Linguistic Structure As A Key To Literary Criticism: Roland Barthes

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Roland Barthes, presenting a critical theory based on structuralism or semiology, defines the being of literature by the subjective pleasure, or bliss, which a literary text gives its reader. This bliss is the irreducible in literature, and it is the proper study of the literary critic, not the external considerations of the author’s biographic details, nor even of the objective realities to which the author’s language refers, for criticism is twice removed from the objective world, being language (criticism) about language (a literary work), thus a meta-language. Barthes does not deny (as did T.S. Eliot) that the author’s personal make-up and his work are inextricably interwoven, but he does maintain that the author is fairly irrelevant to criticism (a la I.A. Richards), because it is the reader’s subjective pleasure which establishes the value of literature. This highly relativistic position betrays Barthes’s strong grounding in modernistic thought, including that of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Nevertheless, he is careful to distinguish his theory from critical schools centered on the philosophies of the aforementioned, because they tend toward exteriority in their criticism, whereas he (in the structuralist tradition) is interested in examining how the interior of a work, through symbol and myth, combines to produce pleasure in the reader. Thus while he may arrive at the same conclusions about a work as a Marxist, existentialist, or Freudian critic, his critical method is quite opposite, being intensive (dealing with form) rather than extensive (dealing with content or biography). In this paper, I will attempt to show how Barthes’s structuralist theory operates, and how it might be applied to a selected piece of literature, Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”
As founder of the structuralist school of criticism in France (and it is a distinctively French school, as he proudly points out), Barthes affirms the uniqueness of the structuralist approach as compared to the other modern schools: existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis. Although de Saussure was the founder of structuralism per se, Barthes was the first to apply it generally to literary criticism. One may marvel that Barthes wishes to distinguish his work from that of the other schools, when he constantly relies on Marxist and Freudian theory in his writings:

We are dealing here with a mechanism based on a double exclusion largely pertaining to this enumerative mania which we have already come across several times, and which I thought I could broadly define as a petit-bourgeois trait.¹

A. confides that he would not be able to stand his mother’s being dissolute—but that he could put up with it in his father; he adds: That’s odd, isn’t it?—One name would be enough to exorcise his astonishment: Oedipus!²

The difference between structuralism and the other schools, then, is not primarily a philosophic one: structuralism as an empirical study largely accepts the empirical conclusions of Marxism and of psychoanalysis. The difference is one of approach. Whereas it is always the purpose of Marxist and Freudian critics to analyze the text for anterior “causes” of what is written (Does it reflect the attitudes of the bourgeoisie? Does it manifest unconscious conflicts of the author?), Barthes maintains that the critic should not be concerned with factors outside the piece of literature itself, neither with its “cause” nor with its message, but only with the interior linguistic form of the literature, which combines to give literature its real being and value, namely, the pleasure it gives its reader:

We might say that the task of criticism (and this is the only guarantee of its universality) is purely formal; it does not consist in ‘discovering’ in the work or the author under consideration something ‘hidden’ or ‘profound’ or ‘secret’ which has so far escaped notice (through what miracle? Are we more perceptive than
Our predecessors?) but only in fitting together...the language of the day (Existentialism, Marxism or psychoanalysis) and the language of the author, that is, the formal system of logical rules that he evolved in the conditions of his time.³

Thus structuralism, from its anthropological-linguistic base, can be eclectic enough to appropriate existentialist, Marxist, or Freudian explanations for the manner in which literature gives pleasure, but always from the standpoint of the linguistic form of the work, never through a biographical or ideological analysis of the work. This is what distinguishes structuralism from the other schools, and why Barthes faults the centrifugal tendencies of Freudian criticism:

...by coordinating the details of a work with the details of a life, psychoanalytic criticism continues to practice an esthetic of motivations entirely based on a relation of exteriority.⁴

A second objection which Barthes has to the other schools of criticism is that they become so deterministic as to eliminate the significance of writer and reader with regard to literature. If Marxism can reduce the activities of writer and reader to the inevitable progress of dialectical materialism, and psychoanalysis can reduce the same to biochemical processes, then the individual loses all significance and literary criticism becomes a function of economics or chemistry. As Barthes explains concerning Marxism,

it is well known by now (the matter was thrashed out long ago) that orthodox Marxism has proved critically sterile through offering a purely mechanical explanation of works of literature and providing slogans rather than criteria of value.⁵

For this reason, Barthes is less interested in orthodox Marxism and psychoanalysis than in what he calls the “marginal activities” surrounding these fields.⁶ It may be argued, however, that Barthes’ assumptions never leave the realm of a strict materialist determinism, and that to treat the writer and reader, as he does, as individuals with individual consciousness and creativity, is an example of unwarranted optimism relative to his assumptions.

Having delineated what Barthes’s structuralism is not, it is now
appropriate to make some affirmative statements about its contents. Among the three elements in the literary process (writer, work, and reader), Barthes's area of interest is definitely in the work as it relates to the reader. Barthes identifies the intrinsic value of literature as lying in “the pleasure of the text.” Therefore a piece of literature is valuable only inasmuch as it draws a response of pleasure from the reader. But, one may ask, does not the pleasure begin with the author’s conception of the work, then pass through the work to the reader? No, Barthes would answer, because pleasure is much more subjective than that:

I cannot apportion, imagine that the text is perfectible, ready to enter into a play of normative predicates: it is too much this, not enough that; the test...can wring from me only this judgment, in no way adjectival: that’s it! And further still: that’s it for me!

Therefore, Barthes is interested in describing the linguistic structure that works to provide pleasure “for me,” the individual reader. To Barthes, the activity of reading (or writing) is not merely a matter of the mind or brain assimilating the text, but rather involves the whole body. There are two types of pleasure which a reader can experience in literature. One Barthes calls simply “pleasure” and identifies as delight which is relative to a cultural and linguistic context and may be the product of dishonesty and excess, i.e., sentimentality. The other, more desirable type of pleasure he calls “bliss”; he identifies it as pleasure which is irreducible and incommunicable, as something that “is scandalous: not because it is immoral but because it is atopic.” This emphasis on pleasure as the sine qua non of literature marks Barthes’s critical theory as a form of hedonism. The literary pleasure he calls “bliss” he identifies quite closely with erotic pleasure, and specifically sexual orgasm, though he avoids a complete equation. But he insists upon the ultimate nature of this “bliss”:

Bliss is unspeakable, inter-dicted.
No “thesis” on the pleasure of the text is possible, barely an inspection (an introspection) that falls short. *Eppure si gaude!* And yet, against and in spite of everything, the text gives me bliss.\(^\text{11}\)

Just as structuralist criticism declares the primacy of form (linguistic structure) over content (message, meaning), it also declares that criticism properly deals with validity rather than truth. It is not the place of criticism, Barthes suggests, to judge the accuracy of an author’s words (signifier) or their correspondence to an objective reality (signified). Criticism is about literature, not about the world, and the only business of the critic is to judge whether a work is consistent within itself, with the world that the author has created linguistically. If so, the work is valid, just as a logical syllogism may be valid whether or not its premises correspond to reality:

Consequently, if criticism is only a meta-language, its task is not to discover forms of ‘truth’ but forms of ‘validity.’ In itself, a language cannot be true or false; it is either valid or non-valid.\(^\text{12}\)

Criticism, Barthes maintains, cannot be static, but must be a continual process of reinterpretation wherein the internal workings of a piece of literature are redescribed in the terminology of the present day: “Criticism is neither a ‘tribute’ to the truth of the past nor to the truth of the ‘other’; it is the ordering of that which is intelligible in our own time.”\(^\text{13}\) Thus to Barthes there is no hall of immovable literary tradition, such as Eliot posited, which criticism enshrines as being of permanent value. Rather, Barthes takes the relativistic position that a work is valuable only as it is pleasurable to the individual reader, that persons may have completely different lists of what they consider “good” literature without there being any logical conflict. If literature were valuable because of its correspondence to eternal truth, such value would be absolute. But Barthes advances the relativity of literary values by linking them to physiologic need:

Does the text have human form, is it a figure, an anagram of the body? Yes, but of our erotic body. The pleasure of the text is irreducible to physiological need.\(^\text{14}\)

Barthes, following psychoanalytic theory, finds the origin of writing, reading, and criticism in neurosis and sexual perversion. The
author sublimates his sexual drive into the pleasure of linguistic expression. This misdirection of pleasure is a neurotic condition: “Thus every writer’s motto reads: mad I cannot be, sane I do not deign to be, neurotic I am.”15 The reader and critic receive a much graver diagnosis, because their pleasure is vicarious:

I observe clandestinely the pleasure of others, I enter perversion; the commentary then becomes in my eyes a text, a fiction, a fissured envelope. The writer’s perversity (his pleasure in writing is without function), the doubled, the trebled, the infinite perversity of the critic and of his reader.16

The severity of Barthes’s assessment can in part be attributed to his loathing of the typical middle class attitude toward literature, that it is a “nice” diversion that can serve a moral or social purpose. His case for the value of literature is based on the purposeless, incommunicable “bliss” that it provides. This concept flies right in the face of the “petite bourgeoisie” whose activities are always goal-oriented. Being without a function, Barthes’s “bliss” corresponds to sexual perversion, which serves no function (does not result in conception, as normal sexual intercourse can). Thus Barthes undercuts the bourgeois position by identifying even bourgeois reading habits with the ignoble practice of sexual perversion.

The science behind Barthes’s criticism, semiology, is a dialectical explanation of language which is quite specific and exact. Semiology proceeds from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), who distinguished various elements in linguistic communication. There are first of all two levels of language, the literal and the mythic. On the lower (literal) level are three elements: the signifier (the mental phonetic concept), the signified (the thing or idea referred to), and the sign (the spoken or written word), which is a synthesis of the first two, since a spoken word cannot be perceived without the simultaneous awareness of both its sound and its meaning, intimately interwoven.17 There is little room for verbal deception on this level since the signified is well recognized and the sign is fairly arbitrary.

It is the second level of language, the level of myth, which is most applicable to literary criticism, since it deals with implied relationships (as in metaphors) where a fairly concrete sign is used to
communicate a broader, more abstract (and potentially inconsistent) idea. The same three elements are found on this level: signifier, signified, and sign. The sign (form + meaning) of the literal level becomes the signifier (form only) of the mythic level. The signified is the broader concept which the writer wishes to convey, and the sign is the signifier (image) coupled with the signified (concept) in the mind of the reader or observer.\textsuperscript{18} The danger lies in the fact that on the mythic level, the signified does not necessarily follow from the signifier, and therefore a writer can manipulate the meanings of mythic forms out of political or social motivations, with relative impunity. Barthes sees all kinds of mischief in this practice, including “the mystification which transforms petit-bourgeois culture into a universal nature.”\textsuperscript{19} It is therefore his intention in his criticism to dissect the forms of literary myth and to expose the consistency or inconsistency which exists between the signifier and the signified on the mythic level of the language.

To illustrate this critical process, I will examine Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.” This poem presents, on the literal level, a description of a rural cemetery, but its signs are utilized on the mythic level to signify broader concepts, including the goodness of simple rural life and the unfortunate exclusion of the poor from the circumstances which could “make something” of their potentialities.

Stanzas 5 and 6 of the Elegy utilize signs on the literal level representing common experiences of rural people as signifiers on the mythic level for “the goodness of simple rural life”:

\begin{quote}
The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock’s shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.  
For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care;  
No children run to lisp their sire’s return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

Here, the “swallow twittering” and the “blazing hearth” are important not so much for their literal meanings as for their use as
(fairly conventional) signifiers on the mythic level for the simplicity and goodness of rural life, of man divorced from the pressures and corruptions of intense social intercourse, such as is found in the city. One can see clearly how this poem typifies the transition from the rationalistic, socially-conscious literature of the eighteenth century to the aloof romantic literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But is there consistency here on the mythic level between the signifier and the signified? Clearly the relationship is doubtful. These details of natural and domestic life, taken together, are insufficient to conclude that rural life is good. By the selection of other signs (for instance, horse manure, drought, superstitions, monotony) one could just as easily propound a myth of the backwardness and unkempt wretchedness of rural life.

But the really objectionable uses of myth by Gray come later in the *Elegy*. Consider stanzas 13 and 14:

> But Knowledge to their eyes her ample page
> Rich with the spoils of time did ne’er unroll;
> Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,
> And froze the genial current of the soul.

> Full many a gem of purest ray serene
> The dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
> Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
> And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

Here Gray’s mythology is subtly altered. The natural and domestic details of the earlier stanzas signified a genuine *appreciation* on Gray’s part of the life of the lower class, of the rural proletariat if you will. The signifiers tell the reader that he is meant to understand simplicity, goodness, and dignity as the myth of the poem. I reiterate that Gray’s tone in the earlier part of the poem is *appreciative* of the circumstances of the life of the lower class.

But in the latter stanzas we are getting signifiers on the mythic level of a much different tenor. The personified “knowledge” here signifies what the lower class lacks. But what is this lack? Precisely, the lack of bourgeois education. Again, “Penury” is a signifier of lack. The existence of the lower class without the material wealth and goods which the middle class values so much is a “repression” of the
lower class’s potentialities. One can see how patronizing the myth has become. It says, “Pity the lower classes who lack the bourgeois prerequisites for a successful life.”

In stanza 14 also, one sees rural life deprecated. The “gem of purest ray” and the “flower” are signifiers for the potentialities and talents of the rural people. But what of their rural life? Its signifiers are “the dark unfathomed caves of ocean” and “the desert air.” Clearly, here we have the very condescending myth of the lower class with great potentialities but (sadly) lacking the bourgeois prerequisites for developing them. The incongruity between signifier and signified, is, in this case, that the middle class values of material wealth and ambition cannot be equated with “good.” It is just such inconsistency as that in the mythology of this poem which Barthes seeks to expose, and thus dispel, through structuralist criticism. He sees popular mythology as preserving the bourgeois values of purpose, ambition, and goals, whereas he sees at least the supreme literary value in the purposeless, irreducible “bliss” of the reader.

Barthes’s structuralism, as he sees it, does all that truly can be done in a communicable criticism of a piece of literature per se. It isolates the distinct terms in a linguistic process and judges whether they are consistent in themselves. Barthes does admit the limits of structuralism: it does not deal with meaning or message (which leads to the objective world exterior to the work) and it does not deal with “causes” (which lead to the author’s life or ideology, also outside the work). It remains to be seen whether structuralist criticism will grow in acceptance among literary critics, and whether it will gain a definite foothold outside of France.

Subsequent quotations are from the same source.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


