

THE GENETIC CODE IN VIEW OF POSTMODERN LINGUISTICS

To be postmodern is quite *de rigueur* among social and literary critics. In fact, reference is made to Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, and Jacques Lacan, for example, in books and articles, in practically every field of study. Nonetheless, postmodernism has been most clearly defined by Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his book *The Postmodern Condition* Lyotard argues that postmodernism represents a movement to undermine "metanarratives"¹ These grand schemes have appeared through Western history, as a means to guarantee a firm foundation for knowledge and order. Without these ultimate principles, the belief is that culture will dissolve into chaos.

In the modern world, one of the most pervasive metanarratives is the genetic code. To some persons, this language embodies both the past and the future of humankind. In the idiom of postmodernists, the genetic code constitutes "arche-writing." A person's genetic script, in other words, is thought to explain all behaviour, ranging from intelligence to deviance. This fundamental language is assumed to represent reality and convey the indubitable truth about the human condition. The genetic code embodies a text devoid of interpretation, or any other extenuating factor that may compromise the discovery of unadulterated knowledge.

How does the genetic code work? In a manner of speaking, an absolute language is represented by genetics, for this code

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extends to the very core of existence. Similar to the theory of literature advocated by Frye and responsible for the New Criticism, genetic writing subtends quotidian concerns and differentiates reality from illusion.² All the possible permutations of human action, accordingly, are assumed to be an outgrowth of a single language. In short, the genetic text has unquestioned legitimacy and explanatory power. Not very different from the role Levi-Strauss assigns to social structures, the genetic code is a "universal narrative model". The so-called surface phenomena of everyday life are thus easily located within a never questioned framework.

As Barthes might say, a primordial alphabet—the alleged "building blocks" of life—is at work providing continuity to the human diary.³ For example, sterile symbols such as "X" and "Y" are used to describe sexual identity. In this respect, even inner body is made to conform to a geometric design. Moreover, an almost magical, although some would say miraculous, arrangement of these and other letters is believed to supply sufficient justification for a bevy of social policies, even political programs. The operation of a natural grammar is presupposed, thus giving a *raison d'être* to actions that would otherwise have none. And consistent with a functionalist rendition of language, internal consistency and rigor are the hallmark of the genetic code. Hence persons are surrounded by a language that is lawful, precise, and omnipresent.

Yet does the genetic code offer a (con-) text, within which behaviour is ensnared? Postmodernists answer no. The postmodern position on this issue is straightforward: genetic writing is simply another form of language. And like speech in general, the genetic code is not an unmediated form of expression. Hence the language of genetics does not have a pristine center, which

serves to anchor firmly this code. Despite the extreme formalization of this language, in the manner advocated by the members of the Vienna Circle, the grammar and syntax adopted by geneticists to describe humans are not ahistorical.

In order to understand the critique of genetics presented in the foregoing paragraphs, the postmodern view of language must be fully discussed. Stated simply, the genetic code is a remnant of a Newtonian world that has been eclipsed. The 'zero symbols' incorporated into the language of genetics can no longer be used to support this biowriting.⁴ Like Newton's *sensorium Dei*, justifying writing by using what Frye calls an "extraliterary schematism is considered to be passé subsequent to the advent of postmodernism. Actually, postmodern writing is centerless and exhibits centrifugal tendencies. Reminiscent of students in Europe during the 1960's, Jean Gebser declares that the "center is everywhere" in the postmodern world.⁵

With respect to writing, suggested by this call for centerlessness is the idea that signifiers, or symbols, "float". Deleuze summarizes this sentiment nicely when he writes, in his analysis of Proust, that "there is no *logos*, only hieroglyphics"⁶ His point is that there is no escape from language, and therefore persons are limited to indirect access to truth. All that can legitimize a particular reading of a text, even the genetic code, is additional language to supplement an already fragile interpretation of reality. Therefore, language use is never final, but provisional.

Discovering a text is an "intertextual" experience, claims Kristeva.⁷ She argues, in a postmodern fashion, that the meaning of a passage can be revealed only as a result of shuffling language from one interpretive milieu to another. This *modus operandi* is required for a simple reason: language mediates completely

reality. Derrida had this relationship between reality and language in mind when he wrote his now infamous phrase, "nothing exists outside of the text."⁸ And the term text, as he explained recently, encompasses far more than books. What Derrida intends to say is that language is not a surrogate for higher reality. As opposed to usual definitions, language does not "point to", "indicate", or "stand for" something non-linguistic. Consequently, speech must be self-clarifying, for all literary and social standards are thoroughly linguistic. Truth, in other words, is the product of "language games", and has "no final legitimacy outside of serving the goals envisioned by the practical subject, the autonomous collectivity."⁹

What is the impact of placing the genetic code in the service of language games? Due to the ubiquity of language, the genetic code can be entered in a variety of ways. This code can never be "finally broken", thereby exposing its hidden meaning, because language does not correspond in a one-to-one manner to reality. Instead, the orientation indigenous to language use settles any questions about the interplay of truth and error. *Ecriture* is the term employed by French postmodernists to suggest that writing implies a commitment to particular assumptions about nature and social existence.¹⁰ Rather than ahistorical, the genetic code is implicated in a unique style of discourse. As with language generally, this mode of speech has little significance outside of a particular epistemological realm.

Considering the postmodern view of language, the genetic code cannot be approached as if it is a *Ding an sich*. Because no language is innocent, as Barthes and de Man are fond of saying, disentangling genetic effects should be recognized as a political event. At this juncture, politics is defined very broadly as the process of selecting and instituting reality. Typically a person's possibilities are thought to be genetically circumscribed. With

regard to postmodernism, however, the genetic text is never simply read, because language use cannot be severed from interpretation. Correspondingly, any genetic analysis must be understood to occur within a limited, linguistically deployed reality. Genetic characteristics, stated differently, have no inherent significance. For even the most natural language, contends Barthes, is nothing but a modality of expression. Even transforming genetics into a science cannot obscure its non-scientific, or linguistic, origin.

Clearly postmodernism radicalizes the traditional nature versus nurture argument. Usually those who disagree with genetic determinism have opted for the position that a person's biological constitution can be altered appreciably by social considerations. Yet is this tactic really liberating, as its exponents claim? Their rationale, simply stated, is that a multitude of causes influence development of an individual's identity. In fact, however, two causal variables are identified as shaping a self-concept instead of one. Accordingly, the self is still assumed to be the product of natural events. Human agency remains enclosed within necessary strictures, as long as psychological stability is maintained.

Striving to locate the null point of a person's being has Cartesian as well as Newtonian overtones. In line with Descartes' hope of uncovering "clear and distinct" knowledge, the self provides an indubitable ground for existence. And if the self can be based on something as fundamental as genetic material, the Cartesian anxiety of the West can be calmed. No evil genius will be able to trick persons into pursuing goals that they will never be able to achieve. As modern psychologists recommend for healthy living, the so-called ideal and real selves will be reconciled. An individual, therefore, will not have unrealistic expectations and experience the stress that accompanies failure. Potentially dangerous flights of fantasy will be precluded, because the self will be grounded firmly in reality.

As should be noted, however, this sort of dualism is undermined by postmodernism. The notion that the self represents the essence of a person's identity cannot be retained. Similar to every other facet of reality, the self has the status of a linguistic habit. The importance of this theoretical demarche for sustaining an identity is discussed by postmodernists under the rubric of the "author effect."¹¹

When Barthes announced the author to be dead, he created quite a stir among literary critics. In fact, many believed that he was attempting to destroy the origin of literature. Yet is this really the case? Rather than subvert the author, all he wanted to do is remind critics that nothing subsumes writing, neither a *psyche* mind, nor soul. Nothing justifies literature other than writing. Indeed, Foucault writes that there is no "deep motive" "creative power" or "design" indigenous to the self.¹² The author, he adds, resides in the "break that founds a certain discursive construct and its very particular mode of being."

Specifically, Barthes contends that authors write themselves into existence, for the "I is nothing more than saying I."¹³ In terms of the postmodern rendition of language, he concludes that a writer invents a "linguistic I." For even the self does not escape undefiled by language. There is no Cartesian *cogito*, which can be relied on to explain an author's intentions. Motives and other psychological or sociological elements can be approached only from within the discursive practice that supplies the contours of a text. A writer's identity is indefinite, because the self changes according to shifts in language use. This means that the self is a document rather than a monument, to use the comparison popularized by Foucault.

Various European feminists have expanded on the central theme of the author effect, in order to confront the traditional

image of women. While throughout the western intellectual tradition women have been portrayed as deformed men, this viewpoint gained visibility subsequent to Freud's work. In point of fact, the origin of the modern rendition of the "anatomy is destiny" thesis is often cited to be an article by Freud, entitled the "Disappearance of the Oedipus Complex".¹⁴ As a result of this publication the female identity came to be defined in absolute terms, as lacking crucial traits. The absence of a penis was believed to stifle the libido and make women inferior to men, with respect to emotional stability and mental capability. In short, a women's range of possibilities was presumed to be biologically inscribed.

Early on, Simone de Beauvoir challenged this tradition with her quite revolutionary proclamation that women are made, not born.¹⁵ After all, if truth is not a spectacle but a "mise en abîme", due to the elusiveness of language, women cannot be approached as if they constitute a class, or genre, of persons.¹⁶ There is no ideal, against which texts or persons can be judged. Both literature and humans must be read in accordance to how they implode reality. The linguistic world that hides between lines, pages, and behaviour is where reality resides. In this regard, Lyotard notes perceptively that "*truth doesn't speak stricto sensu; it works*".¹⁷

When applied to studying the flesh, Lyotard's dictum has interesting implications. "Writing the body" is the phrase used by Hélène Cixous to describe how a person's biography is articulated.¹⁸ Her point is that only the linguistic body exists, thereby, precluding direct access to the genetic biowriting that is assumed to resolve all questions about fate and destiny. Femininity is simply a form or style of signification. Therefore, according to Luce

Irigaray, the female libido is not a lack, but a mode of sexuality that is other than male. Kristeva, accordingly, charges that there is no such thing as Womanhood. Both male and female identities represent choices about life style, which are linguistically instituted. Under seige at this juncture is Aristotle, who suggested that potential antedates possibility. Postmodernists reject this theory and contend that the self is a "thetic" subject, or an outgrowth of creative *praxis*.

Rosalind Coward summarizes the postmodern view of sexuality when she states that "our subjectivity and identity are formed in the definitions of desire which encircle us."¹⁹ There is no doubt that identities can be imposed on persons by those, for example, who claim to be scientific or represent powerful individuals. Yet even when clients are mauled by the rationality exhibited by psychiatrists, this process is linguistic. "Symbolic violence" is the phrase used by Pierre Bourdieu to describe this rape of language. To postmodernists, a diagnosis is predicated on a discursive practice that can be rejected, if clients recognize the fragile nature of a reality that has a linguistic base. Nonetheless, as a result of the "anatomy is destiny" viewpoint, women have been violated in a variety of ways.

Edward Said illustrates in his book *Orientalism* that the inferiorization of a group involves discrediting the symbolism adopted by its members.²⁰ The absence of a phallus, however, has dire consequences only within a particular web of social relations. This sort of polity is called a phallocracy by postmodernists. Yet with language placed at the center of reality, women are not natural objects. Instead, the identity of all humans is related to the "*jouissance* of the body", and thus the self is multiva lent and unpredictable.²¹ Similar to sexual excitement, the climax of self development cannot be anticipated with certitude.

The language in which the self is written is not unambiguous or final, but incomplete. Using the imagery made famous by Derrida, Lacan writes that only "The Women" exists.⁹² Writing "under erasure" in this way indicates that multiplicity-in-unity-is achieved, without *Aufhebung*.

Although the evisceration of symbolism may continue subsequent to the warnings of postmodernists, the source of legitimacy used to sustain this unseemly activity is undermined. The "Father image", the key to what postmodernists call phallogentrism, is no longer an unrivalled basis of authority. Now authority must be predicated on textual relevance, because writing is not monolithic. Hence, textual reductionism is unjustified. Each text is accompanied by a linguistic world that deserves recognition.

In postmodern parlance, this means that the self is *différance*.⁹³ Cixous makes this point by suggesting that everyone is bi-sexual. Incidentally, this term is defined as "the non-exclusion of difference".⁹⁴ What Cixous and Clément are trying to accomplish is to radicalize the concept of androgeny. Traditionally androgeny has come to mean that males and females share traits, yet these characteristics are often thought to be naturally disposed. By labelling persons as bi-sexual, these feminist writers aim to demonstrate that Law of Excluded Middle does not hold with respect to categorizing the language of the body. Rather, in a dialectical sense, alleged opposites interpenetrate. Signs, as Deleuze remarks, are "hermaphroditic".⁹⁵ Thus, the factor that keeps visible an interpretation of the body is the act of choosing, which sustains writing. Language, in other words, must work, if a specific version of reality is to remain credible.

Following the onset of postmodernism, the genetic code is simply one form of writing among many. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, biowriting is "minor literature", rather of a

Grand Narrative."⁶ Instead of expressing a universal theme, minor literature has temporal relevance. More precisely, revealed by this sort of writing is information that is important, once the genetic arena is entered. Accordingly, minor literature has no intrinsic value. The genetic code, simply put, has little significance outside of the bioworld. Most important, however, is that illustrated by every linguistic world is the desire to write. The intention to create a specific linguistic world is vital to penetrating the word.

The genetic code is therefore "decentered". Deprived of an inviolable foundation, only a belief in the value of genetics can justify this approach to literature. In more concrete terms, a genetic text must be valued before it can be understood to provide the reader with any appreciable insight. Can a text, therefore, be treated as an explanatory factor? According to postmodernists the answer is no, for without the undecidable element of interpretation a text does nothing. Stated differently, even if a link could be established between genes and behaviour, the reader mediates this association. Hence the meaning of genetic writing, in the final analysis, is unrelated to biology. *Between* the reader and the genetic code is where the meaning of this text arises.

According Barthes, even so-called evident truths, like those conveyed by the genetic code, are "already interpretations". With regard to social policy, this finding should not be ignored. Because the genetic code does not represent truth but a text, this style of biowriting has limited explanatory power. When attempting to account for crime, for example, the plot of the genetic text may overlook important aspects of the scenario that accompanies criminal actions. When this occurs postmodernists write that "terrorism" is evident, because the (con-) text of crime is misconstrued.²⁸ Because society consists of a patchwork of language games, postmodernists argue, each segment of this

collage must be allowed to speak for itself. Otherwise the integrity of a specific text is compromised. The genetic code, in short, should not be envisioned to explain every text, because the voice of the genetic code has a limited range.

In sum, the genetic code is comprised of writing and nothing more. Similar to every linguistic expression, this form of writing does not necessarily have universal appeal. Only with respect to certain linguistically substantiated assumptions about existence does the genetic code add anything to social discourse. Moreover if a discussion should stray from these tacitly held beliefs, bio-writing may become sinister. The genetic code, therefore, should not be approached as an explanatory but an interpretive scheme. In this way the genetic text can be read, with no chance of it becoming epic literature. As simply another story, the genetic code is optional reading.

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NOTES

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