

Re-defining the Notion of the Text in Literary Theory

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Abstract

The notion of the text has undergone a complex, plentiful and sometimes perplexed changes in the 20th century due to the unprecedented diversity and complexity of reading literature, which raises issues about subjectivity, gender, nationality, ideology, institutions and historical periods. It was Ronald Barthes, in his controversial article "From Work to Text", who opened the gate for new perspectives and understandings of the text. The present paper sums up the definitions and redefinitions of the notion of the 'text' in the modern literary theory.

Key Words: text, work, formalism, structuralism, deconstruction, new historicism, reception theory

ملخص البحث:

خضع مفهوم "النص" للتغييرات معقدة وكبيرة وأحياناً مربكة، خاصة في القرن العشرين؛ نتيجة لتنوع وتعقيدات قراءة النص الأدبي؛ لبروز قضايا مرتبطة بمفاهيم حديثة كالجنس والذاتية والعقلانية والإيديولوجيا وغيرها. وقد كان لبارت في مقاله المثير للجدل "من العمل إلى النص" دور محوري في فتح آفاق جديدة لفهم وتعریف النص. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى قراءة مختصرة لمحاولات التعريف المتكررة لمفهوم النص الأدبي في النظرية الأدبية الحديثة وأسباب تنوعها واختلافها.

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1. Introduction

The 20th century was riddled with radical changes in the way people perceived the world, mainly because of the two world wars as well as the subsequent advances in psychoanalysis and wider sentiment that emerged in the aftermath. It is noteworthy that the values and beliefs that people used to share and the traditional 18th and 19th century novel inculcated were no longer articles of faith for everyone. Moving away from universal truths and myths, people now construed space, time and history in a completely different fashion, which was reflected in fiction, poetry and drama.

Against the backdrop of all these sweeping changes, theory and criticism could not but have shifted from a status as part of the history of literature to that of an overarching field where literature is subordinate to it. By this is meant that the history of criticism and theory is increasingly becoming the general framework for studying literature. This new reality has induced the so called ‘antitheorists’ to “advocate a return to studying literature for itself” (Nelson, 179). However, antitheorist arguments leave much to be desired as they fail to address the complexity of reading literature, which raises issues about subjectivity, gender, nationality, ideology, institutions and historical periods. To this end, there have been various literary movements that have managed to grapple with the abovementioned issues, such as Marxism, psychoanalysis, structuralism and semiotics, as well as poststructuralism or deconstruction. In this essay I will dwell upon the notion of the ‘text’ which replaced the notion of the ‘work’ as

an inevitable outcome of these radical changes in literary theory.

2. What is the Text?

John Mowitt found it difficult to define the ‘text’ in *The New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* as he had doubts to take it as an idea and he argued that “the text can be treated as an idea, perhaps even one whose time has come, but doing so misses something important about what the text is” (2304). In fact, he adds, “what one misses in treating the text as an idea is its resistance to both idealism and the history of ideas, a resistance marked— however obliquely—by the necessarily digressive form of this definition that is not one” (3304). But soon he gave an etymological background of the word:

Text derives from the Latin *textus* (a tissue), which is in turn derived from *texere* (to weave). It belongs to a field of associated linguistic values that includes weaving, that which is woven, spinning, and that which is spun, indeed even web and webbing. *Textus* entered European vernaculars through Old French, where it appears as *texte* and where it assumes its important relation with *tissu* (a tissue or fabric) and *tisser* (to weave). All of these resonant associations are relevant to understanding how “the text” is used in contemporary scholarship, especially the interplay between its nominal and verbal forms, an interplay that registers the quality of what Julia Kristeva has called the text’s “productivity,” that is, its capacity to enable and exceed the producing, the materialization, of products. (2304)

Throughout history, the ‘text’ as an important concept in humanistic scholarship has taken many twists and turns. Walter Benjamin might

remind us with a tradition that dates back at least to Quintilian, when he described Proust's writing as a *textum*, a weaving not unlike the raveling and unraveling carried out by Penelope in the *Odyssey* in his essay “The Image in Proust” (202); a tradition of associating the literary work with a tissue woven of many threads. Associating Benjamin with the closure of this tradition has been justified by Mowitt that “it is because in his insistence on the dialectic of raveling and unraveling, he foregrounds a key preoccupation of what came to be known as textual criticism” (2304).

3. Textual Criticism

Textual criticism is the science which endeavors as far as possible to establish the exact wording that was used in the original document, in the original writer's autograph (Bruce, 135). It provides the principles for the scholarly editing of the texts of the cultural heritage. In the Western world, as traced by Hans Walter Gabler, the tradition and practice of collecting, tending, and preserving records was first instituted in the Hellenistic period. The foremost treasury of manuscripts in classical antiquity was the great library at Alexandria. At the library, “a school of textual scholarship established itself, with a strict fidelity to the letter in editing, but its systematic principles in the works of the librarian Aristarchus of Samothrace have for the most part not survived” (707).

F. F. Bruce believed that textual criticism is not an exclusively biblical discipline. It can be invoked in the study of most ancient literature, and

some more recent literature as well. He illustrated, “Students of Shakespeare know how difficult it is at times to determine the original wording in certain passages of his plays, owing to variations in the earliest printed editions; for example, does Ariel’s song in *The Tempest* (Act 5, Scene 1) begin ‘Where the bee sucks, there *suck* I’ or ‘Where the bee sucks, there *lurk* I?’” (135)

In the twentieth Century, it was in England that modern textual criticism was first put on methodological foundations to counteract such subjectivity in editing. As stated by Gabler, the material study of the book—bibliography—was reshaped into a Virtual science of editing. “As traditionally understood, bibliography was an auxiliary branch of historical study for book collectors, archivists, and librarians. Listing books by authentic date and place required systematic Conventions of description”.(Gabler, 709)

4. From ‘Work’ to ‘Text’

It is often noted that Roland Barthes regards the movement from structuralism to post-structuralism as a movement from “work” to “text.” In his well-known article ‘From Work to Tex’, Barthes discussed seven points of differences between ‘work’ and ‘text’. Drawing this distinction, he said that the former is a process, whereas the latter is a product. The text is produced while the work is consumed. According to poststructuralism, the author no longer owns or determines the meaning of his/her works; rather, he/she is an identity embodied in the structures of the text. In this article, he provided the most succinct available summaries of the poststructuralist theory of the

text, as it was developed by Barthes as well as Derrida, Kristeva and others.

In the first point or principle, Barthes assured that it is important to avoid saying that “the work is classic” as he believed that “there may be 'text' in a very ancient work, while many products of contemporary literature are in no way texts”(156). According to him the difference is this: “the work is a fragment of substance, occupying a part of the space of books (in a library for example); the Text is a methodological field” (157)

In the second point Barthes considered the ‘text’ as a ‘paradoxical’. In this sense he said: “In the same way, the Text does not stop at (good) Literature; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres. What constitutes the Text is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old classifications” (157). The third point of difference is that the ‘text’ can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign. The work closes on a signified. Fourthly, the ‘text’ is plural. He discussed this plurality when he stated:

Which is not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural. The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination (159).

In the fifth point, Barthes discussed the ‘conformity of the work to the author’. As a result, the author has been considered the father or the

owner of his works and literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the author's declared intentions. As for the 'text', it reads without the inscription of the 'Father'. Here again, the metaphor of the 'text' separates from that of the work: the latter refers to the image of an organism which grows by vital expansion. In the sixth principle, he stated that the 'text' requires that "one try to abolish (or at the very least to diminish) the distance between writing and reading, in no way by intensifying the projection of the reader into the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. His final approach to the 'text' was that of pleasure.

In fact, the word 'text' is not neologism, but it acquired a new meaning as it had been used to replace the word 'work'. Of course, the shift from 'work' to 'text' has its reasons. It may be due to some change in the entire critical climate. Or it may be caused by some individual, influential critics (such as Barthes and Foucault) who popularized their preferred terms. But we are not here to account for the reasons. We are here, instead, to explore the concept of the 'text' in its new context.

In an attempt to explore the notion of the 'text' and how it is different from 'work', C. H. Tung, in his book *The Scene of Textualization*, came to the conclusion that "the text is not necessarily restricted to a literary or artistic text. All things, great and small, can in fact be viewed as texts." But normally when we talk about the text, we refer to the structured pattern of words, that is, a discourse, or a linguistic/literary text, which can be oral or written, long or short. For a literary text, it does not stop at a sentence, as does a linguistic text. It usually refers to



a work or part of a work of some length. Furthermore, the literary text is not limited to its physical appearance of sound and shape. It denotes, too, the structure of sense that goes with the sound and shape.

How, then, is the text different from the work? In another book of his, *Imagination and the Process of Literary Creation* (1991), Tung has suggested that a work is to a text what a garment is to a piece of cloth. There are a number of implications in this analogical comparison. First, it implies that a work is always a text, but not vice versa (just as a garment is cloth, but a piece of cloth is not necessarily a garment). The second implication is: both the work and the text are indeed like fabrics. Just as clothes and cloth are both woven materials, so are the work and the text both woven with sound, shape, and sense. However, we have the third implication: although both the work and the text have their respective boundaries or demarcations, the boundary or demarcation of the work is more conspicuously fixed and seen than that of the text, just as the boundary or demarcation of a garment is more plainly fixed and perceived than a piece of cloth. And the final crowning implication is: the work is designed and used more consciously for ethical and aesthetic as well as practical purposes. Writers write works to teach and delight as well as to provide reading material. Similarly, tailors make clothes to appeal to our sense of decency and beauty in addition to providing us with a mass of warming material. In contrast, like a piece of cloth, the text is often thought of as a mere pattern of material waiting for further designing and utilization so that specific ethical and aesthetic purposes can be achieved in addition to its basic material use.

5. Two Kinds of ‘Text’

Roland Barthes referred to two kinds of text in terms of the extent to which they involve the reader: the 'readerly' (lisible) and the 'writerly' (scriptible). Texts of the readerly kind leave the reader “with no more than the poor freedom either to accept or reject the text” (cited in Hawkes 92): they treat the writer as producer and the reader as submissive consumer and suggest their 'reflection' of 'the real world'. Texts of the writerly kind invite the active participation of the reader, and also, in their attention to linguistic mediation, an involvement in the construction of reality.

He argued that most texts are readerly texts. Such texts are associated with classic texts that are presented in a familiar, linear, traditional manner, adhering to the status quo in style and content. Meaning is fixed and pre-determined so that the reader is a site merely to receive information. These texts attempt, through the use of standard representations and dominant signifying practices, to hide any elements that would open up the text to multiple meaning. Readerly texts support the commercialized values of the literary establishment and uphold the view of texts as disposable commodities.

By contrast, writerly texts reveal those elements that the readerly attempts to conceal. The reader, now in a position of control, takes an active role in the construction of meaning. The stable meaning, or metanarratives, of readerly texts is replaced by a proliferation of meanings and a disregard of narrative structure. The writerly text, Barthes denotes, “is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent*

language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed” (S/Z , 5).

There is a multiplicity of cultural and other ideological indicators (codes) for the reader to uncover. What Barthes describes as “ourselves writing” (S/Z , 5) is a self-conscious expression aware of the discrepancy between artifice and reality. The writerly text destabilizes the reader’s expectations. The reader approaches the text from an external position of subjectivity. By turning the reader into the writer, writerly texts defy the commercialization and commodification of literature.

6. ‘Text’ as a Centre for Different Schools in Modern Literary Theory

6.1. Formalism

Formalism, a text-based critical method, was developed by Victor Shklovsky, Vladinmir Propp, and other Russian literary critics in the early Twentieth Century. It involved a detailed inquiry about the plot structure, symbolic imagery, narrative perspective, and other literary techniques of literature. The Formalists, as traced by Eagleton, started out by seeing the literary work as a more or less arbitrary assemblage of 'devices', and only later came to see these devices as interrelated elements or 'functions' within a total textual system. 'Devices' included “sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques, in fact the whole stock of formal literary elements; and what all of these elements had in common was their 'estranging' or 'defamiliarizing' effect” (3).

After the mid-1930s, leaders of the Union Soviet of Socialist Republics and its subsequent satellites in Eastern Europe demanded that literature and textual analysis and literary criticism must directly serve their political objectives. Political leaders in those countries suppressed formalist criticism, calling it reactionary. Even such internationally influential opponents of extreme formalism as the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin and the Hungarian Georg Lukács would often find themselves under attack.

Formalism insisted that the best, and indeed the only, way to study literature was to study the text itself in close detail, and to disregard anything outside the text itself, including the author's biography, the historical context in which the work appeared, how it related to other works both before, during, and after its appearance, and how critics and readers responded to the text. They believed that art was autonomous: "a permanent, self-determining, continuous human activity which warranted nothing less than examination in and on its own terms" (Hawkes, 46). In short, this textual analysis and literary criticism assumed that a text is an isolated object, something to be studied in and of itself alone. This is the criticism that says what literature students ought to do is read the words on the page, and nothing else.

6.2. Structuralism

In the early 1940s, literary critic Barthes, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and other mid-century thinkers and scholars initiated French structuralism by applying linguistically inspired formal methods of literature and related phenomena. Structuralism attempted to

investigate the “structure” of a culture as a whole by “decoding” or “interpreting” its interactive systems of signs. They held the conception of language as a system which can be explored at a number of levels: “at the smallest level of the sign, at the level of the system of signs, or at the wider structural level, which is built on a framework of sign-systems” (Green, xix). These systems included literary texts and genres as well as other cultural formations, such as fashion, advertising, and taboos on certain forms of behavior.

Structuralism looks at the text as a key to understanding ideas and questions beyond the text itself. Rather than centering on the text alone, structuralists ask “big picture” questions: How are literary texts structured? How are they different from non-literary texts? How do literary texts affect readers and audiences? Is there such a thing as a specifically “literary” language, and if so, what is it like? How does literature relate to other aspects of a culture, such as politics, economics, philosophy, or gender relations? The readers, therefore, may know something of “the rules which literature follows (or breaks) and for recognizing to what extent those who write must yield to the literary system if they are to do so meaningfully” (Sturrock, 99). In his works *The Structure of the Artistic Text* (1970) and *The Analysis of the Poetic Text* (1972), Lotman sees the text as a stratified system in which meaning only exists contextually, governed by sets of similarities and oppositions. Differences and parallelisms in the text are themselves relative terms, and can only be perceived in relation to one another. Structuralists use the literary text as a kind of springboard to

ask questions that are not solely concerned with “the words on the page” (Eagleton, 27).

6.3. New Criticism

The text-based critical method of the formalist critics was accepted in the United States because they are parallel with the concerns of so called New Critics who focused on the overall structure and verbal texture of literary works, such as imagery, metaphor, and other qualities of a literary language apart from both historical setting and biographical information about the author. In the 1940s, when Russian linguist Roman Jakobson and Czech literary theorist René Wellek settled at the Harvard University and the Yale University, respectively, the study of literature in North America had been greatly influenced by the work of Cleanth Brooks and other New Critics. Like his British contemporary, Sir William Empson, Brooks applied the skill of close reading chiefly to the analysis of ironies, paradoxes, and ambiguities in individual texts.

New critics acknowledge that “the words on the page” are the basis for any analysis of any piece of literature – the raw material from which any ideas or argument must necessarily come. The ‘meaning’ of a text was to be found in the arrangement of the words of the text and not in other factors such as the reader’s psychology, the author’s intention or the historical context. The objectivity of the text is sanctioned by Wimsatt and Beardsley:

... it is clear that any literary criticism must assume general operations of reading: all critics must make decisions about what can be taken for granted, what must be explicitly argued for,

what will count as evidence for a particular interpretation and what would count as evidence against it. Indeed, the whole notion of bringing someone to see that a particular interpretation is a good one assumes shared points of departure and common notions of how to read. In short, far from appealing to ‘the text itself’ as a source of objectivity, one must assert that the notion of ‘what the text says’ itself depends upon common procedures of reading. (Cited in Green, 186)

But, the analysis rarely stops with close reading; that close reading shows us something, not only about the construction of the text, but about the author, the reader, the social context of the author, the social context of the reader, and about the methods of interpretation available to authors and readers.

6.4. Post-Structuralism

Unlike the New Critics who believed that an intelligent critic could identify the central ironies, paradoxes, and ambiguities of the text and could explain how the text ultimately resolved these without sacrificing its general theme, Jacques Derrida, the founding father of deconstruction, denied the objective existence of a text. Disavowing the basic assumption of New Criticism, Derrida and other post structural critics challenged the definitions and assumptions of reading and writing, and from a philosophical perspective, asked what it means to read and to write.

In an attempt to accentuate the radical change in the conception of the ‘text’ in the post-structural thought, M. H. Abrams has taken three

scholars in focus i.e. Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish and Harold Bloom. He argued that, by pressing to an extreme the tendencies of structuralism, these erudite, formidable, and influential innovators propose “a mode of reading which undermines not only the grounds of structuralism itself, but the possibility of understanding language as a medium of decidable meanings” (437). Though these theorists differ in essential respects, Abrams acknowledged, they share important features which are distinctive of current radicalism in interpretation. In each, the theory doesn't undertake simply to explain how we in fact read, but to propagate a new way of reading that subverts accepted interpretations and replaces them with unexpected alternatives. Each theory eventuates in a radical scepticism about our ability to achieve a correct interpretation, proposing instead that reading should free itself from illusory linguistic constraints in order to become liberated, creative, producing the meanings that it makes rather than discovers. And all three theories are suicidal; for as the theorist is aware, his views are self-reflexive, in that his subversive process destroys the possibility that a reader can interpret correctly either the expression of his theory or the textual interpretations to which it is applied. (Abrams, 437)

Poststructuralists confronted those who believed that the language of literature was somehow different from the language of science and everyday conversation. They assumed that the language of the text is not distinct from the language used to analyze it. In other words, the language used in textual analysis and literary criticism helps form and shape the text being analyzed and criticized. The text and the language cannot be separated, and the language helps create objective reality.

Believing that objective reality can be created by language, post structural critics assumed that all reality is a social construction, and from this point of view, they assumed that there is no objective reality. According to post structural critics, each culture has a dominant group who determines an ideology or hegemony. All people in a given culture are consciously and unconsciously asked to conform to the prescribed ideology or hegemony.

What happens when one's ideas, one's thinking and one's personal background do not conform? For the blacks living in Africa and the Americas, the traditional answer has been silence. Live quietly, work quietly, and think quietly. The message sent has been clear: conform and be quiet, deny yourself and everything will be well.

But, many have not been quiet. Alice Walker, Edward Said, Franz Fanon, Toni Morrison, Gayatri Spivak, Carlos Fuentes, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez had continued to challenge the dominant cultures. Defying the dominant culture, they believe that the ethics, values, and view of life of an individual do not matter. They did not believe with one culture, one perspective, and one interpretation of life.

Post-structuralism has three approaches: post colonialism, African-American criticism, and gender studies. Although each group has its own concern, all seek after the same thing: to be heard and to be understood as valuable members of society. Because, post structuralists believe that their past and future are intricately interwoven, they also

believe that by suppressing their past, their future is also suppressed. Often called subaltern writers, a term, used by Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist critic, which refers to the classes who are not in control of a culture's ideology or hegemony, they provide new ways to see and understand cultural forces in the text of literature.

6.5. New Historicism

The New Historicism has referred openly to an idea of culture as the context of the literary text since the beginning of the 1980s. Like systems theory, the New Criticism rejects the idea of the autonomous subject and an aura-like concept of the text; instead, it focuses on historical combinations of text and context. The text is seen as a historically singular yet integral part of a complex cultural context that consists of other, non-literary texts, of norms and values, social rituals and practices, institutions, and classes. Culture itself is seen here as a permanent process, as a transaction involving many different kinds of material, and, crucially, as a network of negotiations in which the literary text is always already embedded. It is precisely for this reason that it can come to represent a culture. This ability of a literary text to represent a culture in a particular historical configuration rests precisely on the fact that – so the supporters of the New Historicism suggest – history itself can be textualized by that very text, by its composition.

It is therefore the latter with which the specifically literary interest of the New Historicism is concerned. Culture in a particular historical form thus becomes the object of the study of literature. It is here, though, that the real problem of the New Historicism lies as far as

method is concerned. It is a problem of textualization, the problem of how we should conceive of and analyse this textualization on which the link between literary text and cultural context depends. The composition of the text must, after all, also be readable as a poetics of culture, as suggested by the famous chiasmus of Louis A. Montrose with its assertion of combined interest in the historicity of texts and the textuality of history (Jahraus. 221).

6.6. Reception Theory

At the close of his famous essay ‘The Death of the Author’ Roland Barthes states that ‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author’. Structuralism, though heavily text-centred, paved the way for the reintroduction of the reader as a site of critical interest because it focused on the systems which made meanings possible. If the text is a ‘tissue of quotations’, it is the reader who must process and ultimately realise its culture. But that reader, as many critics have seen, is difficult to define or to locate. For the structuralists, however, the reader was less a real entity than a function – a semiotic, idealised site where meaning ultimately resides. Barthes states: “We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes 1977, 147).

Reception theorists suggest that popular literature serves to perpetuate and produce naive readings: the reader collaborates with the text and

the text collaborates with the reader in the production of a self-fulfilling illusion. This is attained without complex aesthetic procedures. The semiotician Umberto Eco makes a distinction between open and closed texts in his work *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (1979). Eco stresses that ‘the reader as an active principal of interpretation is part of the picture of the generative process of the text’ (5). His theory of open and closed texts rests on the assumption of what he calls the ‘Model Reader’. He states:

To organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses. To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by the possible reader. The author has thus to foresee a model of the possible reader (hereafter Model Reader) supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author generatively deals with them. (7)

A Model Reader for closed text is described as follows:

In the process of communication, a text is frequently interpreted against the background of codes different from those intended by the author. Some authors do not take into account such a possibility. They have in mind an average addressee referred to a given social context. Nobody can say what happens when the actual reader is different from the ‘average’ one. Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers . . . are in fact open to any possible ‘aberrant decoding’. A text so immoderately ‘open’ to every possible interpretation will be called a closed one. (8)

7. Conclusion

The notion of the ‘text’ will remain at the center of the critical thought even with the rise of the ‘end-of-theory’ debate that has emerged within the Humanities since the beginning of the 21st century. The recommended remedy for this crisis in theoretical orientation, as suggested by many defenders of literary theory, is a back-to-basics return to close reading of the text, unhindered by those ideological filters that have been imposed on the reader by abstract and arbitrarily theoretical conceptualization.

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