CHAPTER-III

ROLAND BARTHES - A CLEAR TRANSITION

The shift from structuralism to post-structuralism is clearest in the work of Roland Barthes. Barthes believed at first that formulating a grammar of narrative would be of profit in understanding literature (including folklore, I presume). But in a book entitled, "S/Z" of 1970, he reversed this position. Such a change is of vital importance in a study of the concept of the autonomy of art. I refer here to Robert Young's essay on Barthes (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.7).

Of the contemporary literary thinkers I have taken up for study, I have given greater consideration to the work of Roland Barthes, because the questions both of the autonomy of the work of art, and of the dissolution of the same, which corresponds to a shift in critical-literary attention from structuralism to what has been termed post-structuralism, are clearly addressed here.

Two kinds of Works

As we can see, throughout this essay, Barthes distinguishes works of art into two kinds, which, for the purpose of this thesis, we may term a kind of entity which maintains itself largely as autonomous, and the second, a kind of entity which consciously relinquishes its autonomy. Thus, according to Barthes' thought, which I am working out here, autonomy is not a general characteristic applicable or not applicable, to all works
and all forms, or genres, of art, but rather, clearly an attribute of some, and relinquished or deconstructed in others.

In S/Z, Young explains, Barthes rejected the idea of a model transcendent to several texts. Now he postulated that each text is in some way its own model, and that it should be treated in its difference. He referred to this difference as Nietzschean or Derridean, which I understand as nihilistic. He did not posit any substratum of Presence underlying difference.

We see here that the autonomy of generalization, of a single, dominant model or of transcendence, is put aside. An autonomy is posited, on the other hand, of specificity or individuality of texts. The difference which marks each text makes it stand apart in its own right, and as autonomous. The strength of the individual and its resistance to generalization is pointed out here.

Young calls Barthes' statement "disarmingly hedonistic". Barthes' words, which Young refers to, are:

"That is the pleasure of the text: value shifted to the sumptuous rank of the signifier" (Young, 1987, p.31).

These words indicate, Young says, the shift in Barthes' thought, from structure to signification, from work as the object or concept of critical attention, to Text.

What is this new concept, "Text", by which we refer now to a work of art? Young explains, the Text is said to be, in post-structuralist discourse,
"produced in the space of the relations between the reader and written and that space is the site of a productivity: 'écriture' (writing)" (Young, 1987, p.31).

We can see that the older concept of "work" and the new concept of 'text' when referring to an art-object are not opposed to each other as content and form, but that the dialectic of content and form is itself broken-up here. If the work is said to be more concerned with content, the 'text' cannot be said to be more purely a form. For, the text resists generalisation, which is the production of form.

Closed and Open Texts

Resisting both the content and form, the text becomes 'a site of productivity' and a play of signs. The dialectic is between the static, closed object and a dynamic one.

In Barthes' post-structuralist theory perhaps the space the text occupies is in-between content and form, in which signs and the process of producing signification become all-important. Signs, not as formal elements but rather as material, hedonistic elements --- material elements that can be played with for pleasure --- are all-important for the text.

The dialectic here is most concerned with the closure and openness of works of art. Young explains this opposition as one between thing and process, product and productivity, signified and signifier, truth and play. To my understanding then, the text is not against truth and context, but is simply not concerned to
be the transparent medium for them. It is more concerned with signifiers and their play.

All this is important for understanding what has happened to the concept of the work of art in twentieth century thought, or, one might say, in some of the major strains of this thought. We see here the break-up of the autonomy of the work of art as a stable, complete and closed entity. Simultaneously, the autonomy of the author of a work, the concept of the author as centre, as guarantor of pre-given meaning, is dispersed. The text is performative writing, in which meaning and signs both are posited and deconstructed, endlessly. In this sense the text is said to be transgressive in relation to the concepts of autonomy, author, centre, and other cognates.

As I understand the situation, at this point in this research, this theoretical study, which was asking the question about the autonomy of the work of art, must now look at itself as well. What kind of literary or aesthetic criticism is it that looks at a work of art as a text? This criticism, called the theory of the text, avoids reification into a metalanguage, as Barthes and Young explain. Part of this theory engages in deconstructing literary criticism which stands apart, or autonomous, and creates criticism which is itself a textual practice enacting meanings and allowing their dissolution. The criticism itself embarks on a wandering of signification. Thus, even the autonomy, or standing apart, of theory, is questioned here.
I quote:

"The word and the concept 'text' refuse to rest at any level of arrested meaning, performing instead a play, a trembling and overflowing of signifiers, a stereographic shifting of signification....the word never reaches its point of limit, but wanders and redoubles upon itself, in its meanings......". (Young, 1987, pp.31-32).

Here Young elaborates the breaking up or destabilization of the meaning, therefore the being, of a 'text' into a multiplicity. He says that what we now have are

".....meanings of text as a critical value, text as a replacement for the work, text as pleasure, text as a discursive unit, textuality as a tissue of signifying practices, text as the (critical) activity which textualises and analyses these movements....." (Young, 1987, pp 31-32).

Both the work of art and the theoretical-critical activity form a continuous discourse in which the text has many aspects, and both turn on themselves reflexively and critically, to examine and speak their own being.

**Loss of Autonomy Ecstasy**

The loss of autonomy of text, author and, eventually, the subject is described by Barthes as ecstatic. Barthes speaks, as Young explains, of a climax in literary texts associated with the loss of subject. I would note, then, that a climax of any kind is a coming together, a concentration of elements in
pleasure, a focussing, a centring. However, I would concede that such a focussing could be nebulous, dynamic, tentative - a coming together and dispersing. It could also be a centring of phenomena other than the ego.

We considered so far, Young's introduction to Barthes' essay, "Theory of the Text", of 1973, in the book, "Untying the Text". We now look at the essay itself.

In the beginning of "Theory of the Text" Barthes describes the text as a technical device, and inferior to or a servant of, the work. To the latter, he ascribes a spiritual glory. Barthes is describing here the traditional view of works of art. The text as a technical device serves to fix, or guarantee a stable meaning, which is more or less unique, of the work. Constituted of words, the units of language, and of writing as opposed to speech, as actual markings on a material surface, it is the "incontrovertible and indelible" trace of the meaning intended by the author in his work.

The text is inscription, with its qualities of stability and permanence, a corrective to the fragility and imprecision of memory - "it is a weapon", Barthes writes, "against time", as well as against "the trickery of speech, which is so easily taken back, altered, denied.......". Speech in the inner world of the subject can also play tricks, I would add, so that even our memories transform themselves, we sometimes find.

This traditional concept of the text, Barthes writes, is historically linked to a whole world of institutions: the law, the Church, literature, education. The text (in association with

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these institutions, I presume Barthes means) is a moral object. As the written, it also participates in the social contract. "It subjects us", Barthes writes,

"and demands that we observe and respect it, but in return it marks language with an inestimable attribute which it does not possess in its essence: security". (Young [Ed.] 1987, p.32).

So far as the text appears as a technical device, which gives the required material form to a work of art, it would be uncontroversial, I would say. But, as Barthes goes on to explain, the power of the written (text) has become associated with the power of human institutions. The written has come to rule us, subject us. Furthermore, the security of the written is falsely attributed to language in general as well as institutions.

Erroneous Attribution of Stability

Even if an entity is in motion, I would point out here, it can be held as it is, that is, with a definite being, at any one given point, and moment of time, and considered for what it is at that point. Or, it can be seen only as a dynamic entity. Post-structuralist thinkers, we see, have been much concerned with the underlying insecurity, instability, the fragility, tentativeness and dynamic quality of language. And within the space of just one paragraph, at the beginning of this essay, Barthes has moved from the idea of the written text as a stable entity, and the site of a work, to a position that language is a fundamentally
shifty, unstable phenomenon. What Barthes is saying here, as I understand him, is that the fixity of written texts was erroneously attributed to works, to institutions, to meaning and the self. In post-structuralist thought the fundamental instability of all these entities is acknowledged, and therefore the text which could continue to project itself as fixed in its writtenness, does not do so, but engages in a play which deconstructs its stability to reflect the instability of all other fundamental entities.

According to this view, i.e. autonomy not being a general characteristic applicable or not applicable to all works, but of some works, which I elucidate further here, these works, autonomous or non-autonomous, occur in a historical order, the former preceding the latter. The latter kind, which relinquish autonomy, are found in small number throughout history and include perhaps all the works known as post-modern or post-structural.

But it must be noted with Barthes that such an ordering of works of art in a linear, historical arrangement must not be a rigid one.

This research reveals that, corresponding to these two kinds of art --- and Barthes is one writer who does, at certain points, refer in an inclusive way, to all the arts, along with literary works - are two kinds of critical theory. The former, dealing with autonomous works, accepts autonomy as a general characteristic of all art, and presents itself also as an autonomous activity : a metalanguage, the language of literary
criticism, or aesthetics as a separate discipline that studies all the arts.

The second kind of theory is more self-conscious and self-critical. It addresses itself to non-autonomous works, which are themselves self-conscious and self-critical, and the theory relinquishes its own autonomy as well, losing its distinguishing boundary. This means, not that what the critic writes is actually appended to a literary work, but that the former writing is considered to be of the same kind as the latter. Criticism is the same kind of language as the literary work. It is the same kind of creative wandering or discourse. Both are texts. The criticism dealing with texts is distinguished from the earlier criticism by the term, "textual analysis". But, it seems to me, that it is not even analysis in the former sense, but a creativity and play, based on, and by some threads related and tied to, the text under consideration.

In this essay, Barthes goes on to examine the classical notion of the text as "part of a conceptual set whose centre is the sign". (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.33). Then he points to a shift from this conceptual way of thinking to an awareness of the sign as a historical concept, in his own time. It is now seen as an ideological and analytic artefact.

The whole Western civilization from the Stoics to the middle of the twentieth century, may be called a civilization of the sign, says Barthes, indicating how fundamental a role it has played therein (Young, 1987, p.33).
Robert Young, the editor of "Untying the Text", quotes Julia Kristeva here, as one of the first thinkers in our times to link the subject with the sign (See note 1, Young, 1987, p.45). We see here how, therefore, Western civilization is anthropocentric. The sign is fundamental to it, and the subject is linked to the sign. We, therefore, note that our question of the autonomy of the work of art is linked to the autonomy of the subject.

The autonomy of the work of art speaks this nature of Western civilization, we note.


The classical text, Barthes says, may be viewed in its materiality on the one hand, the signs forming words, sentences, paragraphs and chapters (and books, we must add), a well organized material texture, one might say - and meaning, or the signified, on the other. This meaning, he says, is "at once original, univocal and definitive.....The classical sign is a sealed unit, whose closure arrests meaning, prevents it from trembling or becoming double, or wandering". (Young [ed.], 1987, p.33).

We note then, that on Barthes' explanation, tight organization in the classical text occurs on two levels, that of
material signs and that of meaning. Also, the classical sign and the classical text, both lead to closure of meaning.

Tied on Both Sides

The classical text, says Barthes, closes the work, chains it to its letter and also to its signified. We note here that the work is being seen as tied, both to its signs and the signified — tied on both sides. The tight organization leads the reader to close the gaps which are caused by various factors, historical, material, human factors, which if attended to, could break up the integrity of the sign and the work.

Integrity of the work is maintained across history through restoration and interpretation. The two processes repair damaged works as well as meaning, filling in or closing gaps in literary or artistic texture. That is why Barthes does not consider interpretation a part of textual analysis. Interpretation is an effort at closure as textual analysis is not.

So far, Barthes spoke about the epistemological problem of the sign and the text which is sign-centred. He holds that such a text is usually classical and institutional, in the sense, it supports and interlinks with all major, existing institutions in society.

But this situation also has a metaphysical aspect. The discourse, of which the classical text is a part, is one of 'truth'. The classical text is said to speak one definite truth, and the metaphysical position here, furthermore, is that such a unitary truth does exist. One hears here of a 'lasting' truth,
or eternal meaning, of the text, as well as of existence. "One and the same history," writes Barthes, in this essay, "has linked together truth, the sign, and the text." (Young [Ed.], 1987, pp. 33-4).

Yet, throughout history there has also been an anxiety or anguish over the uncertainty of truth, and battles for one meaning against another, Barthes points out. With Nietzsche in the last century, this anxiety becomes a crisis in metaphysics, reappearing as a crisis in language in this century. The two, we can see are linked: metaphysics and language.

Even as metaphysics achieved a triumph of meaning, with structuralism formulating a concept of the sign as the combination of the signified and signifier, scholars began to open the doors of uncertainty in structuralism itself.

At this point, Barthes shows how the philosophical school of linguistic analysis contributed to this "mutation", as he calls it, this deconstruction of the relation between signified and signifier, this widening gap or rupture between signs and truth or reality.

Between Logical Validity and Reality

It will be remembered by philosophical analysts that the crisis of metaphysics was at its height with G.E. Moore, Bertrand Russel and Carnap. Barthes refers to these thinkers here, adding the name of Wittgenstein (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.34). Logical argument was all-important to these thinkers. Discourse had to be logically valid, that is all. The condition of truth, or correspondence with reality, was not important to this
discourse. Therefore, according to Barthes, it contributed to the widening of the gap between signs and the signified(s).

What happens here, as I can see, is that a kind of formalism prevails. Logic is seen as a language. The signs are used according to rules. What they stand for, the content is not important. This is an autonomy of form, and as in formal painting, here too, it minimizes the role of content.

With the development of the discipline of semiology, the whole of literary discourse was brought under linguistic analysis. So far, the unit to be analysed was the sentence. With semiology, attention widened to include the whole text. Barthes quotes Todorov here as saying,

"The notion of text is not situated on the same plane as that of sentence ....... The text may coincide with a phrase or with an entire book...." (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.34).

So now we come to a description by Barthes of that entity in the world of art, including literature, which relinquishes its autonomy. At first, this entity was, as in any positive science, only an object, submitted to the distant inspection of a knowing subject. The epistemological mutation, as Barthes calls it, which coincides with a relinquishing of autonomy by the text (which, I must note, is the result of a new kind of creativity and discourse engaged in by authors and artists), has not yet taken place, but soon follows.
This happened when linguistics and semiotics interacted to create a new field of reference, Barthes explains. This interaction was influenced by another one—that between two "epistemes"—dialectical materialism and psychoanalysis. This interaction between very different cultural frameworks or epistemes, or ways of knowing the world, produced a new object of art—-the text.

Saying anything about this object is itself textual. The critical theory is also a textual practice. I quote Barthes:

"The text is a fragment of language, itself placed in a perspective of languages. To communicate some knowledge or some theoretical reflection about the text presupposes, then, that one is oneself in some way or other engaging in textual practice". (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.35).

This new theory of literary practice emphasizes, thus, the reflexivity or circularity, I would say, of enunciation. That means language or textual practice turns back upon itself, and functions in a circuitous way. The work of art may be approached with definitions, but most importantly as happens, I presume, in the new textual practice, by metaphors.

Barthes refers here to Julia Kristeva's definition of the (new) text. It was Kristeva who first showed how the text is open to other texts, that is, by its openness makes possible an intertextually, which is an important feature of the new artistic and literary practice. (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.36).
Barthes holds that the signifying practice which occurs in a text, occurs in the historical matrix of language and not any universal one of the sign. To my understanding, however, the matrix of signification can be both historical and universal. It is a matter of view-point.

The theory of the text emphasizes the historicity and materiality of the sign, the relation between subject and language, and the plurality of the subject as well as of signification.

The materiality of the sign is a concept drawn from dialectical materialism enunciated in recent times by Marxist thinkers; the plurality of the subject has been best approached by psychoanalysis.

I quote Barthes again:

"In fact the plural is at the heart of signifying practice, in the form of contradiction: signifying practices, even if it be provisionally permitted to isolate one of them, always belong to a dialectic, not to a classification", (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.37).

According to this part of textual theory, the text is an entity which is born out of a dialectic, or oppositional tension, between the subject and its other. As I understand it, it is not centred on either side, but in an in-between space. Barthes says further that it is the productivity which becomes possible in such an in-between space. The productivity which creates the text is not one arising out of any technique of narration and
mastery of style, but a theatre in which dialectical forces interact.

He has spoken of the subject and the other already. Now he presents another dialectical pair — the writer (or producer of art) and the reader (or audience of works of art).

Different from the "Doxa"

The text works, and works language, endlessly, as it is appropriated by various readers. And it works language in a way which is different from the way of normal or ordinary communication, the "doxa", Barthes says.

Here at least, the theory Barthes is enunciating meets the aesthetic theory of Langer as well as the semiotic theory of Rifffaterre. Langer, we may recall, emphasized that the work of art communciates, but in ways different from ordinary language, which she calls discursive language. Rifffaterre says that poesis is a process in which the elements of ordinary language, or what we might refer to as mimetic elements, are reorganized into a different significance.

Langer's and Rifffaterre's theories, however, show the construction or production of a work of art which stands autonomous, but when Barthes speaks of a different-from-usual use of language (or other artistic media) in the production of a text (or other works of art) the product is not similar to the one the former two thinkers speak about. This latter product is not concerned to retain an autonomy.

Barthes refers to this absence of boundary, I would point out, when he writes,
"......the text 'works', at each moment and from whatever side one takes it". (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.36).

When it refuses the normal usage of language, as well as the prevalent, dominant, governing rules, beliefs and values of a society, which Barthes refers to as the "doxa", the text deconstructs mimetic or representational language, and I quote Barthes again:

"....reconstructs another language, voluminous, having neither bottom nor surface, for its space is not that of the figure, the painting, the frame, but the stereographic space of combinative play, which is infinite......the text comes about as soon as, for example, the scriptor and/or the reader begin to play with the signifier....." (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.37).

The text comes about when the writer begins to produce word-plays, or the reader invents meanings on the basis of the signs in the work, meanings which may not have been foreseen even by the author. Thus, as Barthes explains, not the writer nor the reader, but the text works ceaselessly and tirelessly, lending itself to multiple meanings, to endless play. The signifier, Barthes says, belongs to everybody.

Linguistics cannot alone explain textual productivity, Barthes writes. The fecundity of the text opens on to a number of other dimensions, for instance, mathematics, which gives an account of the play of sets and subsets, Lacanian psychoanalysis, which explores the (psycho)logic of the signifier, and
dialectical materialism, which recognizes the play of opposing forces.

While the signifier enters upon a course of play, on this theory, and does not even try to maintain any autonomy for itself, but engages in shifty creativity, I would point out, that it is not just the signifier that is the mobile element here, but the meaning, or signified: the signifier moves as the signified does: the play, it seems to me, is really a play of meanings, and the plurality and creativity spoken about here pertains to all the fundamental entities and institutions of society.

Barthes goes on to speak against the attribution of a unique, unitary, canonical meaning to a text, and therefore against interpretation, which claims to be exclusively correct. The text is, in interpretive reading, believed to have only one, hidden meaning. Every interpretation claims to be the correct one. Significance becomes fixed, reified, "embalmed" in such a reading.

The new conception of text is dynamic: the text is not a product with a fixed, unitary meaning but a production. It's fixity occurred in association with its autonomy, and its loss of autonomy is accompanied by a gain in movement, as I understand it.

"Significance" is now seen to imply fixity of meaning and is no longer an appropriate concept in relation to the text, Barthes writes, and suggests, as Julia Kristeva did, and to whom he
refers here, the term "significance", which implies a process of generating meaning.

Once again we have Barthes providing important distinctions between, and descriptions of, the "work" and the "text" : the text is a polysemic space where the paths of several possible meanings intersect .....". (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.37). The work usually had a monological meaning. The text pluralises meaning.

**Different Constructions**

It is clear that the work and the text are constructed differently. The former has a closed structure, and its signifiers are used in such a manner as to lead the reader to singular meaning. The latter has an open, flowing structure, and its signifiers lend themselves to a play of meanings.

The work intends to communicate, to make a statement(s). It denotes. The text has several connotations associated, like "vibrations", with the denoted meaning. A plurality of meanings, I would say, reverberates around the denoted meaning(s) of the text. The text no longer intends to communicate in a singular manner, but to make possible "a mobile play of signifiers", in Barthes' words.

In this dynamism, I would say, with Barthes, lies the pleasure of the text, which may be referred to as "Jouissance" or eroticism. That is, (for the purposes of this thesis, we may note) the loss of autonomy, in the sense of the dominance of a singular meaning and singular subject, is experienced as pleasure or bliss.
The text, as it relinquishes autonomy and fixity, is no longer concerned to make statements, but with enunciation.

The work had structure, while the text may be said to show structuration: a process of structures coming into being and getting deconstructed.

The work, whose autonomy has been deconstructed, now open, becomes an "intertext". The text has scraps or fragments of past and contemporary cultures or other texts, present in it. Losing its boundary, it not only links with but freely incorporates parts of other texts.

All signifying practices can engender text: the practice of painting pictures, musical practice, filmic practice, and so on. Barthes refers to one kind of deconstruction of boundaries, when he says that textual painting is often no longer only painting, but incorporates in itself the practice of sculpture. Melody is both language and music. (Young [Ed.], 1987, pp.41-2).

Thus, the text interlinks with other texts, transgressing boundaries in this manner. I would say, and does the same by tending to abolish the separation of artistic genres, and of the various arts. It opens up an infinity of readings, and also abolishes the separation of writing and reading of a text on the basis of creativity or productivity: insisting strongly that both are creative.

The text and its theory therefore bring attention to the reader where classical literary theory had largely ignored him or her. The reader here is nothing less than one who also desires to write, or at least, partake of the (erotic) pleasure of
language, to eschew the fixity of autonomy and find bliss in the movement of language.

Barthes explains textual practice further. He refers to historical and philological studies of works of art, but I note, does not mention aesthetics. In any case, he is right in saying that the work of art has traditionally been looked at as an object placed at a distance from the viewer and studied as an entity exterior to the knowing subject. This is the familiar concept of aesthetic distance, much debated in aesthetics. Textual theory questions this concept, removes distance and deconstructs the autonomy of the work of art, which, I note, aesthetic distance fosters.

Between the Objective and the Subjective

But in deconstructing objectivity, which we may recall Langer evokes in the beginning of her well-known book, "Feeling and Form" (1953, first publication), textual theory does not place a subjectivity in the resulting vacuum. It refers, rather, to the field of textual practice, and to topology, the science of the sites of speaking or enunciations. The subject is not apart from this field, but within it, and if not, drawn into it and persuaded, I would add, to participate and contribute.

Such then is the new textual practice. Towards the end of this essay, Barthes says this theory is more for the producers of writing (or any art) than for critics, researchers, students. It is a theory which moves beyond the level of communication (of statements in a particular style) into the field of generative
energy. Barthes describes the characteristics of this theory, some of which are: distortions of enunciation, or word-play, polysemy, a play even on the writer-reader relationship, and a transgression of our established sociality as represented by our usual perception, and transgression of intellection, the sign, grammar and even science.

In transgressing, in relation as well as displacement, this new theory draws its meaning. Barthes shows that in relation to traditional theories of art, this theory is formalist, as I have myself noted, earlier in this chapter. But in relation to formalist theories, this theory, it is best to quote Barthes here

"......reintroduces into its field history, society (in the form of the intertext), and the subject (but it is a cloven subject, ceaselessly displaced and undone - by the presence-absence of his unconscious)." (Parentheses provided by Barthes; Young [Ed.], 1987, p.45).

Barthes acknowledges the paradoxical nature of this theory: it is neither general in the sense of being model-oriented, nor particular or singular, in the sense of individual and idiosyncratic. The text is never wholly appropriated or mastered, it is always on the move in the field of signifi ance. The theory of the text is a theory of "jouissance", a bliss associated with the erotic loss of the boundaries of consciousness, and of the becoming which, Barthes says, "Nietzsche demanded that we perceive beyond the gross form of things". (Young [Ed.], 1987, p.45). The text is like a tree, which seems to have a fixed, definitive form only because of the
grossness of our perceptive organs and is in fact constantly changing, moving, growing.

This theory then avoids both generalisation and particularity and moves, I would say, in an in-between space.

Its dynamism is perhaps its only absolute characteristic, and in this, to my understanding, it mirrors, or corresponds to, reality. A different kind of mimesis occurs here. For, things in reality are also impermanent, always changing. There is thus a cosmological position underlying this theory: change and movement are alone permanent in this world.

But I have one last question to ask, which will tend to turn this self-reflexive theory once more on itself: The tree is always growing, yes, but if we destroy its structure will it be able to grow? Its sturdy trunk, its branches, the veins that transport water and food, and the photosynthetic cells in the leaves - if we mix up this structure what will happen to the tree? May we say then that the tree is characterised by both structure and movement?

The Structuralist Activity


In "The Structuralist Activity" Barthes speaks of the structuralist theory of language formulated by Saussure as, primarily, a dynamic phenomenon - an activity. He says that both
art and the theory of art must be seen, not as rigid forms or structures, but as structures in movement, structures in the process of creation, of being made.

It is to be noted that in this essay, Barthes relates art to nature, or all creation, and then explores how it distinguishes itself. He speaks about all art in general. He also addresses the problem of mimesis, that is, of art representing given reality. He holds that art is mimesis, but not a copy of reality: it makes reality intelligible.

"Technique", which I understand as a certain way of doing something, Barthes says here, "is the very being of all creation". Structuralism follows a certain technique of its own, which distinguishes it from other modes of analysis or creation. And the technique itself is such that the object with which it is concerned is made to reveal, in turn, its own dynamism, its functioning. This is why, Barthes writes, "we must speak of the structuralist activity rather than the structuralist work."

(Con Davis [Ed.], 1986, p.304).

This activity, Barthes says, involves two kinds of operations, dissection and articulation. The object given to human perception is taken apart, "........to find in it certain mobile fragments whose differential situation engenders a certain meaning ........" (Con Davis [Ed.], 1986, p.304). This object may be part of a given reality. Or it may be the work of art which the structuralist is analysing.

Barthes also speaks in this essay about certain objects which structuralists take as paradigms. During the first
operation, a paradigm is summoned up, in a process of citation, on the basis of both similarity and difference, for instance, the Oedipus myth. These units of structure, Barthes says, are not at all anarchic. He speaks of a "submission to regular constraints", of "formalism" and "stability", as well as "a battle against chance", in relation to this activity of structural analysis, through both its stages.

He writes "...it is by the regular return of the units and of the associations of units that the work appears constructed, i.e. endowed with meaning....", (Con Davis [Ed.], 1986, p.305). These associations, or the rules or laws which make them, are referred to by linguistics as "forms".

I quote Barthes further, as in this early essay, he shows himself adhering to a distinct formalist position:"....form, it has been said, is what keeps the contiguity of units from appearing as a pure effect of chance: the work of art is what man wrests from chance". (Con Davis [Ed.], 1986, p.305).

That is why, Barthes goes on to say, "nonfigurative works are nonetheless to the highest degree works of art". Human thought must be understood not as copy or model, but as the "regularity of assemblages", that is, forms created on the basis of certain regularities or laws.

Non-figurative, or abstract art, is seen on this view to be the highest kind of art, exhibiting as it does, pure form.

But, after this point, Barthes goes on to speak about the quality of forms that characterize art and structuralist theory,
and which later came to dominate his concerns — the dynamism of
forms. He writes, "The simulacrum, thus constructed, does not
render the world as it has found it.....(but) manifests a new
category of the object, which is neither the real nor the
rational, but the functional..." (emphasis Barthes'), (Con Davis

One cannot help noting the Kantian tone of Barthes' analysis
here. It is not restricted to the study of art, but concerned
with the wider field of human knowing, and formulation of
knowledge.

Man Fabricating Meaning

He says about structuralism as a method, that "it highlights
the strictly human process by which men give meanings to
things....what is new is a mode of thought (or a poetics) which
seeks less to assign completed meanings to the objects it
discovers than to know how meaning is possible... the object of
structuralism is not man endowed with meanings, but man
fabricating meanings....". (Con Davis [Ed.], 1986, p.305).

A new concept of human being has emerged here, Barthes
writes—man creating meaning. Such a man is the object of
structural inquiry. Here, the attention has shifted from the
semantic content of bodies of knowledge — including art-works and
art theory to the process of creating meaning.

So far, a "shudder of meaning" was felt in nature by man,
Barthes writes. Now he is aware that humanity creates for itself
all that it knows.
Literature, in particular, Barthes says, is an activity which is both intelligible and interrogating, engaging in the world simultaneously as it recreates the world. All engagement in the world is through a literary process, a process of creating fiction, on this view, as I understand it. Here, the creation of meaning or knowledge, and the creation of fiction are seen as identical; fiction reigns supreme or autonomous.

Here, the boundary between knowledge and literature or all art in general, is seen to dissolve. Art reigns supreme. All our way of knowing is an art, a construction or creativity, as I understand this position.

Literature, or narrative, because it creates its own meaning, does not delink itself from history, as the story of real events, but links itself to history by giving it certain forms. It engages in the world through its own active participation or creativity. Thus, what Barthes is saying here is that the autonomy of narrative does not isolate it from history, but that through its creativity narrative engages with the world.

The forms humans create are material as well as intelligible, ideological as well as aesthetic, Barthes holds.

Structuralist man is "not concerned to last". Highly conscious of forms in the making, he knows that after him new forms will be created.

The function, the process, the act of creating meaning has become important as the object of study. Artist and analyst both recreate, Barthes says, the course taken by meaning as it is being constructed, its locus or path.
Thus, humans know the world only through the process of reconstructing its meaning in modes characteristically human. Both art and art-theory are part of this reconstructive knowing process. We can see that Barthes' concern here eventually becomes epistemological, related to the Kantian position that we ourselves supply the categories of all knowing. But he develops this position further as related to aesthetics.

From Work to Text

I refer lastly to Barthes' essay, "From work to Text", 1971, taken here from "Literary Criticism and Theory: From Greeks to the Present" (Lee A Jacobis [Ed.], 1989, pp. 713-18).

Rolland Barthes occupies the unique position of having contributed eminently to structuralism as well as preparing the way for post-structuralist developments, including Derrida's deconstructive method. In "From Work to Text", as in the other essay "Theory of the Text" discussed earlier, Barthes distinguishes between the work, which he says is a static product we consume and the text, which is always in production.

For this thesis, the "work" would be seen as autonomous, and also a fixed, rigid entity. The "text" cannot be seen as autonomous. It must always be incomplete and dependent on the reader, who through his or her participation in producing the text, completes it, or perhaps still leaves it incomplete. The compromise of the autonomy of the text makes it ever-on-the-move, and thus more interesting. It is more exciting and satisfying for the reader, than the work which is static, for it allows the
reader to contribute, out of his or her own experience and creativity.

In his essay, "From work to Text" of 1971, Barthes enunciates certain propositions which describe the natures of the text and the work. But these should not be taken to constitute a theory, he warns. Discourse about texts is itself, or should be, only text, a search, a textual toil, he says. It occupies no special, elevated space.

To my understanding, autonomy is considerably obliterated here, as the texture of an object of art is seen to be co-extensive or interwoven, with that of other objects which together weave the larger cultural discourse, and the theory of art is also seen as a co-extensive weave in this texture.

Barthes says, the work and the text cannot be distinguished according to a crude list, perhaps chronological, which takes classical literary products to be works and avant-garde ones to be texts.

"A very ancient work can contain 'some text', while many products of contemporary literature are not texts at all". He says, further on in the essay, "while the work is held in the hand, the text is held in language : it exists only as discourse". (Jacobus [Ed.], 1989, p.714).

The work may be said to have fixed meaning, and a fixed but hidden signified, which then makes interpretation possible, even necessary. The text, however, belongs to the field of the sign, not the signified. Barthes says,
"The text, on the contrary, practises the infinite
deferral of the signified: the Text is dilatory: its
field is that of the signifier. The signifier must not
be conceived as 'the first stage of meaning', its
material vestibule, but rather on the contrary, its
aftermath. In the same way, the signifier's infinitude
does not refer back to some idea of the ineffable (of an
unnamable signified) but to the idea of play. The
engendering of the perpetual signifier within the field
of the text should not be identified with an organic
process of maturation or a hermeneutic process of
deepening, but rather with a serial movement of
dislocations, overlappings, and variations". (Jacobus

There are interesting philosophical, specifically
epistemological, implications of this statement by Barthes: it
is not that the obscurity and indeterminacy of the signifier
leads to a plurality of reality, nor that reality is hidden and
unspeakable. Reality - the signified - meaning - do not precede
signification, either. The text is itself a weave of meanings
within a discourse. It creates meaning and therefore, meaning is
the aftermath of a text.

**Meanings within Discourse**

Barthes steers away from questions about reality and its
knowability and sayability, towards the network of meanings in a
discourse. Thus he says, further in this essay,
"...The text is not co-existence of meanings but passage, traversal: thus it answers not to an interpretation, liberal though it may be, but to an explosion, a dissemination..."(Jacobs [Ed.], 1989, p.715)

Barthes is not speaking about all cultural activity. Since he distinguishes between two kinds of literary products, it is clear that only some cultural products have a texture which opens out to interconnect with the larger discourse, and within themselves, tend towards a play, rather than a fixity, of meaning. Thus, according to Barthes, by implication, some cultural products tend towards encapsulation or closure, or autonomy, while others tend towards an openness, which means a play of meaning.

In this essay, Barthes connects the relinquishing of autonomy, though he does not use this term, by a text, to social and political relations in the human world: he says the text shows "transparency" of relations. Since it does not present itself as separate and autonomous, it posits freedom and equality. This is how I understand Barthes here. In relinquishing autonomy, the text relinquishes special privilege. He himself says, "It is the space in which no language has a hold over any other, in which all language circulates freely". (Jacobs [Ed.], 1989, p.718).

In much of his later writings, Barthes was concerned to elaborate the difference between a "work" of art or literature and a "text". The text is a cultural product which works against the "doxa", against tradition, against rules and boundaries. It
deconstructs its own autonomy. It posits neither the autonomy of an author nor a reader, but operates in a field of discourse, always moving through an endless play of meaning.

Barthes' earlier structuralist position had already shown language to be self-reflexive, hence autonomous. In his later position, this strain of thought is developed further as a self-reflexive play of meaning - our knowledge as circumscribed by our culture, but an endless play within it. Earlier, he did admit a kind of mimesis in reality; later in his view, language becomes more thoroughly self-reflexive. This view in Barthe's theory is closely related to Paul de Man's post-structuralist theory.

To my understanding, this is a development which has its roots in Kantian epistemology, as well as the Humean uncertainty of knowing reality.

Since we ourselves construct our knowledge of reality, through language, we are free to play with this construction. Since we can never have definite knowledge of reality, we are thrown back upon language - there is only discourse, as poststructuralists tend to say.

Barthes shows that this is a historical development, a way of understanding the work of art as non-autonomous (though he does not use this term) which has come into existence in the latter half of the twentieth century.

However, the situation is paradoxical here. On this view, the work of art is autonomous because self-reflexive, but non-autonomous because it does not have a lasting, definite form.