Post-Structuralist Aesthetics and the Paradoxical Nature of Language

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Abstract

Until the late 60's, despite the prevalence of pluralistic approaches and multi-fanged practices, the relationship among the author, the text and the reader, and the definition of literature itself was of mutual respect and concern. Literary critics going all the way back to the days of Plato, has developed the genre, and ultimately provides us with parameters on how to study , analyze, deconstruct, interpret and evaluate literary works emphasizing the centrality of the author, the reader, or the context with varying degrees. Though the term   "literature" existed even before, it was only from Mathew Arnold onwards that the term that came to take on the meaning of creative and imaginative literature only. David Lodge, favoring majority of contemporary critics, argues that 'literature is language at its fullest stretch' and its most striking feature is 'it's very high level of formal organization'. Elucidating this formulation Lodge sates that the extreme positions taken by Marxists 'that art should have a content', and by Structuralists that 'art should be something which is itself of great beauty' reveals only half-truth: the truth lies somewhere in between because the content of literature is as important as our insistence that literature can only be judged in terms of the words of the page. Likewise, the theories of language that appeared in Europe between the sixteenth and twentieth century generally followed the Coleridgean ' Semasiological' stance, that language is to convey not the object alone, but likewise the character, mood and intentions of the person who representing it'. Therefore, the ultimate problem for the reader was to decipher language as a mediating agency between the categories of the mind and the world given to thought in perception. All these views came in for rigorous interrogation and re-evaluation in the 1960's when post-structuralism replaced structuralism and critics like Foucault, Derrida and Barthes viewed language as constitutive both of the categories and the perceptions contained by it. While reducing "literature to writing, writing to language, and language in a final paroxysm of frustration, to chatter about silence", they created more confusion than they essayed to solve it. What this confusion is and how they confuse the reader, depriving him of enjoying literature, will form the main parabola of this paper.

***Key Words:** pluralism, Structuralism, paroxysm, Post-Structuralism, Logocentrism, phonocentrism, Anglo-American*

Introduction

For as long as writers have been writing, there have been critics evaluating their work Until the late 60's, despite the prevalence of pluralistic approaches and multi-fanged practices, the relationship among the author, the text and the reader, and the definition of literature itself was of mutual respect and concern. Literary critics going all the way back to the days of Plato, has developed the genre, and ultimately provides us with parameters on how to study , analyze, deconstruct, interpret and evaluate literary works emphasizing the centrality of the author, the reader, or the context with varying degrees. Though the term "literature" existed even before, it was only from Mathew Arnold onwards that the term that came to take on the meaning of creative and imaginative literature only.

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Hayden White takes an extreme position when he calls Barthes, Derrida and Foucault as ' the harbingers of the absurdist movement' in contemporary literary theory who have no firm sense of what ' literature' consists of or what a specifically ' literary' artifact looks like (1978:261-282. The Post-Structuralists, he argues, do not know where to draw the line between ' literature on the one hand and the

language on the other because according to them everything is potentially interpretable as literature, or if language is regarded as merely a special case of the more comprehensive field of semiotics, nothing is interpretable as specifically literary phenomenon. Unlike American New criticism, English practical criticism, and Russian formalism which viewed language simply the medium 'embodying the literary message' (ibid 261) and criticism as an activity 'to penetrate through the medium—in order to get at the message', the Post-Structuralists treat language itself as a problem and concentrate more on "language's power to hide or diffuse meaning, to resist decoding or translation, and ultimately to bewitch understanding by an infinite play of signs"(263). They believe that the desire of Structuralists to master the text is in vain because there are unconscious, or linguistic, or historical forces which cannot be mastered. the signifiers float away from signified, the semiotic disrupts the symbolic, inserts gaps between the signifier and signified and power ruptures established knowledge, and all these literary maneuvers set a crossword puzzle for the reader which he is incapable of solving.

Jacques Derrida was the first philosopher-critic who initiated this paradigm shift in this new thinking in the Anglo-American circles (Seldon 1985:84) questioning the basic assumptions of western philosophy ' Metaphysics of presence', Logocentrism' and phonocentrism'. He essayed an approach that contemplates knowledge and meaning as representations unavoidably enmeshed in the heterodox and contradictory nature of language and interpretation, shifting the emphasis of analysis from the author to the signifying process of language and text. In doing so he underscores the inherent contradictions in the canonical conception of literature an even the traditionally upheld hierarchy of the critical text as secondary and subservient to the literary text. Instead of viewing a literary artifact as a creative writer's attempt to project in figurative language the 'experiences of timeless illuminations' Derrida considers them as a playground for 'the warring forces of signification'. Instead of concentrating, like new critics, on the disclosure of the meaning hidden within language, the deconstructionist critics treat language itself as a puzzle in which the 'discourse' at once revealed and concealed its own meaning and meaninglessness.

Roland Barthes in his thought provoking "The Death of the Author" outrightly rejected the traditional views about meaning and language, and assigned the author a mere ' location' where language, the infinite storehouse of citations and references juxtapose interchangeably and totalize that " a text is made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mental relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is

the reader, not as hither to said the author" (1977:145). To Barthes even readers are sites of languages empire, free to ignore the author and open or close the text as per their own choice because "it is language which speaks not the author" (ibid 143". Even in this account of textuality Barthes invokes a network of intertextual associations made up of "codes which are known" and without which it might be impossible to recognize the plurality and irreducibility of the text (1977:159). Accordingly, the critical task is not to discover in the work something "hidden, profound, secret, which hither to passed unnoticed" but only " to adjust the language his period affords him" to the language" elaborated by the author according to his own period"(ibid 393)

There is an inherent complexity involves in the above statement popularized by Structuralists and Semioticians according to whom communities that share a textual history reach a consensus about meaning because they share codes and conventions of expressions. Why should the critic be constrained to choose among "the language his period affords", and if one is condemned to the language of one's own period, can one be certain of recognizing the formal system that an author has elaborated according to the constraints of his own period? Questions of this sort have been elaborately discussed by Umberto Eco, Svante Nordin and Micheal Foucault. Whereas Umberto eco talks of an unwritten cultural encyclopedia that we all consult as we make sense of texts, Nordin maintains that texts must be considered in their social context, interpretation can be known to be true if we attend both to the text and to the linguistic conventions of the community in which the text occurs. Foucault says Said, has gone very far in determining the social constraints upon production, as well as the discursive and cultural systems that provoke and assimilate literary production (1977:508). In his own usage he emphasizes literature as a process rather than simply a set of products, a process which intrinsically social, connected at every point with mechanisms and institutions that mediate and control the flow of knowledge and power in a community. Although he quotes or alludes to the text, Foucault's focus is not on the texts as such, but on the processes of their production and reception. What concerns Foucault is the link between discourse and reality, not in a representational sense but in an operative one, each age has an episteme that determines and limits its ability to conceive and represent reality. This episteme gives rise to a savior, to a general capacity for understanding and assimilating the various fields of human knowledge that characterizes a given age. In order to explicate this link, he describes and demarcates logonomic systems which a combination of as many documents as possible that controls both forms of thought and forms of language and discourse, indeed controls each through the other.

The above analysis, though very brief, clearly reveals that a consistent conception of the working of language and meaning informs almost all the writings of Post-Structuralist critics, and this conception is formulated through a critique of Ferdinand de Saussure and other Structuralist critics who believed that "literature is only language deprived of all transitivity, forever doomed to signify just when it wants to signify only the world in making" (1972. 267). The Post-Saussurean perspective exhibited a much more self-conscious and reflective tendency, and a more rigorous and coherent attitude to the study and analysis of literature. This attitude offered a revised understanding of literature and the world, a discovery that such concepts as 'man', 'society', and 'culture' refer not to things but to linguistic formulae that have a specific referent in reality. It propagated vehemently that the author is not the source of meaning but quite the reverse or for that matter the author is positioned within the social order which conditions his perspective on reality. In other words, it is the recognition of the primacy of discourse, as opposed to mind, in the constitution of meaning that defined the Post-Structuralist and post-modernist stance. Foucault, for example, argues that the topology of discourse "cannot be constructed solely from the grammatical feature , formal structures, and objects of discourse" because " beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop…. it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts" (1972:23-24). These texts are savior, episteme, or archive which control the normal functioning of thought at a given time in a given society; and a creative writer, being the member of that society, cannot afford to escape from this conditioning and control.

It cannot be denied that social facts or versions of social reality –episteme or archive as Foucault might say, have both 'a mimetic content' and 'a semiotic content' which are exploited by creative writers while composing a literary artifact and an understanding of which is necessary for an appreciation of the text. It neither implies Hirsch's emphasis on 'intention' of the creative writer as a determining critical tool , nor New Critics' efforts of eliminating the author through ' intentional Fallacy' and Effective Fallacy' but an assimilation of these 'internal and 'external' forces which help in understanding and appreciation of great creative works of literature. For example, it is generally agreed that the basic plots of Shakespeare's King Lear came from folktales which entered the written record with Geoffrey of Monmouth's Twelfth century history of the kings of Britain. Over the fifty versions of the story survive out of which three plays a significant role in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: Holinshed's *Chronicles*; Spencer's *Faerie Queen*; and *The true chronicle of king leir*, published in 1605. In the text as we have it, Shakespeare departs from all known sources, particularly with regard to its endings, all sources give the story a happy

ending and Shakespeare himself is the sole author of the double death. The same is the case with various motifs incorporated in the plot- Lear's madness, storm scene, the fool, which give it complexity and 'ambiguity'. Therefore, Shakespeare's 'repudiation of history and myth, morality and political ideology 'may have seemed brutal and unexpected to his initial audience, but it proved to be artistic creations of a highly creative genius.

There can be no literature without language, for every text is a performance or *parole* taken from the whole body of linguistic competence or *langue* available to the people who share it as their common code of expression and communication. A creative winter's use of language is different from that of common use: it generates its own rules for interpretation, the fundamental one being the creation of reality through metaphoric use of language which is not empirically verifiable. Metaphor is the highest manifestation of a poet's creativity according to the romantics as it is the incarnation not the powers of imagination and not, as the philosophers of Enlightenment, Thomas Hobbs and John Locke- argues, 'sedition' or cheating (see Novitz, 143-170). Although in the beginning in the beginning of the twentieth century TS Eliot's "anti-romantic" stance that the poet must escape from his personality (including emotion) into the stream of 'tradition 'allowed New Critics, and even archetypal critics to remove an author from the centrality he had occupied in early discussions, the concept of 'metaphor as an omnipresent part of language' remained a driving force. Even Northrop Frye followed Eliot in considering literature as a system closed off from the author's psyche and equated the meaning of a poem with its structure of imagery, thus arguing that literature transcends even the language in which it is written. Even structuralism and semiotics, which restore literature to many contexts instead of looking at it independent of its contexts, as New Critics do, subscribe to the two stages of reading poems- first, as if language were ordinary language; and then return to gaps in the text-which clearly illustrates an inherent conviction in the distinctive use of language in poetry. They, like Russian formalists, treated any figurative use of language as 'deviation' from the conventional or literal use of it which considered neither grammatically, nor syntactically a defective use. We do not regard metaphors as errors, argued Roman Jacobson, because we assume that those who coin them are perfectly familiar with the literal meanings of the words they use non-literally. Een though a metaphor has been unintentionally coined, we can attribute it to the speaker only if he or she is familiar with the literal meaning of the utterance, for otherwise it remains a simple mistake.

Though metaphor and its comprehension depend on literal discourse, the critics and philosophers have failed to offer any viable account of the literal use of

language itself. Saussure and others who believed in the communicative function of language argued that words and expressions form a part of conventionally established regular way and system or what Raymond Williams said in a different context: language is not just a tool to describe a pre-existent reality, but a 'constitutive and material' part of reality itself, and hence' meaning' is intrinsically social and ideological in form and function (1977:99-174).In other words, literal discourse consists of nothing other than te use of words and phrases in accordance with the established conventions. Thus, for instance , anything properly described a s boat must manifest certain features which are widely regarded by the members of a given community as the ' marks ' in virtue of which one applies the word ' boat' and not 'ship'. What a speech community regards as the distinguishing features of 'boat' may change as the communal body of knowledge grows, or as beliefs and theories pertaining to boats alter. When, where, and to what we apply the word 'boat' depends very largely on these beliefs and theories and therefore, same is true of any other word or expression which is used to describe an object, event, or state of affairs.

There above assertion, though closely akin to those of Foucault and his followers, negate the arguments of Derrida and Barthes that being confined to our own system and signs or metaphorical constructions, we have no access to the real world which guides and determines our use of language. They also undermines the fact that despite a consensus among social groups regarding codes and conventions, individual experiences of codes vary: no two individuals sharing the basic notion of what the word 'friend' means , get the same idea or image of the person because they never encode the world in the same way. However they provide vital assertions regarding the role of language in creative literature and help us in understanding or unraveling the greatest puzzle in contemporary literary theory, whether language is put into operation by author, or whether language itself controls the author's operations in creative literature?

The worst sin a creative writer can commit is to pretend that language is a natural, transparent medium through which the reader grasps a solid and unified 'truth' or ' reality' , for Lucan's Freudianism has rightly encouraged us to abandon faith in language's power to refer to things and to express ideas or feelings. To know everything presupposes a 'unified consciousness' which does the knowing, and language is the medium through which this consciousness perceives and represents itself, presupposes the existence of a dimension that" controls the conscious, normal, and the rational functioning of thought at a given time in a given society'(Racevskis 1989:229). His approach also suggests that thinking is to be considered as a process dependent on some organizational principle or plan that need to be discerned, and

implies that there exists the possibility of uncovering the pattern behind the evolution and development of these systems. However, one cannot deny the capacity of a creative writer- described in 'ideal perfection' as Coleridge would say-to dominate or reformulate social discourse in order to create new 'subject positions', or to select language, from a system which is shaped by values and presuppositions shared or opposed by who do not write poems, in order to create autonomous verbal structures. it is true that creative literature is not just a verbal structure approaches through language only, as the American New Critics and Russian formalists believed, because 'external evidence' or 'discourse' will always be of immense help to interpret and evaluate that language. Yet it by no means implies to rely entirely on Levi-Strauss's 'cultural logic' that enabled, what he called, 'the savage mind to construct the social meaning of times and places, objects and activities as they occurred in a range of socially significant texts: myths, rituals, laws, customs. We may reduce author to 'an ideologically loaded way of classifying texts or kinds of writing', or militantly attack the centering of meaning on the originating act of author' (Norris 1982:14,140), the mystery of the relationship between writer, text and reader will remain a puzzle unless we realize what Professor Stoll has remarked: the words of a poem come out of a head, not out of a hat" (Wimsatt and Beardsley 334).

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