

Work and Text: An Analysis of Barthes' Seminal Essays

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Abstract:

This article makes an attempt to understand Roland Barthes' seminal essays "From Work to Text" and "Death of an Author" in the context of various texts like Stephen Mallarme's poems. I argue that his ideas are rooted in the Western tradition and go back to Plato. The article attempts to locate his essays in the context of literature and also traces how his ideas are anticipated in the literary works of the West. The last part of the essay also concentrates on how his ideas work in the context of traditions depending on performances followed by a conclusion trying to resolve some of the contradictory aspects of his ideas.

Key words: Work, Text, Structuralism, Sign, Performance, Tradition, Alienation.

The twentieth century witnessed the convergence of the literary forms like novel, poem, play and essay writing into what we call a text. The early forces of the century like the New Critics paved way for the ontological transformation of the literary forms into texts by questioning the existence of authorial intentions and relevance of biographical details of the writer to his/her work. The similar change also pinned down the art of criticism from form to language. In spite of the New Critical School's concentration on language, distinctions like prose/poetry, classic/modern and emotion/reason which they

criticized or questioned existed in their analyses. The latter half of the century witnessed a linguistic evolution in France with the introduction of structural linguistics. I call the new developments as an evolutionary process as they are rooted in Platonic dialogues. For example, Saussure's idea of language as a system of differences is very much discussed in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*. I A Richards experiment of analyzing poems without authorial, biographical and chronological details anticipate structuralism and its idea of the existence of meaning in differences. What structuralism did is to streamline mostly scattered thoughts of the western critical genealogy.

Roland Barthes earlier works comply with the norms of structuralism but he tries to extend the linguistic pattern of analysis to culture. In his interview with Jean Thibaudeau Barthes says,

I first found the idea of 'blank writing', i.e the degree zero writing...a friend of mine, Fournie, talked to me convincingly about Marxism: he was an ex-typographer, a Trotskyite militant returning from deportation; the intelligence, flexibility and strength of his political analysis, his irony and wisdom, a certain moral freedom, in short the fullness of his character, free from his political excitedness, gave me a very high notion of Marxist dialectic. (133)

The words of Barthes clearly say his earlier efforts of linking language to Marxism. But at the same time it is too difficult to classify him as a Marxist as his inclinations do not last for a long time. For example, he is a Marxist in appropriating a culture to a sign, in defying authorial function in the production of meaning, in questioning the existence of signified as the system of meaning, in showing the second order sign, where a sign itself becomes a new sign because of the play of the signifier, in his efforts to learn about the east or the exotic other without any preconceived notions in his book *Empire of Signs*. Though all his efforts are rooted in culture and societal constructions he is too linguist to be a Marxist. At the same time considering him as a pioneer of structuralism is too

limiting and if so his later works would lose meaning. The works like *Elements of Semiology* and *The Fashion System* all are based on the structures that Saussure speaks in his lectures. For example, let us take his famous classification in *S/Z* readerly text and writerly texts. A readerly text is the one which has dominated the scene for many centuries. Those texts which do not challenge the reader's common sense or the general understanding of the masses are readerly texts. What the readerly texts would do is to depend highly on convention without questioning it reproduces the societal forces thereby not asking reader to write the text again. A writerly text requires a reader to write the text again and again when he reads it. The ideas of the readers are intersected with the authors, the works' ideas are always juxtaposed with that of the readers and the final output of the reading is another text itself.

What is so strange about this classification? His nature of classification is oriented towards structures like dividing things on the basis of systemic differences. But his second division is itself defying the centre. It is more of a disseminated meaning kind. In Barthes we can see the traces of many schools of thought. With respect to the essays we can see him shifting towards the poststructuralist thought. The evidences are glaring in his essay "From Work to Text".

As the title itself indicates, Roland Barthes, in this essay, is concerned about a movement and a shift from one current of thoughts to the other and how the shift questions the universal applicability of a few concepts when they turn inefficient in providing a field of interaction to the newly generated forces. Work is the concept that is questioned here in the essay and text is projected as a new level playing field of the modern ethos. Why text becomes essential at a point of time is an important issue, for which Barthes tries to historically narrate the reasons. Work fails to recognize the recent changes that language witnessed because of the interventions of new ideological ruptures like structural linguistics, Anthropology,

Marxism and Psychoanalysis. The ideological disciplines that are formed due to the ruptures respond to each other when they face an object or a language that challenges the critical thoughts of one discipline. Hence, the challenge to conceive an object breaks all the barriers to secularly address the problem which again demands a new object and that is text. Barthes uses a seven point schema to enunciate the differences between text and work.

Text and work are not chronological categories where we can say all the classics are works and the modern literary efforts are texts. There are some ancient texts and also modern works. Text is always a potential work. Work is tangible as it occupies space in the university syllabus, library catalogues and book shops whereas text is a methodological field that comes to the fore only when the act of writing is performed in the form of a discourse. Text lives for a moment but work forever though without any action.

Text is too neutral that it cannot be interpreted in terms of genres or any other hierarchic classifications. How can we distinguish a person like Georges Bataille who sometimes an essayist philosopher, a poet-novelist or a mystic philosopher? Bataille's entire oeuvre is one single text that escapes any classification. Text's very nature of going to the limits of the rules of enunciation makes it to check and question the received opinions.

Text is radically symbolic unlike work whose symbolic activity is too moderate. Text is usually approached in reaction to the sign whereas work is itself a signified being an object of sciences or a bolus with hidden meanings in its womb which can be ferreted out only after the application of theoretical frameworks like Hermeneutics. Text is a signifier which defers the process of meaning by disconnections, overlapping, metonymic associations and variations.

Text confirms the plurality of meaning or the plural character of meaning as it acts as a passage that disseminates meaning. Text acts as codes that appear and reappear in new

combinations echoing various cultural, social and economical languages none of them original but organized in unexampled fashion. Text is filled with unacknowledged quotations and citations all new yet read, heard and contemplated in one or the other ways, hence, text makes familiar too unfamiliar giving a sense of alienation in a known world. Unlike text, work denies plurisignification and caught up usually in the process of associating itself with visible historical connections. One of the associations that work craves is authorship where it stands as his inscription. Text does not need an author or a father figure to nurture its movement, though authorial intervention is a possibility as one among the many voices heard in the text. What makes the authorial intervention less frequent in a text is its web like character. Text as a network can be re-meshed, weaved and turned to any side for the purpose of understanding.

Barthes says that work is a matter of consumption where the quality decides it's worth but not the act of reading. For text the dynamics is too different where consuming it means a free play, not just an imitation of the text, but a production with new combination that reduces the distance between reading and writing. Nowadays though reading is getting a lot of importance in the academic world; it is not akin to writing but just an imitation of whatever there in the text. Text's history is akin to that of the music's where the contemporary musical production is associated not only with a composer but also to an interpreter who is considered to be the co-author. A text loses its productive capacity if it gets an author. The last part of the essay is about pleasure where he sees text as a linguistic utopia where languages flow circularly instead of framing a hierarchy. Given these many features of the text let us see how text works without the control of the author in his other essay the death of the author.

According to Barthes writing is not just an authorial function but a reader's mode of understanding. An act of reading is no less than writing. In his book *Empire of Signs*

Barthes explains his encounter with a culture that is so different for him that he can listen only to sounds but not meanings. One of his intentions to visit a landscape that is so strange to him is to break the myth of language as the forbearer of meaning and critique westerners' obsession for centre and signified.

The essay is systematically organized and each paragraph reflects upon the Barthes central idea of writing by a reader, not by a writer. The lines of Sarrasine which gets cited in the first paragraph are analyzed in the last part of the essay; the penultimate paragraph that throws light on disentanglement of a text in contrast to deciphering it reaffirms the claims of the freeness of a text that Barthes associates himself with in the second paragraph. These two theses are conjoined with a historical re-interpretation of the western literary antiquity and the contribution of societal and critical bodies in the making of the object the author.

Barthes places the ideas of the late New Critics (the ever unavailable authorial intention for the critic) into the reader's consciousness through phenomenology, thereby even questioning the role of critic and accusing literary criticism for constructing authorship around a text. Intentionality being the core of phenomenological thesis describes the inexistence of experience without depending on a direct object or content. Wimsatt and Beardsley appropriate the basic tenets of phenomenology into literary criticism by enunciating on the critical unwantedness of tracing the authorial intention of a text. The duo concludes their seminal essay that a linguistic analysis along with relevant biographical detail of the author as a suitable alternative for the futile task of capturing the authorial intention. Is not Barthes pushing these ideas into a domain which is constructed on multi-cultural foundations? The answer is on the positive as a writer is not the only one to inscribe the symbols on paper but a reader also etches them on his consciousness. Now let us check how Barthes re-interprets his predecessors and anticipates a destruction of sign.

The first lines of the essay are a passage from Balzac's story "Sarrasine". The quotation is about a castrato with effeminate sensibilities and the distinction that severs people on gender is blurred. The erasure of the boundaries of the identity of gender entails the release of an equivocal expression of an indeterminate character. Barthes poses a series of questions on originary possibilities that might have initiated the descriptions of the castrato and answers writing as a mode that destructs and constructs every possible identity, voice and associates it to a photo negative which gives us a sense of photo but not the photo itself.

Barthes gives a very beautiful analogy of performances of folk cultures to make his point of authorial death clear. In ethnographic societies a performer's identity is usually and intentionally masqueraded. The veiling of identity of the performer only triggers the imagination of the viewers. Performative traditions at least to my knowledge always depend on an imaginative geography like stage—distanced from the reality in which the performers live—territorialized with human boundaries, occupied by people assuming various roles with no connection to their real lives, thus leading to a proliferation of meaning. The reason to make this point is to say that Barthes is keen on performative cultures where the act of meaning production is momentous and not controlled by the performer's personal identity as almost all performances command the performers to simulate a mythical or historical or an imaginative character. Though the inception point of the European civilization is about the loss of identity at the cost of performance, the modern forces and capitalistic tendencies along with rationality, the Enlightenment, religious reformatory movement and Empiricism gave rise to the concept of the author. Contrary to the currents that centered the individual to the literary forces, Barthes also analyses significant literary efforts that always questioned the authorial intervention in terms of understanding and meaning. For example, Mallarme in his corpus has always been critical of

authorship and its relevance to meaning, hence, he mostly operates with sounds rather than words. The basic requisite of writing is the author's subservience to language. Barthes here reads Mallarme in Eliot's idea of literary creation as a result of sliding away from one's (author's) personality to the other. It seems that Barthes is only evidencing T S Eliot's claim of impersonality and it being the threshold of literary creativeness. How? Escaping from one's personality is purely an act that is staged in the context of language, thereby language becomes the sole instrument, self controlled to a major extent hiding and hinting the lost and new found meanings to a reader who engages his consciousness within the text. When it comes to novels, Proust almost dramatizes the act of writing and the sacrifices that the act demands from the author. In his novel *Remembrance of the Things Past* Proust explores the pre-writing consciousness by juxtaposing and re-positioning the reader's and writer's context and infers that the book itself becomes the model for life and not the other way round. The efforts of Modernism, at least a few of the movements under the umbrella struggled to affect surprise, shock and break all conventional abode of meaning residing in the author's care and control.

Brecht's alienation effect is re-read by Barthes as a series of interventions that slowly distances the authorial effects from the texts. Brecht, according to Barthes, redraws the lines that distinguished author and his relations to the book. The thought that pervaded the corpus of the conventional literary criticism sees author as God/father and the book as the child, but Barthes sees the birth of a scriptor whose association is only with language and gets his soul when enunciated. Thus scriptor also indicates the unison of form and content (which Barthes cleverly distinguishes as mind and hand) in a field called language where the origin is questioned.

When text is premised in language then meaning is no more a unilateral directions issued by the author and his life. To exemplify how writing has no origin Barthes implicitly uses

the concept of inter-textuality. Every text is not an original creation, but a methodological field where many works interplay to produce different kinds of effects. The kernel of the author's mind is itself formulated by what he perceives through his cognitive capacities and acts like a creative lexical in producing a writing that is new only in terms of combinations. When a text loses its author then it has to be disentangled not deciphered as there is no hidden meaning in the text calling forth a critic to ferret it. Disentanglement results in specifying the fibers that are weaved into a fabric and that is the only possibility of understanding. The western critical antiquity is also responsible for giving impetus to the authorial construct as the criticism was leveled against the author or his failure to literalize his experiences and at the discrepancies between form and content. In order to prove his case Barthes says how Greek tragedy was tragic because of the intended multi layered meaning in the textures of the dialogues that were unilaterally understood. And this understanding is recognized by the audience and readers but not the characters. Hence, the idea of tragic is located in language as the logic of multi layered meanings is not recognized by the characters. Thus Barthes redefines the literary antiquity on the basis of his theses of scriptor, inter textuality and dictionary only to liberate reader from the theological and capital clutches of the author.

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