

RESEARCH ARTICLE



DERRIDA, BARTHES, AND PERSPECTIVES ON INTERTEXTUAL READING

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The significance of self-difference emerges as one of the important aspects of Derridean notions about text and writing. And, hence, many a deconstructive reading has been devoted to illustration of self-difference. In fact, the idea of intertextuality is not alien to Derridean thought although it is mostly discussed in terms of observations made by thinkers such as Barthes, Kristeva, Riffarterre, Jenny, and Bloom among others. The fact that intertextuality also forms an integral part of the Derridean thesis of *difference* becomes clear when he elaborates on “meaning,” text, and difference in *Positions*:

In the extent to which what is called “meaning” (to be “expressed”) is already, and thoroughly, constituted by a tissue of differences, in the extent to which there is already a *text*, a network of textual referrals to *other* texts, a textual transformation in which each allegedly “simple term” is marked by the trace of another term, the presumed inferiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. (*Positions* 33)

While Derrida would insist, in the spirit of the above quotation, on identification of the subversive forces operating at the level of citations or terms used from other texts and thereby destabilizing meaning at their level as such. Barthes, like certain other thinkers of intertextuality, conceptualizes a kind of intertextual space on which texts are seen as either consciously or unconsciously basing themselves, and to which texts are also seen as contributing significantly.

Like one of the chapters of Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* has been titled “The End of the Book

and the Beginning of Writing,” one of the essays of Barthes is entitled “From Work to Text.” And, the titles themselves speak of the novelty of thought they were trying to introduce into the traditionally accepted ideas about “book” and “work.”

While Derrida was developing a science of writing in super session of the traditional notion of the “book,” Barthes developed his notion of the “text” which is always in a process of being written. Significantly, Barthes noted that a “work” becomes a “text” through a process of its being read which is an unending process. Thus, for Barthes, a text is always in a process of its own making.

In his famous essay “The Death of the Author,” Barthes puts forth his notions of the text and intertext by stripping away the author of his traditionally accepted original creative talent while adding new dimensions to the reading activity and thereby elevating the status of the reader. Vincent B. Leitch notes:

In particular, he [Barthes] reconsiders and recasts the concepts “author” and “reader,” asserting that “writing is the destruction of every voice, or every point of origin” (IMT, 142). Disconnecting the originating voice from its text, Barthes nudges the author towards “death” so that writing (textuality) may commence. Language speaks, not the author. No longer is the author the voice behind the work, the owner of the language, the origin of the production. The “text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (148). We enter the age of the reader. Unsurprisingly, “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the

Author" (148). (Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* 103).

Thus, Barthes' early poststructuralist thought is also in consonance with Derrida's repudiation of the concept of origin. Barthes substitutes the author with the "scriptor" who does not stand in the relationship to his work "as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing" (Barthes, *Image, Music, and Text* 145).

Thus, during his association with the journal *Tel Quel*, Barthes shared the Derridean thrust on textuality as a matter of difference and rejection of the sense of origin. Later on, without registering rejection of his earlier pre-Derridean concerns, the post-*Tel Quel* Barthes develops his theories of textuality and intertextuality. And, in the course of doing so, Barthes records the importance of the empirical world in relation to human experience and understanding of things:

What form does intertextuality take in Barthes' theorizing? According to Barthes, it is impossible to live outside the infinite text—to escape, for example, newspapers, books, TV shows, and billboards. This larger cultural "book" confers meaning on life not only through overt influence but also by subtle infiltration. Figures, metaphors and thought-words create a kind of "muzak" that permeates the environment so that every text relates this lulling hum". (Leitch, *Deconstructive Criticism* 109)

Vincent B. Leitch observes that while intertextuality brings in a sense of confinement for the author, text, and the reader, it also informs a tactical device for critical deconstruction and thereby signifies a means of transcendence:

For Barthes, then, intertextuality presents two faces: it appears as historical crypt, that is, as for information of cultural ideology; and it shows up as a tactical device for critical deconstruction. In the first role, it seems a prison; in the second, an escape key.

The perception of confinement and closure call for strategies of release. *S/Z* offers some ways. (110).

This desire for transcendence is symbolized through the quest for the forces of subversion and difference, explained through reversibility of codes,

which problematize the ideal of mere reproduction or representation. That takes us straight to *S/Z* which works out the details of Barthes' theory of intertextuality. In fact, largely, *S/Z* provides the model of intertextual reading practiced in order to assess the degree of multivalence in texts. However, Barthes' concept of the multivalent text is very comprehensive and tries to capture the poststructuralist spirit as such almost in its totality:

A multivalent text can carry out its basic duplicity only if it subverts the opposition between true and false, if it fails to attribute quotations (even when seeking to discredit them) to explicit authorities, if it destroys the voice which could give the text its ("organic") unity, in short, if it coldly and fraudulently abolishes quotation marks which must, as we say, in all honesty, enclose a quotation and juridically distribute the ownership of the sentences to their respective proprietors, lie subdivisions of a field. (Barthes, *S/Z* 45)

In *S/Z*, Barthes develops a unique method of reading in order to evaluate a text as either lisible (readerly) or scriptable (writerly). Thus, Barthes offers a kind of reading activity a text could potentially subject itself to. He suggests that an ideal text is always caught in the process of its being rewritten by engaging the reader in an ideal kind of reading through which he contributes to the rewriting of the text:

Our evaluation can be linked only to a practice, and this practice is that of writing. On the one hand, there is what it is possible to write, and on the other, what it is no longer possible to write What evaluation finds is precisely this value: what can be written (rewritten) today: the writerly. Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. (*S/Z* 4)

Barthes posits the readerly text in opposition to the writerly text: "Opposite the writerly text, then, is its counter value, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the readerly. We call any readerly text a classic text" (4).

What should be the method and character of reading then? Well, Barthes demonstrates it by

dividing the text of Balzac's "Sarrasine" into 561 lexias and calling each lexia a unit of reading:

We shall therefore star the text, separating, in the manner of a minor earthquake, the blocks of signification of which reading grasps only the smooth surface The tutor signifier will be cut up into a series of brief, contiguous fragments, which we shall call lexias, since they are units of reading The lexia will include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences; it will be a matter of convenience. (13).

Focussing on the necessity of identifying a variety of meanings around a lexia, Barthes notes

it will suffice that the lexia be the best possible space in which we can observe meanings; its dimension, empirically determined, estimated, will depend on the density of connotations, variable according to the moments of the text : all we require is that each lexia should have at most three or four meanings to be enumerated. (13-14).

In the course of his study of "Sarrasine," which involves a linear analysis of the lexias, Barthes examines how different voices remain interwoven in each lexia. He moves on to explain these voices as symptomatic of the different kinds of codes, of which he builds up a typology, and "under which all the textual signifiers can be grouped" (19). He, however, advises us against thematic grouping of semes, or units of signifier with regard to the semic code.

As for the semes, we merely indicate them – without, in other words, trying either to link them to a character (or a place or an object) or to arrange them in some order so that they form a single thematic grouping; we allow them the instability, the dispersion, characteristic of motes of dust, flickers of meaning. (19)

Semic code is only one of the five codes, which together constitute literature. He presents an outline of the five different functions the respective codes serve: the semic code determines the themes, the hermeneutic code helps to pose an enigma which is eventually solved in a text, the symbolic code provides the sphere where meanings become multivalent and reversible, the proairetic code determines action and behavior, and finally, the cultural code provides social and scientific

information. Focusing on the togetherness of the codes Barthes notes:

The five codes create a kind of network, a topos through which the entire text passes (or rather, in passing, becomes text). Thus, if we make no effort to structure each code, or the five codes among themselves, we do so deliberately, in order to assume the multivalence of the text, its partial reversibility. (20)

Following this, he notes: "We are, in fact, concerned not to manifest a structure but to produce a structuration" (20). Hence, Code cannot be used "in the sense of a list or paradigm that must be reconstituted" (20). Barthes notes that the idea of quotations is inevitably linked with the general idea of the codes:

The code is a perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures; we know only its departures and returns; the units which have resulted from it (those we inventory) are themselves, always, ventures out of the text, the mark, the sign of a virtual digression toward the remainder of a catalogue (*The Kidnapping* refers to every kidnapping ever written); they are so many fragments of something that has always been already read, seen, done, experienced; the code is the wake of that already. (20)

In spite of Barthes' emphasis on his radical notion of an interminable intertextual space with regard to intertextuality, and emphasis on eternal deferment of meaning, Jonathan Culler, in *The Pursuit of Signs*, develops a moderate approach to intertextuality by suggesting that a limited number of quotations and texts could be brought into discussion under a project of intertextual reading.

Barthes had noted that "Every text, being itself the intertext of another text, belongs to the intertextual, which must not be confused with a text's origins" (Barthes, "From Work to Text" 77). Hence, Culler observes that Barthes' emphasis was on parting ways with the principal ideal of the genetic approach. Barthes categorically notes that intertextual study may not take into consideration "'sources of' and 'influences upon'" (77) a work :

The study of intertextuality is thus not the investigation of sources and influences as traditionally conceived; it casts its net wider to include anonymous discursive practices,

codes whose origins are lost, that make possible the signifying practices of later texts. (Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* 103)

Culler also notes that intertextuality undermines the autonomy of the text. Hence, it represents a part of the movement for a passage beyond formalism, which Paul de Man strove to achieve through his poststructuralist venture. Apart from that, intertextuality stresses upon the necessity for an exploration of the dynamics of intelligibility. Culler takes note of this bifocality of intertextuality:

On the one hand, it calls our attention to the importance of prior texts, insisting that the autonomy of the texts is a misleading notion and that a work has the meaning it does only because certain things have previously been written. Yet, in so far as it focuses on intelligibility, on meaning, 'intertextuality' leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code, which makes possible the various effects of signification. Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work's relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of that culture. (103)

This quotation makes clear the fact that intertextual study should not be confused with comparative criticism, for the former is primarily concerned with a text's being, nay making, whereas the latter assumes that the understanding of a text's meaning is enhanced through its comparison with other texts.

Thus, Culler's approach to intertextuality, in a way, highlights its deviational character from three popular methods of reading literature: genetic, formalist (or even New Critical), and comparative. In the course of explaining intertextuality, he establishes a distinction between the position of Barthes, Kristeva, and Riffarterre who hold on to the idea of anonymity and interminable vastness of intertextual space, and that of thinkers like Laurent Jenny and Harold Bloom who restrict the scope of intertextuality.

But, what is noteworthy is that Culler himself picks up a limited number of quotations, and citations from different works and sees them as

intertextual operators for one another. He believes that identification of a few, even one, intertextual operator for a piece of discourse is also enough because all of them together stand only as manifestation of certain discursive practices and/or literary conventions. He does not really illustrate the anonymity of the intertextual space but suggests that since the discovery of a limited number of intertextual operators are only constituents of a code, innumerable constituents of this sort can be discovered to validate the vastness of the intertextual space. But, in addition to that, if anonymous sources can be discovered, it is certainly welcome. In the second part of his chapter entitled "Presupposition and Intertextuality" in *The Pursuit of Signs*, Culler suggests that presuppositions also provide a field of intertextuality. He proceeds to explain the two kinds of presupposition at work in natural language: logical and pragmatic. He notes that these two kinds can be extended to the study of literature but highlights the tremendous importance of pragmatic presupposition in the study of literature by relating it to codes and conventions. Culler also highlights the significance of speech-acts in his discussion of pragmatic presupposition.

Certain practitioners of intertextuality have established a distinction between "internal intertextuality" and "external intertextuality." Andre Bleikasten, in the footnotes to his essay entitled "Emma Bovary's Ghost in Sanctuary," takes note of Jean Ricardou's classification of intertextuality: "Ricardou posits 'external intertextuality,' i.e., the relationship of one text to another, in opposition to 'internal intertextuality,' i.e., the relationship of a text to itself" (Bleikasten, "Emma Bovary's Ghost in Sanctuary" 54). Since the relationship between two texts may not always be a relationship of influence but "inter-readability" (Gresset, "Introduction," *Intertextuality in Faulkner* 8), we could call the latter a case of external intertextuality. Bleikasten explains the internal intertextuality thus:

The cited part, inasmuch as it stands for the non-cited whole, functions as a kind of synecdoche. Yet, its relationship to its native place now no longer suffices to define it, as it is at present embedded in another text and therefore absorbed and transformed by another system of internal intertextuality. (Bleikasten 39)

It might be possible to accommodate this distinction in our reading in the following two chapters. But, at the same time, it may be noted that Michel Gresset has provided another classification of intertextuality:

In scope, intertextuality extends all the way from the “operative repetition” of one single word to the use of a whole book as an “inter-web” of meaning. One good example of the first can be found in Faulkner’s subtle quotation . . . of the verb “to fade” taken from Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in “Pantaloon in Black.” The best example of the second is most certainly Joyce’s extended use of the Odyssey in Ulysses. Half-way between these extremes, I would place the intertextual diffusion of the whole of Keats’ “Ode” throughout Light in August. (Gresset, “Introduction,” *Intertextuality in Faulkner* 4)

While the word-level intertextuality informed by Gresset deserves special consideration, the other two (examples of Ulysses and Light in August) seem to come close to “external intertextuality” and “internal intertextuality” respectively.

Thus, as we have seen, the concept of intertextuality, which was originally ingrained in Derridean thinking about the text, writing and reading, was very successfully handled and developed by Roland Barthes in the post-structuralist phase of his career. Barthes’ observations inspire innovative use of a variety of methodologies of literary analysis – in relation to the codes in particular and the notion of the “text” in general. The right use of the observations made by Barthes, Culler and others in intertextual reading can help refute the banter on theory that it is rather self-absorbed.

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Article Info:

Article Received:31/03/2014

Revised on:19/5/2014

Accepted for Publication:23/05/2014