

The Politics of Literary Form: Revisiting Roland Barthes' Writing Degree Zero

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Abstract: This article examines Roland Barthes' Writing Degree Zero (1953) as a seminal work that redefines literary writing as an ethical, historical, and ideological practice. Focusing on Barthes' concept of *écriture*, it explores the distinctions between language, style, and writing, and analyzes the evolution of literary form from classical bourgeois writing to modern experimental modes. The article discusses Barthes' critique of realism, political writing, bourgeois ideology, and the search for a "zero degree" of writing, while highlighting his views on literary responsibility and the relationship between language and history. It argues that Barthes transforms literary form from a purely aesthetic category into a site of ideological and cultural struggle, making Writing Degree Zero a foundational text in structuralist and poststructuralist literary theory.

Keywords: Roland Barthes; Writing Degree Zero; *écriture* (Writing); Literary Theory; Literary Form; Bourgeois Writing; Structuralism; Poststructuralism; Ideology; Language and History.

Roland Barthes's 1953 debut, Writing Degree Zero, fundamentally altered literary theory by reframing literature as a battleground for history and ideology rather than a static art form. At the heart of his argument is a crucial three-way distinction between language, personal style, and writing (*écriture*). While language is a societal given and style is rooted in a writer's biology or psychology, *écriture* represents a deliberate ethical and political alignment. Consequently, choosing a specific way to write is a social act deeply entangled with class dynamics and historical shifts. Barthes demonstrates this by charting the path from

the rigid conventions of classical French prose to modern, self-conscious literary experimentation.

In her well-known introduction to the text, Susan Sontag expands on this view, urging readers to see Barthes as an expansive cultural theorist rather than a narrow literary critic. She notes that this early work lays the groundwork for his career-long obsession with how human consciousness is shaped by language and history. Furthermore, Sontag highlights how Barthes implicitly disputes Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of "committed literature." Where Sartre saw language as a transparent tool for political activism, Barthes reveals that the medium of language itself is inherently loaded with historical baggage, making a truly neutral style—a "degree zero" of writing—both a profound modernist pursuit and a historical paradox.

The Triad of Expression: Language, Style, and Ecriture

In his theoretical framework, Roland Barthes breaks down literary production into three distinct realms: language, style, and writing (*écriture*). He defines language as a passive, inherited framework provided by society, establishing the boundary of what a writer can physically express. Conversely, style originates internally, shaped by an author's unique psychology, biology, and personal history. Positioned between these forces is writing (*écriture*), which Barthes identifies as an intentional, ethically driven selection. Through *écriture*, literature directly engages with its contemporary social reality. Rather than serving as a mere utilitarian tool for delivering information, writing operates as an ideological declaration that establishes an author's place in history. Writers must actively navigate their linguistic inheritance, choosing whether to conform to or subvert established traditions. Consequently, literary form acts as a moral barometer reflecting an author's stance toward the world.

Ideology and the Evolution of Written Modes

Barthes asserts that written forms are frequently co-opted to validate political authority. Dominant regimes establish specific linguistic norms that transform vocabulary into an instrument of state power. For instance, classical French literature mirrored the rigid hierarchy of the monarchy, whereas the intense rhetoric of the French Revolution forged a vocabulary tailored to rapid societal upheaval. Similarly, Marxist discourse created a specialized lexicon designed to unify political philosophy and action.

However, Barthes raises critical concerns regarding the evolution of Stalinist discourse, which he argues ossified into a dogmatic framework of political labeling. Within this system, language ceased to observe or report actual conditions, functioning instead to enforce predetermined moral and political verdicts. This shift reduced writing to a tool for maintaining systemic control rather than a medium for genuine human dialogue. Barthes

concludes that intellectual commentary often suffers from a similar flaw, failing to alter the foundational structures of language even while claiming political engagement.

The Novel and its Narrative Conventions

The nineteenth-century literary tradition forged a deep connection between prose fiction and historical perception. In his analysis, Roland Barthes identifies two structural foundations that define the classical realism of the novel: the third-person perspective and the use of the preterite tense (the *passé simple*) (Barthes, 1953). These formal techniques cooperate to generate an illusion of a transparent, objective reality while successfully obscuring the subjective presence of the narrator (Barthes, 1953).

The preterite tense acts as a tool of containment, reshaping raw human experience into a tidy, linear sequence governed by logic, causality, and design (Barthes, 1953). Concurrently, the third-person voice creates a deceptive aura of neutrality, hiding the underlying bourgeois biases and societal assumptions embedded within the act of telling a story (Barthes, 1953). Through these mechanisms, the traditional novel tames the chaos of history, repackaging it as a neat, highly intelligible narrative (Barthes, 1953). Conversely, modern avant-garde novelists disrupt this comfort zone by manipulating syntax, fracturing chronology, and destabilizing the narrative voice, thereby exposing the artificial scaffolding of classical storytelling (Barthes, 1953).

The Structural Evolution of Poetic Expression

Barthes draws a rigid line of demarcation between the poetry of the classical era and that of the modern age (Barthes, 1953). Classical verse functioned essentially as an elegant extension of prose, operating within shared oratorical rules, strict rhetorical devices, and communal linguistic boundaries (Barthes, 1953). Modern poetry, by contrast, rejects this utilitarian framework entirely, liberating individual words from their standard sentence structures and transforming them into isolated, self-contained objects imbued with an autonomous, vital force (Barthes, 1953). In the modern poetic landscape, a word no longer serves as a mere stepping stone toward a broader sentence meaning; instead, it stands alone as an independent entity layered with its own vertical depth (Barthes, 1953).

As Barthes observes regarding this shift, the modern poetic word functions as an isolated gesture stripped of its immediate historical context or surrounding environment, suggesting that a profound, existential strata lie beneath every individual term (Barthes, 1953). By abandoning straightforward, transparent communication, modern poetry adopts a highly concentrated symbolic architecture that forces the reader to confront the dense, unyielding reality of language itself (Barthes, 1953).

The Ascendancy and Fragmentation of Bourgeois Prose

According to Barthes, the trajectory of literary styles is tethered to socio-economic developments (Barthes, 1953). Prior to the mid-seventeenth century, French literature enjoyed a wide variety of linguistic expressions because the national language had not yet been codified or institutionalized (Barthes, 1953). However, around the year 1650, the establishment of classical grammar created a single, standardized literary language that mirrored and validated the socio-political dominance of the rising bourgeois class (Barthes, 1953).

This classical mode of writing masqueraded as a universal standard of reason and art, though it was explicitly designed to promote bourgeois cultural values (Barthes, 1953). It functioned simultaneously as a functional tool for communication and a decorative ornament, acting as a clean window for ideas while masking its true ideological work (Barthes, 1953). Even the political upheavals of the French Revolution did little to alter this linguistic paradigm; while state institutions were overthrown, bourgeois prose remained intact because the underlying class ideology maintained its cultural hegemony (Barthes, 1953).

The definitive breakdown occurred after the revolutions of 1848, when the expansion of industrial capitalism and intense class warfare shattered the illusion of a unified bourgeois society (Barthes, 1953). Authors working in the wake of this crisis—including Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé, Arthur Rimbaud, and later writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus—could no longer treat language as a neutral, universally shared reflection of social reality (Barthes, 1953). As a consequence of this historical rupture, modern literature fractured into a multitude of isolated, self-conscious styles of writing, each trying to resolve the crisis of its own legitimacy (Barthes, 1953).

The Reflexive Turn and Style as Meticulous Craft

In the modern era, literary creation faces a persistent internal crisis. Whenever an author coordinates a linguistic network, the foundational validity of the literary enterprise is brought into question (Barthes, 1953). The diverse stylistic modes available to contemporary authors highlight a historical impasse, forcing literature to confront its own structural limitations (Barthes, 1953). Consequently, modern composition becomes acutely self-conscious, recognizing that linguistic forms are deeply bound by historical conditions rather than operating as universal truths (Barthes, 1953).

During the nineteenth century, textual form evolved from a transparent delivery system for ideas into the primary locus of artistic labor (Barthes, 1953). Authors began to view literature as a specialized trade demanding rigorous discipline rather than a product of spontaneous inspiration (Barthes, 1953). Gustave Flaubert serves as the pivotal figure in this

transition; his obsessive focus on style exposed the inherent artificiality of literary artifice (Barthes, 1953). Within this framework, the sheer effort of composition acquired its own aesthetic worth. Textual production was no longer validated by its ultimate purpose, but by the measurable labor expended to create it (Barthes, 1953). The writer evolved into an artisan whose primary ethical duty shifted from the straightforward expression of ideas to the deliberate, painstaking manipulation of medium and form (Barthes, 1953).

The Illusion of Realism and the Paradox of Revolution

A critical examination of literary realism reveals that it does not merely copy external reality. Naturalist authors like Guy de Maupassant, Émile Zola, and Alphonse Daudet claimed to present objective depictions of society, yet their texts relied on complex formal mechanics that merely generated a realistic veneer (Barthes, 1953). Far from achieving neutrality, realistic prose is deeply marked by highly visible signs of deliberate construction and artistic fabrication (Barthes, 1953).

This systemic issue extends directly to socialist realism. Communist writers frequently adopted traditional bourgeois literary frameworks while attempting to infuse them with radical, revolutionary themes (Barthes, 1953). In doing so, they inadvertently sustained the very ideological structures they intended to dismantle (Barthes, 1953). True radicalism in literature cannot be achieved simply by altering political subject matter; it requires a fundamental restructuring of language itself (Barthes, 1953).

The Pursuit of Neutrality and Silence

As awareness grew that literary language was compromised by historical bias and ideological co-optation, some avant-garde figures sought an absolute escape. Writers like Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud pushed verbal expression to its breaking point, attempting to dismantle language entirely in the belief that literature could only find renewal through self-destruction (Barthes, 1953). However, complete linguistic silence eliminates the possibility of human communication and cannot serve as a sustainable literary strategy (Barthes, 1953).

As an alternative, the concept of a neutral, "zero degree" writing emerges, characterized by a completely stripped-down style that avoids rhetorical flourishes, decorative metaphors, or overt ideological markers (Barthes, 1953). Yet, even a completely flat, objective style eventually hardens into a recognizable literary convention (Barthes, 1953). Every successful stylistic breakthrough is ultimately absorbed by history and institutionalized, demonstrating that an absolute, permanent state of linguistic innocence remains out of reach (Barthes, 1953).

The Intersect of Speech, Form, and Ethics

The relationship between formal literary language and vernacular speech underwent a dramatic shift in the twentieth century. While earlier novelists like Honoré de Balzac and Victor Hugo integrated regional dialects primarily to add picturesque local color, later figures like Marcel Proust and Louis-Ferdinand Céline transformed speech into a direct reflection of social identity (Barthes, 1953). Dialogue became an index of class, education, and professional background (Barthes, 1953). This trajectory culminated in experiments where spoken vernacular actively reshaped the grammatical framework of prose fiction, bringing literature into alignment with immediate social realities (Barthes, 1953). Because human thought cannot exist outside of a linguistic framework, literary form functions as the ultimate arbiter of an author's socio-political and ethical responsibility (Barthes, 1953).

The Ideological Grid

Ultimately, modern literature can be understood as a continuous, utopian quest for a liberated language (Barthes, 1953). While writers consistently struggle to break free from inherited stylistic conventions, they remain constrained by the very linguistic traditions forged by previous generations (Barthes, 1953). Every radical attempt to construct a new mode of writing eventually undergoes institutionalization, transforming back into a standard convention (Barthes, 1953).

Nevertheless, this perpetual experimentation is vital because it embodies literature's ideal aspiration toward an expressive mode free from class divisions, historical alienation, and ideological manipulation (Barthes, 1953). Literature exists simultaneously as a historical construct and a space of endless potential, mapping the constraints of language while imagining a future where communication might become truly universal and transparent (Barthes, 1953).

Writing Degree Zero reframes literary form as an active ethical, historical, and ideological practice rather than a static aesthetic object (Barthes, 1953). Composition is permanently bound to class ideology and structural power dynamics (Barthes, 1953). The true value of this critique lies not in advocating for a specific narrative method, but in exposing literature as a continuous struggle between historical constraint and creative freedom (Barthes, 1953). Decades after its initial release, this theoretical framework continues to drive foundational debates regarding structuralism, post-structuralism, and the socio-political responsibilities of the writer (Barthes, 1953).

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