

## Roland Barthes: Beyond Bourgeois Narratives

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Submitted: 05.02.2023.

Revised: 09.04.2023.

Accepted: 21.05.2023.

**Abstract:** *As a man of letters, a scholar, and a critic, Barthes's erudition is based on the most diverse fields of modern studies like psychoanalysis, mathematics, music, fashion, classical rhetoric, linguistics, semiology, anthropology, and narratology available at his time. His ideas were much more flexible and adaptable to the evolution of linguistic, cultural, and social theories developed during his lifetime. His eagerness to apply and test his own and others' theories through textual analyses deprived him of any fixed canonical belief and theory; hence there is no 'Bartheism'; he never tried to radically force his ideas and uphold any fundamental all-inclusive theory of literature, culture, or language. He seemed to have modified his approach to reading a narrative during his active career with intensive flexibility of contemporary theoretical developments. His own efforts to find a grammar of Narrative had often frustrated him but he always criticized the bourgeois interpretations of narrative or any other cultural phenomena. Yet the purpose of this article is to find some consistency in his argument, particularly in respect of textual analyses and their appreciation.*

**Keywords:** *Barthes, Structuralism, Poststructuralism, Narratology, Mythology, Postmodernism, Bourgeois, Culture.*

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## **Introduction**

Anyone attempting to fit Roland Barthes into “some kind of Pantheon of unchanging forms” will undoubtedly underestimate his agility and ingenuity, says Mann.<sup>1</sup> Most of the critics and scholars agree that Barthes seemed to have accepted the core notions of structuralism of Saussure, and Lévi-Strauss and applied those notions to popular cultural aspects of Western bourgeois society to reinterpret mythologies, fashion, literature, and other narratives. Gradually its notions were being challenged by Derrida and other poststructuralists and Structuralism was claimed to be completely incapable of accounting for the plurality of discourses that Barthes himself later stressed. It is difficult to place Roland Barthes as a literary theorist. He began as a Structuralist and ended as a Post-Structuralist, veering in and out of a variety of other movements in the process. Despite these philosophical shifts, he managed to hold on to a few essential convictions. He saw language as the primary means of interacting with the environment, even if he was inconsistent about how that should be accomplished. He also criticized the bourgeois interpretation of the text, and culture in general. He insisted that several literary forms could best mediate between language and the world, even if he couldn't always select which forms to use, when, or how. His contribution to Classical and Post-classical Narratology is still highly regarded for its ingenuity and liberal reading of any narrative texts today.

## **Narratives: Structuralism to Post Structuralism**

Most of the critics agree that Barthes started his writing career with a belief in Structuralist order but ended his career with a certain parody of order and veered towards Poststructuralism, especially after the 1960s. His *S/Z* manifested this transformation which itself raises many questions about his own earlier belief. Yet he remained firm on certain core beliefs about language and culture. His later works, particularly, posthumously published ones, compared with the earlier works apparently display many contradictions. In his Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives Barthes claims that our world is full of narratives; in fact, no civilization is without its narratives; our stories, myths, epics, legends, folklore, literature, performances, discourse, media, advertisements, reports, court verdicts are all narrated by somebody at a certain time through certain mediums of expressions. The sheer diversity and range of narratives make it impossible to find any narrative ‘theory’ which is consistent with all the genres, and modes of narratives of all time. Based on the studies by Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson, and Formalists, Barthes is left with two decisions- ‘either narrative is a random assemblage of events’ or ‘it shares with other narratives a common structure.’<sup>2</sup> With this view, he went on to form hypotheses based on linguistic analogy.

Roland Barthes is widely believed to have begun as a structuralist before branching out into post-structuralism in his later publications like *S/Z*. *S/Z* is a three-hundred-

page deconstruction of Balzac's short work 'Sarrasine'. Sarrasine's plot is rather straightforward. A sculptor falls in love with a woman who turns out to be a castrato, a man whose penis has been surgically removed. In an earlier piece titled "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes utilized 'Sarrasine' as a springboard for integrating the reader in a multi-faceted investigation of the story's plurality of voices while downplaying the writer's function. *S/Z*, a full-length book by Roland Barthes, extensively expanded on this notion. Many critics have pondered how to view it. Reading *S/Z* requires one to reach a mindset that judges it as either an exhilarating voyage that embraces a new way to read established texts or as an upsetting deconstructing of long-held assumptions that used to divide the universe into emotionally satisfying and complete entities.

### **Beyond Order and Narrative**

In 'Roland Barthes and the Limits of Structuralism', Paul De Man asserts that Barthes should be hailed as the one who asserted the autonomy of signifiers i.e. the objective properties of the sign independent of their semantic function as code, ...<sup>3</sup> He also cites the first essay in *Mythologies* by Barthes; for Barthes, feels Mann, catch-as-catch-can ultimately become void of content and meaning or a 'free play of signifiers';<sup>4</sup> for Barthes, it is a 'myth'. Yet we feel that Barthes had hoped for Structuralist's order in Linguistic terms but later on certain philosophical discoveries made him retreat into a belief that semiology in its prevalent forms is 'unable to account for the stylistic tension between written and spoken language'.<sup>5</sup> Man is dissatisfied with the way American critics treat Barthes; he cites Seymour Chatman's article 'On Defining Form' where Chatman criticizes Barthes for questioning the referential function of language; Man defends Barthes saying that Barthes is often thus misunderstood as he never doubted such function but only asserted that language does not have any 'ultimate' referential function.<sup>6</sup>

In his 1977 Interview Barthes confessed that earlier he had postulated a 'grammar' of narrative, or a 'general language of narrative'<sup>7</sup> as he had already claimed in his 'Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives'. In *S/Z* he 'reversed this perspective'; no model could be valid in general for all the narrative texts; he claimed that 'each text is in some sort its own model'.<sup>8</sup> His initial model is explained by Frank Whitehead in 'Roland Barthes' Narratology'. His analogy of narratology with structural linguistics is quite abstract, thinks Whitehead. Barthes proposed three levels of narrative hierarchy: functions, actions, and narrations; functions are sub-grouped into proper functions and indices; later functions are further subdivided into cardinal functions or nuclei and Catalysers. On a functional level, Barthes classifies two elements of narratives – cardinal or nucleus and complementary catalyzes; the former 'either initiates or resolves an uncertainty';<sup>9</sup> the latter connects the main narrative with the reader and creates a discourse; as he claims, it 'constantly reactivates the semantic tension of discourse...'<sup>10</sup>

what emerges from this claim is that the core or cardinal narrative is less vulnerable than complementary elements or catalyzes which could dominate the discourse of the narrative; yet, in case of oral narratives based on memory, the cardinal elements might often alter itself due to the pressure created by connecting 'catalyzes'. This classification does not penetrate into stylistic or cultural aspects of a textual narrative.

In *S/Z* Barthes 561 Lexias or narrative fragments are often interrupted by 93 Divagations, according to Whitehead.<sup>11</sup> In fact in his Narrative analysis of Balzac's 'Sarrasine', a remarkable short story, Barthes identifies five distinct but arbitrary codes - 1) Hermeneutic Code (HER), 2) Semic Code (SEM), 3) Symbolic Code, 4) Code of Actions (ACT) and 5) Cultural specific to reference to science (REF). This type of effort by Barthes and Levi-Strauss to codify texts and socio-cultural phenomena was felt to be relevant till the 1960s and 1970s. Yet these 'codes' should be only 'cultural'; Barthes claims that 'these codes by a swivel characteristic of bourgeois ideology, which turns culture into nature, appear to establish reality, "Life".<sup>12</sup> He further clarifies that life is a mixture of commonly 'received ideas'; no codes could be 'superior' without annihilating the 'plurality of codes'; as 'cultural codes' can't be 'stupid' unless other codes claim and prove themselves 'intelligent'.<sup>13</sup>

### **S/Z: Post-Modern Aesthetics**

The way Barthes interprets the title of 'Sarrasine' through the title of his own text of *S/Z* itself manifests a post-structural tendency; SarraSine would lead us to SarraZine where the alphabet 'Z', like a castrating 'oblique and illicit blade' slashes the 'zebras'; the slash(/) within Sarrasine and La Zambinella signifies 'the slash of censure, the surface of the mirror, the wall of hallucination, the verge of antithesis, the abstraction of limit, the obliquity of the signifier, the index of the paradigm, hence of meaning'.<sup>14</sup> Frank Whitehead claims that Barthes' tendency to accept a highly creative text as exemplifying some 'abstruse literary theory'<sup>15</sup> and to personify language and words as 'living entities'<sup>16</sup> is part of the larger Post-Structural tendency.

In chapter VI of *S/Z* Barthes claims upon the plurality of a text and thereof 'we must renounce structuring this text [ Sarassine] in large masses, as was done by classical rhetoric';<sup>17</sup> he asserts that a classic or 'writerly' text is not 'single' but universal since 'the single text is valid for all the texts of literature';<sup>18</sup> Barthes refuses to construct a structural model, as Structuralism tended to convince us; the aim of interpretation of a classic text should not be towards constructing a 'Model' or 'not at a legal structure of norms and departure, a narrative or poetic Law, but at a perspective'.<sup>19</sup> As Paul Douglass comments, 'Barthes seems to validate Bergson's continuing significance for the world of literary theory';<sup>20</sup> Barthes certainly supported the 'Postmodern Aesthetics' in his appreciation of texts, narratives, and beyond the popular structural tendency.

After the publication of *S/Z* in 1970, a new direction pointing beyond structural analyses could be found in Barthes's so-called 'structural' analyses of texts; for instance, as Frank Whitehead claims, in 'Wrestling with the Angel', and 'A tale by Edgar Allan Poe', Barthes points to a plurality and 'explosion' of meaning.<sup>21</sup> 'Textual Analysis of a Tale by Edgar Allan Poe' clearly shows Barthes's orientation towards a postmodern sympathy beyond the structural world in which we often presume him to be confined. While analyzing a Story by Poe, Barthes claims that there is a distinction between Structural and textual analysis; the first one deals with Oral narrative and the second one with an *Écriture* or written text. He claims that 'Textual analysis does not try to describe the structure of a work' rather he thinks, it aims to a 'moving structuration of the text' since the text is 'open to infinity';<sup>22</sup> he clarifies, unlike hermeneutic literary criticism, Marxist or psychoanalytic criticism, his textual analysis intends to or should aim for an 'opening of its signifying' and to 'live in the plurality of the text', not to find any hidden agenda or truth. His decision to divide the text into 150 segments or *lexias* is 'purely empirical' and arbitrary, as he himself concedes. Each *Lexia* consists of one or several sentences or part of a sentence; the purpose behind this *lexias* is not to construct a grammar of narrative but to appreciate and understand the plurality of sense or connotations, associations, and their interplay, it seems. For him each part of the text, sentence, or *Lexia* forms different 'codes' based on senses, associations, or significance; even a title of Poe's text contains codes; these codes are not strictly scientific, rather than are cultural, based on what has been already known: 'codes are certain types of *deja-vu*, of already seen, already read, already made';<sup>23</sup> codes are the 'beginnings of inter- textuality';<sup>24</sup> he furthers, the unravelled character of the codes is not what contradicts structure' but 'the integrating part of structuration.'<sup>25</sup>

### **Myth Today**

In *Mythologies* Barthes criticized the popular bourgeois culture for constructing its own narrative of 'myths' to uphold its own interest and values, guided by consumer, popular culture of the West. This bourgeois culture utilizes the available second-order linguistic or metalanguage ideas in the Structural and Semiotic systems to construct this narrative of 'myths. Hence *Mythologies* is claimed to be a work in a Structural vein.

Later, after 15 years, Barthes, while reviewing his earlier opinions on Myth, claims that certain tenets of Myth remained to be unchanged; Myth today is a 'reflection', 'anonymous utterances of the press, advertising, mass consumer goods';<sup>26</sup> 'Common Sense, Right Reason, the Norm, General Opinion' become part of myth today; it may not be a long continuous narrative but 'discontinuous' discourse guided by the Semiological division between connotations and denotation, opines Barthes;<sup>27</sup> the perception of myth may change but the essence of myth still remains same even after the 'Deconstruction' of mythical views in the postmodern age.

### Author and Text

Jean-Michel Rabate feels that Barthes' beheading of the author could be a parallel to the French revolution itself; he denied the possibility of any 'theological' truth inside the text divinely hidden by the Author;<sup>28</sup> This claim truly sounds like Lyotard's assertion that incredulity towards metanarratives or absolute truth is the chief feature of Post Modernism. 'The Death of the Author', first published in English in *Aspen*, no. 5-6 in 1967, condemns the same bourgeois culture to consume the 'meaning' of a text in order to end its interpretations. Yet Barthes here applied Derridian Poststructuralist views as well as American New Criticism of the 1940s. Two Neo-Critical essays, "The Intentional Fallacy" and "The Affective Fallacy" were jointly published by Monroe Beardsley and William Kurtz Wimsatt in *Verbal Icon*. In order to justify close textual reading, they considered that too much concern with authorial intention and emotional effects of a poem would create 'intentional' and 'affective' fallacies; this would interrupt the close reading; further, the deconstructionist views merely purport to expose the internal disability of the text. In contrast, Barthes challenged the role of the author in creating any 'meaning'; rather a text is subject to the extent a reader is able to interpret.

The autonomy and freedom of the reader could be predicted much earlier by Barthes' *Writing Degree Zero* where he claimed that style and language are responsible for the freedom of interpretations. These apparently revolutionary claims about the intellectual freedom of the readers in 'The Author is Dead' could well be traced back to his much earlier work like *Writing Degree Zero*. His concept of Writing and style needs to be analyzed here; he considers language and style are 'blind forces' and 'objects' Barthes;<sup>29</sup> with these objects and forces a mode of writing (écriture) responds to the historical and social demands; Quite relevantly Rabate points out why did Barthes quote Sartre's first chapter of *What is Literature*; unlike the formalist and beyond Sartre's concept, Barthes gave a social, moral and historical dimension to language and style, thereby to écriture. This itself guaranteed freedom for the interpretation of a text; Rabate tried to compare through her/his diachronic analysis of Valéry and Barthes as both tried to establish and uphold a theory of poetics or literature in general; while differentiating modern poetry from the classical one Barthes claims that 'poetic vocabulary itself is one of usage, not of invention';<sup>30</sup> words in classical poetry are subjected to a 'relation' and 'emotional pressure';<sup>31</sup> even 'words' or rhetorical devices were just 'virtual linking devices';<sup>32</sup> compared to this perception, words in modern poetry lives on its own without this 'relation' or connection, rather by an extension of itself; it is like a 'monolith'; 'it is a sign which stands';<sup>33</sup> it is reduced to a sort of 'zero degree, pregnant with all past and future specifications';<sup>34</sup> this encyclopaedic, solitary status of words in modern poetry disturbs the 'persuasive continuum',<sup>35</sup> a social relations and functions of language, thinks Barthes; but he seems to favour Classical poetics, based on oral

transmission to the formal ecriture in modern sense. He condemns the isolation of words from any growing context, and relationships within the text as 'terrible and inhuman'.<sup>36</sup> What he displays here is an intense awareness of modern poetics as devoid of any social, historical narrative. Although quite ironically, the autonomy of the words in modern poetics gives rise to the autonomy of the readers to interpret the texts with utmost freedom; this freedom is ushered in by modern poetics to some extent.

### **Rhetoric, Style, Narrative**

Quite occasionally Barthes concerned himself with style, beyond its rhetorical and linguistic limitations; although he acknowledges its root in classical oratory and rhetoric, he denied that stylistic is not just a relation between Form and Content; it is an exception and aberration from current usage; he refuses to see a text as the binary structure of form and content; 'the text is not double but multiple'.<sup>37</sup> In order to perform structural analyses of a narrative sequence, 'we must return to stylistics; the narrative layer is hidden/ wrapped by the stylistic layer, though there is no link between them'.<sup>38</sup> He intensely discussed his ideas of rhetoric, in a classical sense, and style in *Writing Degree Zero* and his analysis of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus (French original being 'Réflexions sur le style de L'Étranger', 1944). He elaborates upon the individual and social aspects of rhetoric and style. This should be explored in another occasion. An exploration of the relationship between narratology and stylistics could be done later on.

### **New Narrative/Poetics of Mallarme**

In his interview with Raymond Bellour, Barthes, when being asked about his serious devaluing of the narrative of contemporary literature, denied that narrative should not be thought of as the sole field of 'the dominant model';<sup>39</sup> he felt that 'new narrative' was emerging through 'Mallarme's view on Poetry Fiction'.<sup>40</sup> He thinks, for Mallarme, 'it is a language which speaks, not the author';<sup>41</sup> he also mentions the legacy of Brecht, Valery, and Proust who in their own ways, found means to be independent of the limitations of the language. Even at a later stage of his career, Barthes had preserved immense respect for a symbolist poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; Mallarme, a controversial figure, who was known for elusive, incomprehensibility. Mallarme's fragmentation of impressionistic images, the uncertainty of meaning, and giving complete freedom for interpretation have become subject to study by poststructuralists. A music critic of *The New Yorker* Alex Ross claims that 'His poetics explicitly called for the "vibratory disappearance" of reality into a pure, self-sufficient work'.<sup>42</sup> In a sense, Mallarme had been a poststructuralist before structuralism settled in. Michel Foucault also agreed with Barthes to claim that Mallarme as a pioneer 'brought about a quantum leap in literature' as he was responsible for the 'demystification of logo-centric thinking' to

formulate Mallarmé's poetics is to ignore his unique art, think many critics.<sup>43</sup>

### Conclusion

In brief, Barthes was quite aware of the theoretical developments in Europe, Asia, and in particular the articles published in *Tel Quel* in France; Michel Foucault, Kristeva, Todorov, and Derrida- all of them influenced Barthes to be much more dynamic not only in his theoretical assumption but also in his practical analysis of text, music, and other cultural modes like fashion; Barthes' claims on poetics of modern poetry, narratology, and style, semiology were constantly being shaped by the contemporary theoretical developments as well as his own practical experiences with textual narratives, and other post-modern cultural phenomena. Sometimes, his claims often seemed to be contradictory, yet he always tried to explore deeper into human responses to literature, and cultures. And his explorations hold onto some consistency throughout his life, defying the bourgeois tendency toward confining the interpretations of narratives and cultural phenomena.

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