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Unlearning the Routines of Intelligibility: A Reading on Roland Barthes's Postmodernist/Poststructuralist Stance

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Abstract- Roland Barthes's theoretical attack on the intelligibility of structuralism has always sounded as a philosophical reasoning that should be revered as such. This rather is a paradigm shift in human effort in the creation of a better life and in its understanding. Through a written text, it is possible to view cultural entities that reveal the forwarding of the world's civilization being conveyed by the author. This possibility is granted by individual/reader's cultural background, which varies with the variation of the latter's life conception. In this context, do we consider the author's biography or his/her imagination in our construction of the text's meaning? In other words, should we perceive life through the same lenses of the author by the help of the text? This article has argued that Barthes's stance on poststructuralism/postmodernism is not a philosophical reasoning but a necessary step in the human free psychological development. On the other hand, confining a written text to the author's intended meaning (which is not feasible), does not verify the human cultural diversifications; and finally, both poststructuralism and postmodernism are aiming the same cultural objectives which do not go for the understanding of the world through one and single discourse.

Keywords: *poststructuralism/postmodernism, theory, author, text, reader, meaning, culture.*

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Unlearning the Routines of Intelligibility: A Reading on Roland Barthes's Postmodernist/Poststructuralist Stance

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I. Introduction

A great work of art has the capacity of hatching multiple readings. And the articulacy of a narrative drives a certain conduct that calls the attention of the reader on the author. But the traditional critics' recourse to the values of clarity, nobility, and humanity, which they treat as neutral and self-evident, actually exerts a coercive, censoring force on other interpretive possibilities. Thus the savvy and popular differences between Roland Barthes's poststructuralist or postmodernist stance connotes altogether the idiosyncratic reader's freedom to act without constraints. What then are the consequences of ignoring the author in the process of reading? And through Barthes's attunement to poststructuralism, can we realize the hitting of postmodernist targets? This article considers the simulacra on Barthes's stance which is straddling between poststructuralist postures and postmodernism. On the other hand, the idyllic creative ability to move against the literary composition establishments advocates the freedom in writing and reading. Therefore, the death of the author gives birth to the reader in order to do away with complexities and confinements of reading, which encode the fidelity to an origin, a unified meaning, an identity or any other pregiven exterior or interior reality.

It is in this perspective that Jean Francois Lyotardin "Defining the Postmodern" (1986); Julia Kristeva in "Crossing the Borders: An Interview with Julia Kristeva" (2006); Derrida in *Deconstruction* have each analytically viewed a perspective against the met narrative. This article observes that any approach under the postmodern umbrella considers the difference and suspects universal truths, objectivity, unambiguous meanings. It argues, furthermore, that grand historical narratives constitute an intellectual constraint on thinkers and writers. Therefore, Roland Barthes's poststructuralist stance should not be argued as adulation. Rather what becomes universal in the intellectual trend is the suspicion on what is said to be

In effect, the revisionist views forced by the evolving global civilization which are also thought up in the epochal condition open the liberation gates to do away with standardization of judgment. Alice Jardine in "Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts: The Political Difference of Julia Kristeva" argues that:

> A *text* is not a text if it is totally opaque, refusing to be brought to light, completely impervious to the hermeneutic gesture; and a *context* is never totally transparent, appearing in some kind of referential purity. Now, somewhere in between these two readings—the clear, fast, so-called spontaneous, more transparent one, and the unclear, slower, so-called reflexive, more opaque one—between the first reading and the second reading 'first and second only by virtue of our intellectual habits', is a certain kind of difference which is *political*: a difference in attitude toward *interpretation*.[1]

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[1]AliceJardine. "Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts: The Political Difference of Julia Kristeva." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 367, Gale, 2015. *Literature Resource Center*

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Barthes's stance is not the only evidence of the forwardness of poststructuralism. Moreover, this literary movement has been a respite to writers and thinkers who have willed for a freer expression and less opaque texts. It is not the context of "the periphery is in many cases the center."[2] It is rather the context in which the varieties of cultural backgrounds call upon inter- textual ability to convene thinkers on the understanding that a single interpretation of a piece of literature connotes with the singularity of the center. While the centers have been multiplied by the multiplicity of understandings, the confinement to a solitary text in the construction of meaning leads to the rigidity on world cultivation judgment. Thus, Julia Kristeva and Birgitte Huitfeldt Midttun clarify it by saying:

> The concept of inter-textuality soon became Kristeva's hallmark. She wanted to show how a text always communicates with another text or other texts, in a polyphony of different voices that meet in the act of reading, which engender other, and new, interpretations of the text. Kristeva's polylogous understanding of the text and especially her rereading of literary works soon brought her into conflict with the structuralist establishment in France at the time, and through this, she became one of the groundbreaking theoreticians of the French poststructuralism.[3]

The above quoted passage insinuates the constant changing of any living language through the development of words due to the rise of diverse needs. Therefore, what is at stake in the poststructuralist theory is 'the death of the author,' which explores the consequences of freeing the reading process. The easiest way to kill the author resides in the consistence of theory, which: "consists of grammar, rhetoric, dialectic, poetics, hermeneutics, semiotics, grammatology, and other modes of understanding textuality."[4]

Thus, this article will be articulated around two subtitles. The first is about the flexibility forced on texts to be opened for the centrality of the reader's opinion. The reader's free use of a text that is conducive to giving to the text a meaning not meant by its author constitutes the focus of this part. The second subtitle observes the abjuration of structuralist ethos. This part emphasizes the fact that poststructuralism is not adulation. It has rather been made compulsory by the linguistic needs forced by freer expression and human civilization through cultural variations.

II. Flexible Networks of Language Games in a Text

The polylogue that is allowed by the poststructuralism eventually underwrites possible ways and means to reach veracity or justice, which is universally accepted according to the reading idiosyncrasies. "..we must arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus."[5] The existential requirements are the rules of the linguistic game. Moreover, many revolutions such as feminism have had the paradigm shift in human civilization from the turning of the twentieth century. Alice Jardine assures that:

> Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Derrida would say if in different ways, that the image upon which our Western Identity and Ethics is founded—the *visage,* the human face—the one that has been heretofore White, European, and Male—is cracking apart. All that remain are simulacra and masks. For Foucault, modernity began 'when words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things'[6]

This means words in a text are no more static in meaning and do no more follow any conventional standardization.

An agent solving a problem or interpreting a piece of literature obviously is substituted by a whole arsenal of the cultural background at stake. Thus, Anna Yeatman suggests that:

> A self [*which*] is discursively oriented to 'the understanding of identity as multiple and even self-contradictory' (de Lauretis 1986, 9) is clearly incapable of practicing the disciplinary self-government of a self-oriented within a culture of self-mastery (mastery by reason of the passions, instincts, or drives). The former self is one which understands and resists the exclusionary terror of self-mastery whereby the integrity of a self is established through the exclusion and repression of all that is rigidly deemed non-self. Martin and Mohanty (1986,1987), show how Mannie Bruce Pratt's autobiographical narrative enables reflection on postmodern selfhood.[7]

A reading that excludes the reader prevents the latter from grasping their voice through the process.

[2] Michael Denning. *The Cultural Front*, (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 5.
[3] Julia Kristeva and Birgitte Huitfeldt Midttun."Crossing the Borders: An Interview with Julia Kristeva."*Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter, vol. 340, Gale, 2013. *Literature Resource Center*.
[4] David H. Richter. *Falling into Theory: Conflicting Views on Reading Literature,* (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2000), p. 112.
[5] Jean-Francois Lyotard*The Postmodern Condition* 1984, cited in Anna Yeatman, *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 117.
[6] Jardine, Alice. "Opaque Texts and Transparent Contexts: The Political Difference of Julia Kristeva." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 367, Gale, 2015. *Literature Resource Center.*Accessed 7 Dec. 2016.Originally published in *The Poetics of Gender*, edited by Nancy K. Miller, Columbia UP, 1986, pp. 96-116.
[7] Anna Yeatman, *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 119.

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Because the construction of meaning to a work calls on the interpreter's cultural background, the latter gives him/herself the chance to leave a discursive watershed. Yeatman argues again that: "A non-consensualist politics of difference develops rhetorical procedures which problematize a subject speaking on behalf of another and which put a premium on subjects finding their own 'voice' within whatever politics of representation is at hand. Within this politics, subjects are understood to be discursively positioned within the conjectural historical moment of contested narratives…. "[8] This contestation drops the real quality of a duel just because of the physical presence of the author. This absence rather takes the value of thelatter's death leaving only his/her imagination. And as a text is taken to be a field to enter, the reader enters the field uneventfully to sow what she intends to.

Hence, a psychological confrontation is prepended by necessity. Barthes thinks that "Just as Einsteinian science compels us to include within the objectstudied the relativity of reference points, so the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism, and structuralism compels us, in literature, to relativize the relations of [*scriptor*,] reader, and observer (critic)."[9]

The subject in front of a text is as a critic in hermeneutics for that text. And since it is a field to enter (process), Roland Barthes finds that – the quotation is a bit longer because it encompasses a comparison between a text and work:

> The text is approached and experienced in relation to the sign. The work closes upon a signified. We can attribute two modes of signification to this signified: either it is claimed to be apparent, and the work is then the object of a science of the letter, which is philology; or else this signified is said to be secret and final, and must be sought for, and then the work depends upon a hermeneutics, an interpretation (Marxist, psychoanalytic, thematic, etc.); in short, the work itself functions as a general sign, and it is natural that it should represent an institutional category of the civilization of the Sign. The Text, on the contrary, practices the infinite postponement of the signified, the Text is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier; the signifier must not be imagined as "the first part of the meaning," its material vestibule, but rather, on the contrary, as its aftermath; similarly, the signifier's infinitude does not refer to some notion of the ineffable (of an unnamable signified) but to a notion of play; the engendering of the perpetual signifier (in the fashion of a perpetual calendar) in the field of the Text is not achieved by some organic process of maturation, or a hermeneutic process of "delving deeper," but rather by a serial movement of dislocations, overlapping variations.[10]

This openness of the text becomes a challenge for the subject who is willing to find her voice in the text through its interpretation. In other words, is giving the chance to draw the whole context into her own conception of life ignoring utterly the author's intent. How is it conceivable to cooperate with the author when words in the text are deployable and can easily be refastened to various meanings? Barthes furthermore finds that:

> The logic governing the Text is not comprehensive 'trying to define what the work "means"' but metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy 'if it failed him, man would die.' The work (in the best of cases) is moderately symbolic 'its [*symbolics*] runs short, i.e., stops;' the Text is radically symbolic: a work whose integrally symbolic nature one conceives, perceives, and receives is a text. The Text is thus restored to language; like language, it is structured but decentered, without closure 'let us note, to answer the scornful suspicion of "fashion" sometimes lodged against structuralism, that the epistemological privilege nowadays granted to language derives precisely from the fact that in it [language] we have discovered a paradoxical idea of structure: a system without end or center.'[11]

This is to show the hermeneutic code in the text, which leads to the voice of truth because of the historical facts inherent in it. And since the author may have obviously been inspired by other texts or cultural drives, foreshadow or anticipation codes also could be found there in an empirical way; which undoubtedly would indicate the machine that helps the free flow of the narrative. It is in the same inclination that the author's meaning cyphers could be felt – thetimbres of the text. But here only the voice of the author is heard not his intended meaning for the symbol of a mountain does not stand for the same implication in every cultural entity. Though the reader may feel the cultural background of the author through his use of symbols, this does not come to transfigure the reader's life conception but scientifically cultivate him about the other side of the world through the help of his own cultural background. Paula Geyh et al find that:

> French philosopher Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that a skepticism toward the 'grand narratives' of modernity defines the 'postmodern condition.' This skepticism extends to any philosophy or theory,

[8] Ibid.

[9] Roland Barthes. *The Rustle of Language*. Translated by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang . a Division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Translation copyright © 1986 by Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc. Originally published in French as Le bruissement de la langue Copyright © 1984 by Editions du Seuil), pp.56-57.

[10] Ibid. p.58.

[11] Ibid. p. 59.

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such as Marxism, which claims to provide a complete explanation of culture and society. Lyotard argues that there is no longer any hope of a single conceptual system or discourse through which we might aspire to understand the totality of the world. Indeed, one can no longer speak about 'totality' at all. Instead, we have a plurality of worlds and multiple, often mutually incompatible discourses through which to understand them.[12]

That is evidently elucidating how both poststructuralism and postmodernism are aiming the same critical objectives which do not go for the understanding of the world through one and single discourse.

III. Abjuration of Structuralist Ethos and its Splenetic Commentary

Manumitting a text for relative meanings far or near the author's is not a structuralist ethos. However, commenting a text in confined zone of meaning (unique meaning) is one of the main characteristics of this literary approach. Arnold Krupat argues that:

> The truth value attributed to language when a signifier is seen to be correctly, even inherently, linked to a signified is a phenomenon which is unique to cultures which use written forms of information storage. Historically, oral cultures seem to be typically unconcerned with fixed meanings (118). However, he points out that there is a tendency among scholars of Native literatures to hold a "signified-based theory of language," or to assume that meaning is fixed and can be accurately communicated. He further writes that "as students of oral cultures and traditions, Native Americanists have in particular referred this possibility to speech and voice." I propose that King is playing off this opposition, not standing firmly in either camp, but getting the best of both of them. In this war of written versus oral words, it is not a question of which culture has possession of the Truth, but rather of which culture has the literary means of conveying it. In pitting the one narrative form against the other, King questions first whether a written text really represents an inflexible, authoritative, dogmatic version of reality, such as is being lampooned by the narrators of *Green Grass, Running Water*.[13]

The recommendation for a written text to really represent an inflexible, authoritative, dogmatic version of reality reflects the ethos of structuralism. This character is obviously conducive to the confinement of truth into only one angle of vision and tends to annihilate the culturalism of other creative efforts from different visionary approaches. This also forces each and every reader to belong to the cultural background of a written text's author. And consequently, criticism and appreciation remain the affair of those who share the author's viewpoints and thus, the effort to make such a text bear a sign of diversified meanings remains futile and the question revolving around the problem of referentiality remains unsolved.Jakki Spicer asks in "The author is dead, long live the author: autobiography and the fantasy of the individual": "Do the contents of the book correspond to a life lived, or only to the contents of an author's imagination? What, in fact, is the relation between a life and a text?"[14] The only reality is that only the cultural background of the reader that commands the understanding and creation of his related meaning becomes useless if related to the author's life. And the comment made upon such a compact text remains superficial.

The superficiality of the comment of a text remains such due to the fact that it is made solely on the structure. Moreover the comment on a text's structure has nothing to do with the latter's contents. For a splenetic commentary on a piece of literature suggests only the whim of the writer or a specific reader who has no intention of making his/her own cultural background valuable because when reading a piece of literature, it confirms or infirm what one has previously believed in. Chinyere Nwahunanya in: "Structuralism and African literature: a revaluation" illustrates how the structure or form of a text is the only entity that should be considered in analysis/interpretation according to the tenet of structuralism:

> Take for instance the "form and content" critics of African literature. Their bold statements of intentions to analyses the form and content of chosen literary artifacts end up as exercises in the exegesis of content. This is due mainly to the fact that most of such critics do not possess the tools of structural analysis which are indispensable to a stylistic analysis of form. They, therefore, end up with superficial generalizations about "tightly structured plots", "effective use of flashback", "impressive deployment of symbols" and other such vague

[12] Geyh, Paula et al. *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. xx.

[13] Bailey, Sharon M. "The Arbitrary Nature of the Story: Poking Fun at Oral and Written Authority in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water*." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Janet Witalec, vol. 171, Gale, 2003. *Literature Resource Center*. Originally published in *World Literature Today*, vol. 73, no. 1, Winter 1999, pp. 43-52.

[14] Jakki Spicer. "The author is dead, long live the author: autobiography and the fantasy of the individual." *Criticism*, vol. 47, no. 3, 2005, p. 387+. *Literature Resource Center*.

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statements which tell us virtually nothing about the form or structure of the works being analyzed.[15]

Therefore, the oppugning of the ethics of structuralism becomes essential for the sake of universal covering of an author's effort. Eugene Good heart in: "Do We Need Literary Darwinism?" argues for the uniqueness and distinctiveness of a text:

> Can evolutionary psychology say anything interesting about literature? My answer is that it is possible, that I am not a prophet and can't predict the future. On the basis of what I've read up to now, I must confess that I am a skeptic. Both the general understanding of literature and the interpretations of individual works are crudely reductionist. Reductionism in the natural sciences is no vice; on the contrary, it enables one discipline (for instance, physics) to explain another (chemistry). In the humanities, however, it subverts the uniqueness and complexity of works of art. Carroll's complaint about "traditional humanist criticism," (which I exemplify in his essay) is that lacking in empirical curiosity, it "operates on the level of the author's lexicon and seeks no systematic reduction to simple principles that have large general validity" (***Literary Darwinism*** 213). Well, this hardly seems a deficiency. The alternative that Carroll and his fellow literary Darwinists propose is the dissolution of the individuality of a work (the very reason that we enjoy and value it) into large generalizations that remove all of its distinctive features and vitality.[16]

If a text cannot be interpreted by the help of another it means its author has coined it without having read other texts or might have written out of vacuum. If physics can easily help explain chemistry, it is because both are from the same core of studies field, which is science. A piece of literature is always interpreted by the guide of other culturally acceptable items that make them part and parcel of literature/fiction. "Although many critics think that Barthes pushed this manifesto-like formulation too far, this celebrated idea, now a critical commonplace, remains alluring for its implicit reminder that we rely on literary storytelling as well as documentary records for the reconstruction of not only texts' informing intellectual contexts but also their authors' lives and deaths"[17]

IV. Conclusion

Literature has always given rise to its interpretation, but now that no argument of literary gossip goes unnoticed, it may be time to reflect a little on the activity of literary criticism. Roland Barthes (like Proust before him) launches an attack on the traditional biography-based criticism. This article is dedicated to him as a postmodern ditty. And the slinkiness of this work resides in its being subversive for a reasonable cause. If the presence of God in our minds reprieves our freedom, it has been possible to reason without including God in our quotidian life. So much as Frederic Nietzsche has helped us succeed in doing without God; Barthes is helping us to read without author through poststructuralism/postmodernism.

It is in this perspective that this article has raised firstly the point on the flexibility of poststructuralism in the networks of language games in a text. The main argument has been the description of literature as a space where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the figure that writes. The death of the author marks the birth of literature, defined, precisely, as the creation of this speech, to which we cannot allocate an exact derivation.

What is important to a text is not to be found in the original thought of its author but in the individual reader's final product inferred thereof. The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author, not for its plunder but to render it universally fashionable.

The second point raised by this article has focused on the illustrations of some structuralist ways of text treatment. Some clear cut characteristics of structuralism vis-à-vis a written text and the commentary thereupon advocate solely the consideration of the form of it, neglecting utterly the contents. Theorizing the author in a position of monopolizing the means of writing, structuralism makes written text self-sufficient with concrete reality. Rather, the ambiguous aspect of this is either to refer to the author's imagination or his life in the construction of meaning. That is why it is better to refer to the text itself and with the help of one's cultural background, construct a subjective meaning to the content that will diversify the author's intention. And, thus, Roland Barthes's poststructuralist/postmodernist stance should not be taking for adulation; rather, this should be regarded as a breakthrough that stands for the world's civilizational betterment.

[15] Nwahunanya, Chinyere. "Structuralism and African literature: a revaluation." *Journal of Comparative Literature and Aesthetics*, vol. 26, no. 1-2, 2003, p. 43+. *Literature Resource Center*.

[16] Eugene Goodheart. "Do We Need Literary Darwinism?" *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 385, Gale, 2016. *Literature Resource Center*,.Originally published in *Style*, vol. 42, no. 2-3, 2008, pp. 181-185.

[17] Holly Laird. "The Death of the Author by Suicide: Fin-de-Siècle Poets and the Construction of Identity." *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, edited by Kathy D. Darrow, vol. 250, Gale, 2011. *Literature Resource Center*, Originally published in *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s*, edited by Joseph Bristow, Ohio University Press, 2005, pp. 69-100.

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