Intertextuality and Ontology

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Let me propose the following theses:

1. The concept of intertextuality requires that we understand the concept of text not as a self-contained structure but as differential and historical. Texts are shaped not by an immanent time but by the play of divergent temporalities.

2. Texts are therefore not structures of presence but traces and tracings of otherness. They are shaped by the repetition and the transformation of other textual structures.

3. These absent textual structures at once constrain the text and are represented by and within it; they are at once preconditions and moments of the text.

4. The form of representation of intertextual structures ranges from the explicit to the implicit. In addition, these structures may be highly particular or highly general; they may be of the order of the message or of the order of the code. Texts are made out of cultural and ideological norms; out of the conventions of genre; out of styles and idioms embedded in the language; out of connotations and collocative sets; out of clichés, formulae, or proverbs; and out of other texts.

5. Jenny poses the problem of this disparity of forms of intertextual representation by asking whether one can properly speak of an intertextual relation to a genre. Such a relation is not strictly a relation to an intertext, and it would ‘mingle awkwardly structures which belong to the code and structures which belong to its realisation’. But he immediately concedes that it is not possible to make a rigid distinction between the levels of code and text: ‘Genre archetypes, however abstract, still constitute textual structures’,¹ and conversely reference to a text implicitly evokes reference to the set of potential meanings stored in the codes of a genre.

6. The process of intertextual reference is governed by the rules of the discursive formation within which it occurs. In the case of literary texts (and of readings of literary texts) the relation to the general discursive field is mediated by the structure of the literary system and by the authority of the literary canon.

7. The effect of this mediation is to effect a metonymic reduction of discursive to literary norms, and so to make possible the reflexive thematisation of the text’s relation to the structure of discursive authority. Since intertextuality may function
either as trace or as representation, this thematisation need not depend upon
conscious authorial intention.

8. The identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not
a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the
purposes of a reading. ‘There are no moments of authority and points of origin
except those which are retrospectively designated as origins and which, therefore,
can be shown to derive from the series for which they are constituted as origin.’
The prehistory of the text is not a given but is relative to an interpretive grid.

9. What is relevant to textual interpretation is not, in itself, the identification of a
particular intertextual source but the more general discursive structure (genre,
discursive formation, ideology) to which it belongs. This has implications for the
kind of knowledge we should expect to be relevant to the reading of texts. It
suggests that detailed scholarly information is less important than the ability to
reconstruct the cultural codes which are realised (and contested) in texts.

10. Intertextual analysis is distinguished from source criticism both by this stress
on interpretation rather than on the establishment of particular facts, and by its
rejection of a unilinear causality (the concept of ‘influence’) in favour of an
account of the work performed upon intertextual material and its functional
integration in the later text.

I take it that these theses give an account of the sort of range and force the concept of
intertextuality carries in its application to literary texts. But the concept has from the
beginning also had more radical implications. If, on the one hand, it has transformed the
unity and self-presence of the text into a structure marked by otherness and repetition, on
the other it has suggested that the exterior of the text is not a monolithic real but a system
(or an infinity) of other such textual structures. In its early elaboration by Kristeva,
Barthes and others it was not restricted to particular textual manifestations of signifying
systems but was used, rather, to designate the way in which a culture is structured as a
complex network of codes with heterogeneous and dispersed forms of textual realisation.
It formulated the codedness or textuality of what had previously been thought in non-
semiotic terms (consciousness, experience, wisdom, story, gender, culture, and so on).

The crucial step here is that from thinking intertextuality in relation to a cultural text to
thinking social structure as a whole through the metaphor of textuality. Insofar as the
‘real’ signified by literary (or any other) texts is a moment of a signifying process, and
indeed is only ever available to knowledge within and by means of a system of
representations, it has the form not of a final referent but of a link in an endless chain of
semiosis (a chain which may of course be broken for practical purposes and by means of
a particular pragmatic delimitation, but in which in principle the ‘last instance’ of
representation is always deferred). In this sense the ‘reality’ both of the ‘natural’ and the
social worlds is text-like in that it can be thought as a grid or a texture of significations,
an intrication of heterogeneous materials. Moreover, the metaphor of textuality makes it
possible, by overcoming the dichotomisation of the real to the symbolic, or the base to the superstructure, or the social to the cultural, to recognise the semiotic dimension of all moments of the social (to understand the economic in terms of the systemic assignment and circulation of value, and the political in terms of structures of representation; to recognise that the world of things is organised as a system of taxonomically distributed objects, and that the body and its gender are differential cultural constructs). Conversely, the metaphor makes it easier to recognise the material dimension of all signifying structures. Finally, there is a real gain in methodological economy in thinking textual signification in terms of intertextual reference rather than through an ontological distinction between the symbolic and a real which would be external to the symbolic order, a non-signifying terminus to the signifying process.

This is the force of Kristeva’s argument that ‘the transformational method . . . leads us to situate literary structure within the social whole considered as a textual whole’; and it is at times the force of Derrida’s important but difficult concept of the ‘general text’. Consider this passage from The Truth in Painting concerning the relation between the work and the parergonal frame: ‘With respect to the work which can serve as ground for it, [the frame] merges into the wall, and then, gradually, into the general text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands out against the general background.’ A few lines previously the parerga were said to be separated, successively, not only from the work, the ergon, ‘but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which the statue or column is erected, then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription in which the drive to signature is produced’. It is clear from the appositional form of these two passages that the general text is designated as equivalent to the ‘field of historical, economic, political inscription’, and that it is thus used in the sense of a social text.

At other times, however, the concept of the general text is posited within an immediately problematised opposition to some other domain of being. In this passage from Positions, for example:

What is perhaps in the process of being reconsidered, is the form of closure that was called ‘ideology’ (doubtless a concept to be analysed in its function, its history, its origins, its transformations), the form of the relationships between a transformed concept of ‘infrastructure’, if you will – an ‘infrastructure’ of which the general text would no longer be an effect or a reflection – and the transformed concept of ‘ideology’. If what is in question in this work is a new definition of the relationship of a determined text or signifying chain to its exterior, to its referential effects, etc. . . . to ‘reality’ (history, class struggle, relationships of production, etc.), then we can no longer restrict ourselves to prior delimitations, nor even to the prior concept of a regional delimitation. What is produced in the current trembling is a reevaluation of the relationship between the general text and what was believed to be, in the form of reality (history, politics, economics, sexuality, etc.), the simple, referable exterior of language or writing, the belief that this exterior could operate from the simple position of cause or accident.
For all its complication of causal relations, this passage continues to rely upon a distinction between the textual and the non-textual; the ‘general text’ here would be the endless series of relations between signifier and signified which, while never finally ‘referring’ to a sheer non-textuality, is nevertheless other than this complex ‘exterior’. In this sense the general text is both the structure of textuality itself (that is, a structure of indefinitely postponed presence, the differential, deferred, purely relational structure of signification) and that edge or margin of textuality (its frame, its ‘context’, its institutional space) which problematises its self-containedness, opens it out constantly to an ‘outside’ which is never properly external to it.

Derrida’s most extended meditation on the generalisation of the concept of text is to be found in a long passage in ‘Living On’. It begins by arguing that ‘if we are to approach a text it must have an edge’, but then proceeds to focus on the increasingly problematic nature of ‘all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e., the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth’. As a result, the concept of text undergoes a kind of reversal:

What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [débordement] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a ‘text’, of what I still call a ‘text’, for strategic reasons, in part – a ‘text’ that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) – all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference – to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth).

This is the movement of generalisation, of the replacement of the limited notion of text by that of the general text – not a limitless text but a principle of textuality that subverts the edges between inside and outside, symbolic and real, signification and reference. But in a final movement Derrida then tries to qualify this generalisation, to set limits to the textualisation of the world, or rather to a perception that the questioning of limits is equivalent to an abolition of all differences and demarcations:

Whatever the (demonstrated) necessity of such an overrun, such a débordement, it still will have come as a shock, producing endless efforts to dam up, resist, rebuild the old partitions, to blame what could no longer be thought without confusion, to blame difference as wrongful confusion! All this [this resistance, i.e.] has taken place in non-reading, with no work on what was thus being demonstrated, with no realisation that it was never our wish to extend the
reassuring notion of the text to a whole extra-textual realm and to transform the world into a library by doing away with all boundaries, all framework, all sharp edges (all arêtes: this is the word that I am speaking tonight), but that we sought rather to work out the theoretical and practical system of these margins, these borders, once more, from the ground up.

The double movement of this text involves a simultaneous textualisation of the real and recognition of the limits of textuality; and it is the incompatibility or undecidability between these two moments that is governed by the problematic of the edge, the margin, the limit. As Gasché argues, the generalisation of the text (what Derrida elsewhere calls its ‘necessary generalization . . . its extension with no simple exterior limit (which also supposes the passage through metaphysical opposition)’, Positions, p. 66) does not mean the construction of a new, more diffuse totality; the general text ‘has no inside or outside’ because ‘it is no longer a totality’. Indeed, the general text ‘is rather [the] border itself, from which the assignment of insides and outsides takes place, as well as where this distinction ultimately collapses’. The generalisation of textuality ‘is not an extension or application of the traditional concept of text to its traditional outside’, 7 and it does not imply ‘a “theology of the text”’. 8

It seems, nevertheless, that just because of this problematisation of the border, the question of the extension of the text is finally left open. Moreover, it seems to be the case that the status of the extra- or non-textual in Derrida has essentially to do with the problem of reference rather than with questions of the determination or conditions of existence of textuality. But it is precisely the question of determinacy that comes to the fore in any politically interested concern with the extension of the textual metaphor to a generalised intertextuality. The problem is this: while a number of previously intractable theoretical difficulties about the structure of the social and its relation to the symbolic order are solved by the refusal of an ontological difference between moments of the social (between culture and the economic last instance or bottom line, for example), this move nevertheless begs the question of the forms of constraint and determination which operate between a plurality of instances of the social – forms of structural pressure which can no longer be deduced from ontological qualities (such as ‘materiality’).

The most influential attempt in recent years to develop a non-ontological model of the social, and of a correspondingly complex social causality, has been the cluster of metaphors of the social structure elaborated by Althusser. Like the dispersed and de-centred structure of the text, the non-totalised social whole is made up of disparate temporalities, and its specific form is one ‘in which different structural levels of temporality interfere, because of the peculiar relations of correspondence, non-correspondence, articulation, dislocation and torsion which obtain, between the different “levels” of the whole in accordance with its general structure’. 9 The term ‘structuration in dominance’, borrowed from poetics, is used to describe a causal determination which is entirely constituted by the particular and contingent contradictions for which it is the precondition. In the same way, the concept of overdetermination theorises a relation between the general contradiction between the forces and the relations of production, and the conditions of existence of this contradiction, the so-called superstructures: ‘it is
radically affected by them, determining, but also determined in one and the same movement, and determined by the various levels and instances of the social formation it animates. And the concept of structural causality represents an attempt to think a form of determination which is immanent in its effects – that is, which does not depend upon an external and originary principle of determination, nor upon the epiphenomenality of the effects.\footnote{11}

In a discussion of Althusser’s work, Laclau and Mouffe argue that it represents a radical attempt to think the social in semiotic, and hence in non-essentialist, terms:

The symbolic – i.e., overdetermined – character of social relations … implies that they lack an ultimate literality which would reduce them to necessary moments of an immanent law. There are not two planes, one of essences and the other of appearances, since there is no possibility of fixing an ultimate literal sense for which the symbolic would be a second and derived plane of signification. Society and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the relative and precarious forms of fixation which accompany the establishment of a certain order.\footnote{12}

Laclau and Mouffe find, nevertheless, that the concept of overdetermination is limited by Althusser’s retention of the concept of ‘determination in the last instance’ by the economic - even though this last instance ‘never comes’ (\textit{For Marx}, p. 113). Their own recent work attempts quite explicitly to provide a semiotic and non-reductive account of the social.

The key terms in this project are articulation and discourse. Articulation is defined as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse’ (\textit{HSS}, p. 105). Discourse is coextensive with the social, and is not opposed to a non-discursive realm. As in Foucault, it is a complex of linguistic and extra-linguistic acts and entities, but the paradoxical effect of this ontological impurity is not to emphasise but precisely to defuse questions of causal priority. Thus ‘the practice of articulation, as fixation/dislocation of a system of differences, cannot consist of purely linguistic phenomena; but must instead pierce the entire material density of the multifarious institutions, rituals and practices through which a discursive formation is structured’ (\textit{HSS}, p. 109). Economic practice, for example, is to be thought of as discursive.\footnote{13}

When this is spelled out in detail, however, the latent ambiguity (or rather the latent lack of ambiguity) of the concept becomes apparent: in explaining the discursive structure of economic practice Laclau and Mouffe argue that ‘today we can see that the space which traditional Marxism designated “the economy” is in fact the terrain of a proliferation of discourses’ (technical discourses, discourses of authority, of accountancy, of information).\footnote{14} The difficulty here is that the term ‘discourses’ retains its traditional sense of \textit{languages}; and this suggests the difficulty of not reintroducing an opposition between
the textual and the non-textual, or the linguistic and the non-linguistic, when the concept of discourse is extended to account for social practices in general.

The counterpart to this problem is the tendency of any such monistically deployed concept to indifferentiation. Let me give a couple of examples. One concerns the status of the ‘exterior’ of discourse:

With this ‘exterior’ we are not reintroducing the category of the extra-discursive. The exterior is constituted by other discourses. It is the discursive nature of this exterior which creates the conditions of vulnerability of every discourse, as nothing finally protects it against the deformation and destabilisation of its system of differences by other discursive articulations which act from outside it. (HSS, p. 146, n. 20).

The question this raises is how far this conflictual relation to other discourses is capable of accounting for the ‘shape’ of any one discourse, for its specificity, and for the limits of its construction of reality; it is a question, that is to say, as to whether a model of discursive conflict can account adequately for the manifold pressures that act upon discourse. The second example again raises questions of discursive finitude:

It is not the poverty of signifieds but, on the contrary, polysemy that disarticulates a discursive structure. That is what establishes the overdetermined, symbolic dimension of every social identity. Society never manages to be identical to itself, as every nodal point is constituted within an intertextuality that overflows it. The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity. (HSS, p. 113).

The appropriate counter to this argument would, I think, be Foucault’s contention that discourse is characterised by its rarity: that it is an object of social struggle. Here too Laclau and Mouffe’s concern with fluidity and with the interpenetration of discourses leads them to disregard the structural and economic (rather than semantic) constraints on this ‘infinitude’. My third example, finally, involves their separation of the concept of hegemony from any necessary connection to a hegemonic class (see HSS, pp. 134-8). To tie hegemony to the shifting and apparently indeterminate play of subject positions (which are themselves the consequence of discursive structures) is to misunderstand the play of stabilisation and destabilisation within the field of force of the social. Geras, in a hostile and often uncomprehending review, nevertheless identifies the major weakness in Laclau and Mouffe’s discursive metaphor. It is the problem of how to model determinacy within this account of hegemonic articulation (for example, of how to integrate material resources, institutional structures, and so on) – or else, asks Geras, ‘must we just assume that openness and indeterminacy of the social mean, here, such a free play of discourses and articulatory practices that any number of outcomes is always possible, so that no particular outcome, no specificity, can be understood or explained?’
I have discussed Laclau and Mouffe’s work at some length because it seems to me one of the most interesting contemporary elaborations of the implications of the concept of intertextuality (although they are not directly indebted to the literary uses of the concept). Their extension of the concepts of text and discourse to the field of the social ultimately begs the question of what it is that conditions the textual - that is, the question of the conditions of existence of textuality. They are in fact quite explicit about the impossibility of this question: ‘If the being – as distinct from existence – of any object is constituted within a discourse, it is not possible to differentiate the discursive, in terms of being, from any other area of reality’, and ‘If the discursive is coterminous with the being of objects – the horizon therefore, of the constitution of the being of every object – the question about the conditions of possibility of the being of discourse is meaningless’.16

This indifferentiation of the concept of a generalised intertextuality can be resolved only by rethinking textuality in terms of its intrication in asymmetrical and unequal relations of force which would not, however, be simply external to the textual. This might mean positing different modes of textuality and textual functioning, or postulating an endless series of structural constraints, each level of which would in its turn be able to be thought as textual in form and susceptible to further constraint; or it might mean abandoning the concept of textuality for that of discourse, in the Foucauldian sense of an ontologically impure mix of textual structures, practices, institutional sites, and rules of application. But whilst these responses might be more appropriate in theoretical terms, it may be that for strategic and heuristic purposes it is not possible ever finally to move beyond that model of ontological difference which has traditionally been used to think the limits on textuality. In the same way, whilst epistemological questions about the limits of knowledge can be resolved adequately in terms of contradictions between discursive domains and the grids of understanding they carry with them, and whilst scientific practice (for example) works largely in terms of the construction of objects of knowledge, it may nevertheless be the case that for ordinary purposes we will continue to understand the production of knowledge in terms of the hard resistance to discourse of an ontologically distinct domain of factuality.

The consequence of this for literary study is perhaps a caution about the need to work according to two different sets of rules. On the one hand there is a need to work rigorously with the concept of intertextuality in such a way as to break down the limits between the textual and an apparently external and non-textual (‘contextual’) domain. On the other there is the need to be constantly suspicious about the extent to which broad domains of social being can thus be incorporated within the single conceptual domain of textuality – and about how any such incorporation allows us not to attend to the hard resistance of other and disparate domains of discourse.


16 Laclau and Mouffe, ‘Post-Marxism Without Apologies’, p. 86.
Author/s:
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Title:
Intertextuality and ontology

Date:
1990

Citation:

Publication Status:
Published

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/35082

File Description:
Intertextuality and ontology

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