure is not gained according to Saussure by being integrally connected to

a content outside the structure. So, this is familiar grounds to you rather Saussure argues that 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 linguistic structures, but as Levi Strauss had shown the structuralist way of thinking about the meaning making process can be extended to other things like for instance the kinship structure of a society or how mythic narratives operate and we have seen that in our lecture on Levi Strauss and our analysis of the oedipal myth.

Now, the structuralist mode of reading can be extended even further actually to understand how meaning is generated in other more mundane situations, like for instance driving down the road while driving down or crossing for instance. If we see that the traffic sign is red we stop our cars or at least we should stop our cars and we do that because we interpret the red sign the red light that is glowing in the crossing to be a halt sign. On the other hand if we see the green light then we continue to drive because we read the green sign the green light 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 or inherent relationship between these color 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 and this will mean any sign system that surrounds us starting from the rudimentary system of traffic signals to the more sophisticated sign system of a literary language all relate to external world through convention. So, it is convention to stop to read the red light as telling us to stop and it is convention to read the green light as telling us to go and these two signals connect with the external world these two signifiers connect with the external world merely through a habitual relationship of certain ideas with them. But if you look at conventions then you will realize that conventions are tentative.

Since they are conventions that exist within a particular social cultural and political milieu yet each particular socio political order makes it appear that the conventions through which meanings of any science system is interpreted within it is universal and eternal and perfectly natural. Yet this is clearly not so because we can imagine very well an order social order, where the meaning of the red and the green signal might be switched they will still share an oppositional relationship between them, but we might start interpreting through convention red signal as go and green signal as halt.

Now 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 naturalize 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 reading of things ranging from wrestling matches to cinematic representations to show of striptease.

In this book Barthes shows how the meaning of things that surrounded people in the France of 1950's were not natural or universal or eternal, but were rather meanings generated out of the bourgeois conventions. Since, it was a bourgeoisie that represented the major socio political dispensation within a capitalist world. 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 the way he points out that signifiers connect to the outside world of signified through conventions which are tentative and which are related to particular social political and economic milieus is already something that goes beyond what pure structuralism told us. Pure structuralism that we encountered in Saussure for instance and in Levi Strauss; in Saussure for instance there is no political dimension and no political dimension is also very clearly identifiable.

Say for instance in Levi Strauss structuralist analysis of myths or kinship for that matter and Barthes starts bringing us closer to what we now refer to as post structuralism. So, here with Barthes we start our journey from structuralism and this additional political dimension already brings us out of structuralism and on to post structuralism leads us on to post structuralism and 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 post structuralist criticism of someone like Michel Foucault for instance.

But Barthes writings not only prefigured the post structuralist position of Foucault, but also prefigured some of the thought processes that would underline the kind of post structuralist criticism that would be inaugurated by someone like Jacques Derrida and this derridean kind of post structuralism 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; which as I said some would regard to be a very

scandalous announcement indeed. So, when we talk of an author we usually think of a real living individual, who stands prior to a particular text and who stands before a particular text originates. And he helps in creating that particular text by pouring his own emotions his own sensibilities and his own ideas into it. That is how we usually consider the relationship between a text and its author. So, in other words the text is regarded as an expression of the authors 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 the text that he has written. Now according to Barthes the author is not a reality rather it is 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. So, for instance those of us who are conditioned by the capitalist world order all of us think of texts that surround us as created by one author or the other and that appears to us as a most natural way of thinking about a text and we believe that this is how people have been thinking about texts throughout the history of the world.

Now, the reason why Barthes believes that the presence of a real life author behind the text as a final arbiter of meaning is an illusion is because like a true structuralist he considers meaning to be the 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 by an author. There was the author necessarily stands outside the text or at least author as we usually understand him a real life individual. Now a text therefore, cannot be the expression of someone's personality why because that someone is always outside the meaning making process of a language structure.

Barthes by pointing this out declares that the Death of the Author figure is actually not really the death, but actually the recognition of the fact that author is a fiction. So, what Barthes is doing is he is really announcing the death of what was always a fiction a bourgeois fiction which was only conceived or mistaken as reality. But does this mean that Barthes believes that texts get produced by themselves without any human agency do they fall from sky or can we say that they are generated by a machine randomly no that would of course, be a very ridiculous assumption and indeed Barthes does state that, texts are produced by writers and by writers we mean individual human beings.

But what Barthes emphasizes is that this writer that he is talking about cannot be mistaken for an author. Why? Because 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 a kind of repository of a language that is always already present before that writer and it is from that language that he sites to produce a text it is from that dictionary that he sites to produce a text.

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

(“Death of the Author”, Barthes)

In Barthes 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 a expression of the inner self of an author.

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Barthes in his essay defines it as “a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture”.

(“Death of the Author”, Barthes)

Barthes in his essay defines it and I quote as “a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture”. And, this is because the writer cannot, but use pieces of a language associated with a particular culture through convention that had already been used and already been reused by others. Writer or the process of writing for instance is therefore, not only original, but a series of citations which recycles the same signifiers that has already been used before.

So, with Barthes nullifying the presence of an author behind the text, we arrive at the verge of derridean post structuralism and it is this derridean post structuralism that we will take up in our next lecture.

Thank you.