

Chapter - X

Deconstruction and Anti - Aesthetics.

In 'The Death of the author' Roland Barthes has suggested that 'the Author' is an outmoded concept and that text can operate on their own without reference to authorial objectives and intentions. The argument depends on a conception of self that recalls that of David Hume. One of the consequences of Hume's researches into the nature of causality, during which he famously claimed that there was no necessary connection between causes and effects, was that he was led to deny that there was any such thing as an enduring self. Hume saw individuals as bombarded by an endless stream of sense-impressions from the outside world, and the self accordingly was for him merely a "bundles or collection or different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity". Nothing apparently tied those perspective together such that we could be justified in speaking of a fixed personal identity or a self that endured over time. The picture that emerges from Hume is of an entity caught in the fleeting present and struggling to make sense of it in any wider perceptive. A similar picture emerges from Barthes when he states that linguistically, the author is never more than the instance of writing. This enables him to dismiss the claims of expression theory because it would require a fixed personal identity to do the expressing, and that is precisely what both he and Hume are denying is possible. Authors have no more of a fixed identity over time in Barthes than the self does in Hume.

The 'Death of the author' is also the death of the critic or any one who makes an aesthetic judgement. The social status of the artist has been considerably downgraded by Barthes, and we are at the opposite end of the spectrum from Plato's notion of the artist as an individual dangerous to a well-ordered society. Plato was centrally concerned with the effects of art in his aesthetics, where as structuralism typically avoids this issue; so it is perhaps not surprising to see the contribution of the creative artist being marginalized by Barthes.

Barthes this pushes structuralism to its limits. If we start with self regulating grammars and deep structures, it is quite logical to end up with 'the death of the Author'. From this point of view texts take on a life of their own seemingly independent of human agency. Value becomes equated with function.

As an aesthetic theory structuralism is vulnerable at several points. Structure remains a questionable concept resting on dubious assumptions. To build individual creativity into the reading process, structure continues to have a reality independent of readers. Human discover or appreciate it, not control or direct it. The formalism of the theory must remain a problem in that it leads to a form of criticism which can say very little about the content of works of art, and, by extension, their psychological effect. As Derrida has noted, each individual work is compared to an ideal structure. Essentialism is to the fore, behind each text is supposed to be an essential structure, well or badly realized by the author. Structuralist analysis also blurs the distinction between the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic. The evaluative aspect is marginalized. There is often a studied avoidance of psychological and social evaluation in structuralism.

Barthes's work reveals the strengths (University of application, for instance) and weaknesses (the lack of a theory of value) of structuralism. University of application might be regarded as a weakness as well as strength. One largely knows before the event what a structuralist will say. Confronted by any social phenomenon, fashion, advertising, the arts, myths, cultures - the structuralist responds in much the same way. The method becomes highly predictable in its operations, which is one of the starting points for Derrida's critique of structuralism. It classifies rather than interprets or creates. Derrida's work is part of a movement called post-structuralism, reacting against institutional structures and received authority in general.

The initial thrust of Derrida's attack is against philosophical structures, and his researches lead him into the field of aesthetics and criticism. Deconstructionist aesthetics involves the following assumptions :

(i) that text, like language, are marked by instability and indeterminacy of meaning.

(ii) that given such instability and indeterminacy neither philosophy nor criticism can have any special claim to authority as regards textual interpretation.

(iii) that interpretation is a free-ranging activity more a kin to game-playing than analysis.

The point of deconstructionist criticism is to demolish the illusion of stable meaning in texts. There are no pre-existing meanings, structures or essences to be taken into account in Derrida's universe, and there will be no attempt to limit arbitrariness there. He calls for a free play of sign and meaning, unrestricted by any limiting notion of structure. There is pleasure of infinite creation, and creation of this kind is undertaken by the reader. For a post-structuralist, reading becomes performance. How can there be discourse or communication in the absence of order? How can it be maintained?

Rather than stable meanings and the authority of the critic, Derrida offers as undecidability of meaning and critical play with language. His aesthetic theory derives from his critique of metaphysics and what he calls the metaphysics of presence. In the case of such binary oppositions as speech/writing, subject/object, signifier/signified and word/meaning, one side of the opposition is always considered to be subordinate to the other. Derrida claims that speech, for example, is consistently accorded greater status than writing in western philosophical discourse because it is felt to be closer to the original thought in the speaker's mind, and thus less contaminated by mediating, and potentially distorting, literary devices and tricks of writing. Speech is felt to have a sense of immediacy and authenticity that writing lacks. This assumed quality of immediacy is what Derrida defines as the 'metaphysics of presence', and he strenuously opposes it. The point of Derrida's project is to dismantle such oppositions and show that no hierarchy in fact exists; to show that writing is not subordinate to speech, and so on. If there is no interior design of meaning for speech to express then it cannot claim authority over writing. Neither can meaning claim authority over word if it is indeterminate, unstable, and in a permanent state of active interpretation. Meaning is in fact both differed from itself (non-identical to itself) and constantly deferred (never fully present, fixed, or complete). The metaphysics of presence is thus exposed as a myth.

We might define Derrida as anti-metaphysical as well as anti-foundationalist and by traditional standards the propounder of what amounts to an anti-aesthetics. It is in the area of value, particularly aesthetic value that Derrida is at his most radical, as well as most questionable, as a theorist. The value of deconstructing texts, of laying bare their indeterminacy of meaning and lack of truth, structure and essence, is presumably that one is making an individual contribution to the break down of received authority. This is the 'Death of the author' notion extended well beyond Barthes.

Aesthetic value and meaning are no longer seen to be products of the operations of a system, and have become fleeting and unstable phenomena which can never be recaptured or even properly communicated. They must always be considered to be in a process of 'becoming' instead of being directed towards a pre-arranged goal as in the case of structuralists such as Levi-Strauss. In Derrida's scheme of things meaning is endlessly being produced and just as endlessly being erased, so that there is no fixed points of reference for critics to orient themselves by. Value judgements of the traditional kind become impossible under the circumstances and the value of reading is now seen to be located in the active interpretation of the reader. Value has shifted from the system to the reader. If structuralism systematically excludes the human dimension from aesthetic theory, then deconstruction in some sense introduces it, but at the price of individual isolation. 'Active interpretations' by their very nature remain very private things.

One of the implications of Derrida's deconstruction of Western metaphysics is that philosophy can claim no special status towards other disciplines. If, as Derrida argues, philosophy itself can not be grounded, there being no self-evident truths or transcendental signifieds around to perform that service, then it cannot function as a legitimate source of grounding for other activities, such as aesthetic theory or literary criticism, criticism, far from being an applied form of a theory, however loosely formulated, in its turn derived from a philosophical position, can now claim equality with philosophy. Philosophers are just as much caught up in the problems of language as any other writers. They too are essentially engaged in

the business of writing narratives, of persuading by means of literary figures appealing to the emotions, rather than providing by means of rational argument. Christopher Norris has argued to the effect that the task now is to explore the various ways in which philosophy reveals, negotiates or represses its own inescapable predicament as written language. The application of deconstruction takes us further down the road to an anti-aesthetics. If all discourse are merely rhetorical narratives of a greater or lesser degree of plausibility directed at the senses rather than the reason, then aesthetic judgement becomes an increasingly problematical activity. No judgement could be considered to be preferable to another, indeed no grounds would exist by which comparison of judgements could be made.

Deconstruction seems to be calling for a rejection of value judgement, although, there are implicit values. It puts forward a theory of reading in which the value is deemed to lie in 'active interpretation', that is, the rejection of received authority in favour of irreverent game-playing with the text. The value of criticism in the deconstructionist scheme of things is that it upsets the authority of texts, denoustrate both the instability and endless plurality of meaning, possible in a text's 'play of differences' (total apprehension of meaning, in the sense assumed by the 'metaphysics of presence' being considered impersible). The theory - of - value problem in deconstruction is that its values have no foundation, nor according to the theory is such a foundation ever possible. What deconstruction is notably successfully in doing, however, is drawing attention to the hidden commitments (to essentialism and determinism, for example) of other theories.

Anti-Aesthetics might also be the way to define post - modernism. We propose some comments centering round Jean-Francois Lyotard's book *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard's work shows a concern similar to that of Derrida in its desire to transcend, or by-Pass, value judgements. All discourses are treated as equal, with no particular claims to precedence. Any discourse is simply a narrative : a sequence of ideas which either plausible or not, congenial or not, but which has no sustainable claims to transcendental authority. The value of a particular narrative, to Lyotard might well lie in its modesty as regards claims to authority. What is not

clear is how, in the absence of workable criteria, we can assess the claims of competing theories.

Lyotard's theory centres on the individual. The individual is dominated by systems and theories, and in the process as having lost any sense of creativity and freedom for manoeuvre. Lyotard wishes to set this embattled individual free from the claim of pre-existing systems of explanation.

As an aesthetic theory post-modernism seeks to effect a complete break with the past. A postmodern artist may rework traditional form, though in a very knowing, often cynical manner. Irony is the staple of post modern creative practice. He has little real feeling for the past or for its system of values. In his world there would appear to be no direct contact with objects, events or other beings, but only with their simulations. Modern culture has become so complex in terms of communication media that it is all but impossible to differentiate between image and reality. In practice, the image has taken over from reality, with the television image becoming more 'real' and more authoritative, than the actual live event. The cinema and TV are now the realities. The medium is the message. What is also entailed is a consistent refusal to judge the artefacts are confronts, there is the argument that we should not discuss their value, but merely experience them. One reaches the outer limits of anti-aesthetics when we are told that judgement is no longer to be attempted.

The rejection, or at least suspicion of value judgement is a common theme running through structuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism. Nevertheless, despite themselves, each one might be said to imply a theory of value of sorts in that they have unacknowledged or otherwise. On the one side, we have determinism and authoritarianism (Structuralism), on the other indeterminism and some form of anarchism (deconstruction and postmodernism). A general trend toward anti-aesthetics can be noted; that is to say, a trend towards a theoretical position with an oppositional stance to the basic assumptions of theoretical aesthetics (that value judgements can be made, that criteria can be established for making those value judgements through the use of philosophical theory). The major

theoretical shift that takes place between structuralism and post modernism is a move from essentialism to anti-essentialism; from a world featuring stable structures to a world of flux and indeterminacy. Where as structuralist aesthetic theory assumes an underlying unity to existence and seeks to denoustrate this at work in texts, deconstructionist aesthetics argues for a lack of unity and sees text as exemplifying this. In critical terms of reference this represents a move from description and classification to anarchic game playing.

The validity of the anti foundationist position in Derrida and Lyotard remains a major question. If meaning is always and necessarily, in the process of being deferred, never fully present to any individual, never totally complete in itself, then deconstructionist writing must be caught in the same kind. If all discourses are merely narrative then equally so is Lyotard's, and much of the authority of his utterance disappears. Part of the problem lies in the desire for universality of application, with regards to meaning, on the anti-foundationist side of the divide. Derrida wants to say more than that in some cases meaning is relative and pheral; he wants to claim that in all cases it is relative and plural, and, indeed, that it can never be reduced to criteria of truth-value. He asks us to choose between all meaning being rigidly fixed, or all meaning being radically unstable. This debate is presented in a polarized form. Most of us would be quite willing to accept that meaning is not always completely stable, the art of poetry largely depends an just such a premise, without thereby feeling this licenses a swift transition to the position of claiming that all meaning at times can only be unstable. How could one possibly prove, or even test , such a proposition ?

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