

# MEANING AND TRUTH IN STRUCTURALIST AND POST-STRUCTURALIST CRITICISM

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## ABSTRACT

*Post structuralism expels the Author from the Text: that is what Barthes means by 'death' of the author. Given the views of language on which structuralism and post structuralism rest, it is not possible to view authors as the masterful presences of old to be found within and without of their writings, transferring themselves whole and without loss or distortion from life into literature. The author is in fact a construct, a hypothesis, formed by a reader on the evidence of his or her reading. Whatever is known of the author is textual; they have no existence for us. The process by which authors are 'constructed' is circular: we abstract them from their texts and then use this abstraction to explain their texts. Barthes and Derrida after him seek to break this circle and de-originate the text, that is, originate it in language. Structuralism and post-structuralism will not accept the author as a sovereign unity regulating the semantic plane of his or her writing from within. Writing undoes the Author; he is disseminated. The replacement provided by the post - structuralists for the Author, that is, the Subject is present in the Text in a great many dispersed fragments, a presence among other presences and without any hold over them. From these dispersed fragments, the reader is free to construct some kind of a coherent figure who can be classed among the Text's themes. If the Subject is conceived of as the author, it would be untenable, because the Author and the Subject to be discovered in Texts are not one but two. Derrida looks on efforts to authenticate texts by reference to some supposed ultimate authority absent from Texts as futile. They are a sign of the common nostalgia for the monolithic figure of the Author, or Derrida would say, for God, the ultimate law giver.*

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Structuralism came in the vanguard of criticism with the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure's posthumous *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure argued that our knowledge of the world is inextricably shaped and conditioned by the language that serves to represent it. He insisted on the arbitrariness of the relationship between the sign and the object, i.e., between the signifier and the signified. Saussure's insistence on the 'arbitrary nature of the sign led to his undoing of the natural link that common sense assumes to exist between word and thing. Meanings are bound up, according to him, in a system of relationship and difference that effectively determines our habits of thought and perception. For from providing a 'window' on reality, language brings along with it a whole intricate network of established conventions. In his view, our knowledge of things is insensibly structured by the systems of codes and conventions which alone enable us to classify and organize the chaotic flow of experience. There is simply no access to knowledge except by way of language and other related orders of representation.

The meaning that the text conveys comes to the reader because of the structure of language - the structure of relationships and differences within the system of language. In Jonathan

Culler's *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), regarded as a sound and authoritative guide to the complexities of structuralist thought, the author says that the proper task of theory is to provide a legitimating framework or system for insights which a competent reader should be able to arrive at and check against his sense of relevance and fitness.

Culler's claim for the structuralist approach is that it offers a regulative matrix for perceptions which might otherwise seem merely dependent on the critic's personal flair and virtuosity. Culler takes his cue from Noam Chomsky's argument that 'linguistic structures are innately programmed within the human mind and operate both as a constraint upon language and as a means of shared understanding.'<sup>1</sup> Thus Culler says that our comprehension of literary texts is conditioned by a similar grammar of response which enables us to pick out the relevant structures of meaning from an otherwise inchoate mass of competing detail. Culler's argument is that a competent reader will be able to comprehend the meaning in the text according to the 'grammar' of response - competence here meaning the training of the intelligence to locate ones reading within the conventions of plausibility defined by a generalized knowledge of literature.

Structuralism, by providing the competent reader with codes and conventions to comprehend literature, lends support to traditional ideas of the text as bearer of stable meaning and the critic as a faithful seeker after truth in the text. Structuralism looks for structures of meaning in literary texts. Our comprehension of literature is based on our understanding of the structure which is embodied in a literary text. "Literary understanding can reasonably be seen as structure dependent: the structure of literature determines not *what* we understand when we read but *how* we understand it. The particular meanings we derive from our reading are the 'events', our 'competence' is the system on which those events depend. That system must be learned; there is no wholly untutored way of making sense of literature."<sup>2</sup>

Post structuralism replaced structuralism in the late 1960's. Jacques Derrida, the French Philosopher brought post structuralism almost single handedly. Post structuralism is a critique of structuralism from within. It takes language to be the model of structural system more whole heartedly ever than structuralism does, and draws unexpectedly fundamental conclusions from the way in which language works.

The structural reading of a literary text or other texts which ignores its real extension in time carries for Derrida the particular danger that it will also be a teleological reading. If the text is shown to have a structure, it is all too easy to show that this structure is the *object* of the text and of its author. The text is thus *perverted* into the realization of a structure which pre-existed it; is predetermined. Up to a point many texts are predetermined, since their authors will be writing to a plan. But only up to a point; the plan is not to be confused with the final text. For Derrida, the plan too is something textual, a structure, because it was formulated (in words). The plan cannot be offered as the a- textual 'origin' of another text.

Derrida's conclusions come from a far larger ambition than merely pointing out the weaknesses of structuralism as commonly practiced: it is to dismantle the whole system of Western thought from the time of Socrates because he believes that it has been led astray by its reprehensible

failure to grasp the nature of language and of meaning. Derrida shows that the works of Saussure serve the sweeping purpose of supporting a prevailing and unconscious idealism which asserts that language does not create meaning but reveals them, thereby implying that meanings pre-exist their expression. This for Derrida is a non-sense because for him there can be no meaning which is not formulated: We cannot reach outside language.

The western metaphysical privileging of speech over writing is put into question by Derrida. For him, that privileging shows the bias against writing coming down from Plato onwards against speech as something derivative, secondary, supplementary. Derrida believes that he is countering a longstanding prejudice among those who have thought and written about language: that the written word, language, is subordinate to the spoken, that it is the representation of the spoken, itself seen as primary. This traditional priority accorded to speech comes about from the deep 'Phono centricism' of Western thought. We are sentimental towards the human voice and deluded by it into forgetting that even when we speak, or speak inwardly with oneself, i.e., think, we still have recourse to signs. We cannot be fully present even to ourselves in so far as we must of necessity converse with ourselves in a system of signs that is not ours alone but a social institution. 'Hearing ourselves speak' is the illusory model of intimacy and immediacy which Derrida suggests has enabled us conveniently to ignore the true nature of signs.

In *Grammatology*, Derrida suggests that the positing of writing as secondary to speech is part of a much broader tendency. Derrida relates the phono centricism of metaphysics to logocentrism - "the belief that the first and last things are the logos, the word, the Divine Mind, the infinite understanding of God, an infinitely creative subjectivity, and, closer to our time, the self-presence of full self-consciousness."<sup>3</sup> Derrida says that this phono logocentrism is a longing for a center, an authorizing presence that spawns hierarchized oppositions. "The oppositions between intelligible and sensible, soul and body seem to have lasted out "the history of Western philosophy," bequeathing their burden to modern linguistics' opposition between meaning and word. The opposition between writing and speech takes its place within this pattern."<sup>4</sup> In Western philosophical tradition, voice, becomes a metaphor of truth and authenticity. Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics undercuts this notion of truth and authenticity which is the illusory effect of the "metaphysics of presence". The 'metaphysics of presence' presumes that whatever is present to us is wholly and immediately so, grasped in an act of pure intuition which has no recourse to signs. Presence, according to Derrida can never be immediate, but mediated by language. Since our consciousness too has recourse to signs which work to give meanings through a system of relationships and difference, nothing can be wholly and immediately present. Such is the nature of the sign system which mediates between us and the phenomena, that, Derrida claims, there can be no meaning to asserting that something is 'present', if there is no possibility of its being 'non-present'.

One thus very quickly realizes that the presence of the present moment can only appear as such to the extent that it is continuously compounded with a non-presence and a nonperception....<sup>5</sup>

The structure of time and of language is identical for Derrida. Any idea we might have of the 'present moment' as a simple point incapable of analysis is undone by the patent relativism of

the term “present”. The ‘present moment’ is not a point but a structure, depending for its existence on its relationship with past and the future. Like any linguistic sign, it is inhabited by other ‘traces’. ‘No sign is an island’, we might say. The nostalgia for presence brings about the phonocentric illusion. Derrida shows no nostalgia for a lost presence when he says, ‘the other of the signified is never contemporary, is at best a subtly discrepant inverse or parallel -- discrepant by the time of a breath - of the order of the signifier.’<sup>6</sup> Word and thing never in fact become one. The structure of reference works and goes on working not because of the identity between the so-called component parts of the sign - the signifier and signified - but because of their relationship of difference. The sign marks a place of difference.

The structure of the sign is determined by the ‘trace’ or ‘track’ of that ‘other’ which is forever absent. This ‘other’ of the sign is never to be present in its full being. The trace of the sign structure is illusive. It demonstrates that signs can never be complete in themselves but refer us endlessly to other signs. (The sign trace itself cannot be exempted from the process of endless referral) This process of endless referral is also termed by Derrida as ‘differance’, and used by him to suggest both the differential nature of sign system and the French sense of ‘deferment’. Derrida means to suggest both ‘differing’ and ‘deferring’ as for him both are the same processes. The process of referral from sign to sign need never in theory be arrested because there can be no final escape from the sign system. Each new signified is, Derrida reminds us, also a signifier, and so on *ad infinitum*. Sign will always lead to sign, one substituting the other as signifier and signified in turn. This leads to saying that knowledge is not a systematic tracking down of truth that is hidden and may be found but rather that it is a ‘field of free play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions in the closure of a finite ensemble.’<sup>7</sup>

Derrida’s insight into the sign system with its differential nature brings him to speak of signs as having an indicative function as opposed to the expressive function. The widespread view of text as something ‘spoken’ comes from our eagerness for texts to express, communicate the thoughts and sentiments of the author. This is the lyrical view of authorship and its corollary is that the signs which authors use must also themselves be expressive. Derrida will have nothing to do with such an approach towards texts. Derrida holds that pure expressivity is incommunicable because it lies outside the scope of our communal system of signs:

‘Everything in my discourse which is destined to manifest an experience to someone else must pass through the mediation of the physical aspect. This irreducible mediation commits every expression to an indicative operation. The function of mediation is an indicative function. Here we come close to the root of indication: there is indication each time the act which confers meaning, the animating intention, the living spirituality of the *vouloir-dire*, is not fully present.’<sup>8</sup>

As readers we meet with language in its expressive function but as we read, we may hope to restore it to its expressive function. To reactivate writing is always to reawaken an expression is an indication. Derrida holds the view that the moment texts are written, they are ‘dead’ and therefore capable of enduring for centuries. But this inscription of texts cuts them loose from the circumstances of their composition and casts them adrift in the future, as indications susceptible of a great many,

possibly conflicting reactivations; for as, Derrida reminds us: 'In order to be what it is, all writing must be able to function in the radical absence of any empirically determined addressee in general.'<sup>9</sup>

An author cannot control the 'reactivations' to which his or her text will become subject. Language has powers of generating meanings irrespective of the wishes of those who use it. For Derrida no concept of 'mastery' is possible, by which an author may remain in control of what he or she has written. The idea of the text 'communicating' meaning from author to reader is called necessarily into question: '[Writing] can no longer be understood then under the category of communication, at least if we take this in the restricted sense of transmission of meaning. Inversely, it is in the general field of writing so defined (there is writing whenever we have recourse to signs) that the effects of semantic, communication may be determined as particular, secondary, inscribed and supplementary ones'.<sup>10</sup>

Such statements by Derrida have been adjudged philistine demonstrating as they do a great skepticism towards the establishment of any true channel of communication of meaning between author and reader. As students of literature, we want to attribute the meanings we discover in texts to some source and the source we find most plausible and convenient is the author. It seems improper to attribute them to ourselves, even though it is in us in whom they occur. But Derrida's position is that there is no need to attribute them to a person at all, either to the author or the reader. By Derrida's dispensation, they may be attributed to language itself in its indicative function - language is quite certainly the real locus of meaning.

By this logic it seems irrelevant to ponder over the possible disparities between 'authors meaning' and 'readers meaning'. The indicative model of language and sign system in general affords a great spectrum of meanings is a text with certified authors meaning at one end of the spectrum and blatant readers meanings at the other. In between are many meanings which could be either. In the light of this argument, to refer every meaning we discover in a text to its author would be absurd; to refer to a few conventional codes (as structuralism does) would be inadequate because what Derrida teaches us is that the text is the locus of an alarming and untamable process of 'dissemination'. The very nature of language which is used for conveying meaning through differences is responsible for the multiplicity of meaning. Dissemination also comes from language because of its indicative function because the author is not present in the words to stop the reader from investing his words with meaning he did not intend. Dissemination carries forward the notion relished by Barthes and by other structuralists of the multiplicity of meaning to be found in a literary text. This 'semantic hypertrophy' met with angry opposition from scholars - critics who preferred to believe that canonical meanings could be agreed upon any text. Barthes accused his opponents, the university professors of 'bigotry' and '*a-symbolia*' saying that they were blind to the richly connotative nature of literary language. Barthes and Derrida after him celebrate the knowledge that texts generate meanings with terrible liberality. Some meanings can be said to be unreasonable, inconsistent, and unhistorical and so on but still they are meanings that have arisen from texts and will continue to arise.

Structuralism and post structuralism contest our right to practice abridgement of texts with a clear conscience. The practice of abridgments or summarizing is an attempt to curtail the

liberality with which texts generate meaning. The concept of multiplicity of meanings is challenged because summaries have been traditionally used to keep meaning on a tight leash. To give the meaning(s) of a text is to eliminate, whether consciously or not, a great deal of the text's semantic content. Derrida resists very strongly the idea that summaries can be given of a text's meanings because summaries, far from replacing or curtailing the text actually add to them, being further textual elements themselves. A summary is an illusion if we mistake it for the 'transcendental signified' of another text; it is rather a text in its own right.

Consistent with the idea of plurality of meanings in a text, post structuralists have replaced the term 'Book' with 'Text'. The Book is an entity enclosed between two covers and complete in itself - a unity susceptible to an exhaustive interpretation or reducible to a manageable sum of meanings. The Text, on the contrary, is not enclosed but open to the four winds of language, spawning meanings with the utmost generosity and standing in close relation to other texts. It does not have the unity of a book or the singleness of purpose. Rather than the utterance of a single author, it is to be interpreted as the utterance of a chorus. The text is, in Bakhtin's term for it, 'polyphonic; it is made up of many strands, many voices. One text contains all manners of allusions to and echoes of other texts; and the many kinds of relations that can be established between one text and others -- quotation, parody, plagiarism, 'influence' - are known collectively as 'Inter-textuality'. The process of referral working in language is operative at the level of texts too; because signs evoke in us traces of other signs, a text may evoke in us the memory of other texts of which we already have knowledge.

Post structuralism has similarly substituted the 'Subject' for the Author. In Barthes' essay "Death of the Author", the common view of the author as the ultimate explanation of the work is under attack: '..... the image of literature one can find in contemporary culture is tyrannically centered around one author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions; criticism still consists for the most part in saying that Baudelaire's oeuvre is the failure of Baudelaire the man, that Van Gogh's oeuvre is his madness, and Tchaikovsky's his vice : the explanation of the oeuvre is always sought on the side of the man who has produced it as if, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, it was always in the end the voice of one person and one person alone, the author, who was giving us his confidences'.<sup>11</sup>

Post structuralism expels the Author from the Text: that is what Barthes means by 'death' of the author. Given the views of language on which structuralism and post structuralism rest, it is not possible to view authors as the masterful presences of old to be found within and without of their writings, transferring themselves whole and without loss or distortion from life into literature. The author is in fact a construct, a hypothesis, formed by a reader on the evidence of his or her reading. Whatever is known of the author is textual; they have no existence for us. The process by which authors are 'constructed' is circular: we abstract them from their texts and then use this abstraction to explain their texts. Barthes and Derrida after him seek to break this circle and *de-originate* the text, that is, originate it in language. Structuralism and post-structuralism will not accept the author as a sovereign unity regulating the semantic plane of his or her writing from within. Writing undoes the Author; he is disseminated. The replacement provided by the post - structuralists for the Author, that is, the Subject is present in the Text in a great many dispersed fragments, a presence among other

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The de-origination of the Text then, isolates it from the inaccessible, extratextual thoughts and projections of an author and accentuates the act of writing itself; the pre-supposed unity of the Author is shattered: 'as soon as a fact is recounted, for intransitive ends, and no longer to act directly on reality, that is to say, with no other function than the actual exercise of symbols ..... the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins'.<sup>12</sup>

The semantic hypertrophy adverted to by post structuralists leads to the dismissal of the concept of Truth in the interpretation of Texts. The idea of the plurality of meanings would be under threat if Truth is allowed in the interpretation of Texts. It is because of the *exclusiveness* which attends the notion of Truth. If a critic claims to have discovered the truth in a text, interpretations other than his must be presumed to be untrue and thereby disqualified. Structuralism and post-structuralism are libertarian in this respect; they assert the in-exhaustiveness of the text and thus its openness to new critical discoveries. The truth is an unwanted theological concept, out of place in the study of literature or as Derrida would add, any writing.

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