Intertextuality as a Comparatist's Tool

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Abstract

Comparative Literature as a 'nation-state paradigm' is under conceptual pressure in the present day context of Transnationalism. If it should survive as a discipline, there is an imperative need to broaden its conceptual framework and retool the discipline. This paper argues and also demonstrates that Intertextuality, specifically, 'Accidental Intertextuality,' can be a good tool for a comparatist.

Keywords: Accidental Intertextuality, Dialectical Pattern, Judaeo-Christian Allegory, The Absurd, Thematology

1. Introduction

This paper is divided into three parts. Part I deals with the theoretical background to Intertextuality and its particular relevance to Comparative Literature. Part II focuses on a survey of interpretations on Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* and offers, in its turn, a new perception of the work. Part III, the last part, presents an intertextual study of Beckett's play with John Milton's *Paradise Lost* [27] and Timothy Findley's *Not Wanted on the Voyage* - all three forming the intertext.

2. Intertextuality Defined

The term "intertextuality", Julia Kristeva's coinage [25], has come to have almost as many meanings as users. To start with, however, one needs to have a working definition of the term. Intertextuality, as defined by Dictionary.com, is "the interrelationship between texts, especially works of literature; the way that similar or related texts influence, reflect, or differ from each other. In other words, "intertextuality is the shaping of a text's meaning by another text.

Intertextual figures include: allusion, quotation, calque, plagiarism, translation, pastiche and parody. Intertextuality may be explored between two (or more) texts or regarded as a production within a given text. It may be an author's borrowing and transformation of a prior text or a reader's referencing of one text in reading another" [19]. It is the latter conception – intertextuality as a reader's intervention – that this paper focuses on.

3. Fitzsimmons' Taxonomy of Intertextuality

Intertextuality, according to Fitzsimmons, can be of three types: "obligatory, optional and accidental. These variations depend on two key factors: the intention of the writer and the significance of the reference" [15]. William Blake, for example, intentionally alludes to biblical themes and uses biblical register in his works. Again his references to 'lamb' are a case in point. The distinctions between these types are not absolute and exclusive and they may co-exist within a given text. The first two categories, optional and obligatory, overlap Comparative Literature,

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though signified by different terms and of course governed by the 'nation-state paradigm,' a framework with its geopolitical, mono-ethnic and mono-cultural parameters. Specifically, Obligatory Intertextuality is similar to 'Influence Study'; and Optional intertextuality may overlap 'Influence Study' and or 'Thematology.' It is the third type, 'Accidental Intertextuality,' which seems to lie outside the scope of traditional Comparative Literature. It is, however, an analytical tool that a comparatist currently needs to be able to cope with 'literature without borders,' as envisioned by Gayatri Spivak [33]. Now, what follows is a brief, expository note on all three types of intertextuality.

3.1 Obligatory Intertextuality

Fitzsimmons states: "Obligatory intertextuality is when the writer deliberately invokes a comparison or association between two (or more) texts. Without this pre-understanding or success to 'grasp the link', the reader's understanding of the text is regarded as inadequate" [15]. "Obligatory intertextuality relies on the reading or understanding of a prior *hypotext*, before full comprehension of the *hypertext* can be achieved" [20].

According to Comhrink,

To understand the specific context and characterization within Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, one must first be familiar with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is in *Hamlet* we first meet these characters as minor characters and, as the *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* plot unravels, specific scenes from Hamlet are actually performed and viewed from a different perspective. This understanding of the hypotext *Hamlet*, gives deeper meaning to the pretext as many of the implicit themes from Stoppard's play are more recognizable in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* [10].

3.2 Optional Intertextuality

Fitzsimmons says:

Optional intertextuality has a less vital impact on the significance of the hypertext. It is a possible, but not essential, intertextual relationship. The connection, if recognized, will slightly shift the understanding of the text Optional Intertextuality means it is possible to find a connection to multiple texts of a single [motif or] phrase or no connection at all. The intent of the writer, when using optional intertextuality, is perhaps to pay homage to the 'original' writers, or to reward those who have read the hypotext. However, the reading of this hypotext is not necessary to the understanding of the hypertext [15].

Keller observes:

The use of optional intertextuality may be something as simple as parallel plotlines or similarity of characters. For example, J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series shares many similarities with J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. They both apply the use of an aging wizard mentor (Professor Dumbledore and Gandalf) and a key friendship group is formed to assist the protagonist (an innocent young boy) on their arduous quest to defeat a powerful wizard and to destroy a powerful being. [21]

This connection is interesting and Rowling was most likely influenced by other fictional and fantasy novels. However, this link is not vital to the understanding of the *Harry Potter* novels.

3.3 Accidental Intertextuality

"Accidental intertextuality is when readers often connect a text with another text, cultural practice or a personal experience, without there being any tangible anchor-point within the original text" [15]. According to Wöhrle, "The writer has no intention of making an intertextual reference and it is completely upon the reader's own prior knowledge that these connections are made. Often when reading a book or viewing a film, a memory will be triggered in the viewers' mind" [34]. "For example, when reading Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, a reader could draw deep connections to the biblical story of Jonah and the Whale, simply from the mention of a man and a whale" [19]. Whilst it was not probably Melville's intention to create these links, the readers have made these connections themselves. In this context, Roland Barthes' observation – quoted below – seems to be particularly relevant: "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up the writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination…" [4]. This stance would certainly militate particularly against the traditional comparatist conception of authorial hegemony. Barthes' re-definition of the role of the reader, coupled together with Spivak's conception of 'literature without borders,' will make for eclecticism in comparative literature. The chief benefits of this eclecticism are that Comparative Literature, as a discipline will be more resilient and thus more viable and that the comparatist would feel empowered to explore 'fresh Woods and Pastures new,' to borrow a phrase from Milton.

4. An Introductory Note on Godot

Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is voted "the most significant English language play of the 20th century." In this

absurdist play, as is well known, two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, wait indefinitely for the arrival of someone named Godot. In the mean time, to hold the terrible silence at bay, they eat, sleep, talk, argue, sing, play games, exercise, swap hats and even contemplate suicide[5]! The play thus illustrates an attitude toward human experience on earth: oppression, corruption, hope, and bewilderment of human experience that can perhaps be reconciled only in the mind and art of the absurdist. The play examines questions such as death, the meaning of human existence and the place of God or His absence in life. Incidentally, there are – reportedly – small differences between the French original (titled *En attendant Godot*) and its English translation (done by Beckett himself). These differences, significant as they may be, do not concern the topic in hand.

5. Selected Interpretations

The play has led to many interpretations since its introduction in 1953: comparative, political, philosophical, psychological, religious, etc. Now let us have a quick look at some of them.

5.1 Comparative Studies

There are of course a number of comparative studies available on *Godot*, as the following survey indicates. For instance, there are influence studies. A major source of influence on *Godot* is said to be Racine, the 17th century (French) playwright. In Racine's play *Bérénice* two characters talk at length to one another and nothing happens for five acts. Beckett was an avid scholar of Racine and lectured on him during his time at Trinity. "Essential to the static quality of a Racine play is the pairing of characters to talk at length to each other." The other influences are Balzac and Sartre [11]. Similarly, Gujarati playwright Labhshankar Thakar, together with Subhash Shah, wrote a play titled *Ek Undar ane Jadunath*, based on Godot, in 1966 [26].

There is also an instance of Negative Influence: Turkish playwright Ferhan Şensoy's play *Güle Güle Godot* (*Bye Bye Godot*) tells about the people of an unnamed country where there is a big problem of water and there is a mis-governor named Godot. The people of the country are waiting for Godot to leave, because they desire to have a country where they are able to select their own governor.

Parallel Study—an example: Hunter has compared *Godot* – thematically and stylistically – with Tom Stoppard's play, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Parallels include two central characters who – at times – appear to be aspects of a single character, and whose lives are dependent on outside forces over which they have little control. There are also plot parallels, the act [or motif] of waiting as a significant element of the play; during the waiting: the characters pass time [as noted earlier] by plying questions, impersonating other characters, at times repeatedly interrupting each other while at other times remaining silent for long periods [18]. Again, according to Bryden, the play "exploits several archetypal forms and situations, all of which lend themselves to both comedy and pathos" [9]. Again, as a matter of comparison, there are significant similarities between *Godot* and Beckett's later play *Endgame*: For instance, waiting as a motif is common to both. In *Endgame*, Hamm waits for the end[6], but in *Godot*, Vladimir and Estragon wait for the start (arguably) of the millennium.

5.2 Other Interpretations

Other interpretations are aplenty. It is seen, for instance, as a political allegory of the Cold War by Peter Hall [16] and as a metaphor for Ireland's view of mainland Britain by Graham Hassell [17]. Bernard Dukore equates Didi, Gogo and (the absent) Godot with the Freudian Ego, Id and Superego respectively [32]. Similarly, the four chief characters in the play are considered archetypal: Lucky and Pozzo as the Jungian shadow and ego and Vladimir and Estragon as the animus and anima [32]. Boxall, on the other hand, would look upon Vladimir and Estragon's relationship as quasi-marital [8]. For the characters, as noted earlier, bicker, embrace each other and depend upon each other. Blair, for his part, considers the play as a metaphor for Beckett's long walk, with his partner Suzanne, into Rousillion [2]. It is also suggested – not pursued – that the play could be a Christian allegory, where the solitary tree is representative of the Cross or Godot of God [11].

6. *Godot* as an Absurd Play

Beckett's *Godot,* like much of his work, is often considered to be part of the *Theatre of the Absurd*, a form of theatre which stemmed from the Absurdist philosophy of Albert Camus. Absurdist philosophy claims that humankind, particularly in the contemporary world, is doomed to be faced with *the Absurd,* being incapable of seeing meaning that may be inherent in life. Absurdism, derives, in turn, from Kierkegaardian existentialism and posits that, while inherent meaning might very well exist in the universe, human beings are incapable of finding it due to some kind of mental limitation [22]. Therefore, humanity is doomed to be faced with *the Absurd*, or the absolute absurdity of existence. Vladimir and Estragon typify this kind of existence.

This kind of interpretation reportedly stemmed from the work of Martin Esslin, specifically from his *The Theatre of the Absurd* and *An Anatomy of Drama* [3].

But such an interpretation is the result of a truncated view of 'the Absurd' and as such severely "limiting and narrow." For, none of these writers, Beckett, Kierkegaard, Camus, Ionesco or even Esslin, would subscribe to this view. Kierkegaard does of course insist that we must embrace the absurd, as life is meaningless. But, as he would hasten to add, it is up to anyone to find meaning in it through authentic living [22]. Camus, for his part, urges 'perseverance' in the face of absurdity. Martin Esslin himelf, in his introduction to *Absurd Drama*, sounds clearly positive in his interpretation: "The Theatre of the Absurd attacks the comfortable certainties of religious or political orthodoxy. It aims to shock its audience out of complacency, to bring it face to face with the harsh facts of the human situation, as these writers see it. But the challenge behind this message is anything but one of despair. It is a challenge to accept the human condition as it is, in all its mystery and absurdity, and to bear it with dignity, nobly, responsibly [unlike as Vladimir and Estragon did]; precisely because there are no easy solutions to the mysteries of existence, because ultimately man is alone in a meaningless world. The shedding of easy solutions, of comforting illusions, may be painful, but it leaves behind it a sense of freedom and relief. And that is why, in the last resort, the Theatre of the Absurd does not provoke tears of despair but the laughter of liberation" [13].

Moreover, from a conceptual angle, Existentialism (which stems from Stoicism) forms the basis of the Absurd, deals with larger issues like 'Dread' or the 'Absurd,' which Empiricism or Rationalism cannot possibly cope with. Existentialists, philosophers or playwrights, do suggest the possibility of a solution, as noted earlier. But they do not spell out any methodology or algorithm, whereas Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology (which blends with Existentialism) actually does [24]. That is to say that it is possible, through phenomenological 'reduction,' to radically change a perceiver's (*noesis*) attitude to a phenomenon (*noema*). Put simply, 'detached reflection' in silence does it [1]. So, the Absurd may be construed as pointing to contemplative silence for phenomenological 'reduction' to take place, for meaningfulness or solution to configure in the mind.

Now, in the light of this construal, one may perhaps understand the significance of the play's subtitle (though in English only): "a tragicomedy in two acts". Tragicomedy is a literary genre that blends aspects of both tragic and comic forms. Most often used in dramatic literature, the term can variously describe either a tragic play which contains enough comic elements to lighten the overall mood or, often, a serious play with a happy ending. *Godot* is a tragicomedy in both senses of the term. That is, there are comic elements in the play and the work also suggests – not depicts – a happy ending, a resolution of the conflict. The purpose of the play, then, is only to alert the audience to pursue the opposite of what the characters intend or try to do on the stage. Taken in this sense, the play seems to negate belief only to affirm it eventually.

7. A Comparative Note on the Absurd

A comparative note on the Absurd may serve to underpin the above claim that the play is after all a synthesis of unbelief and belief. The absurd as a phenomenon is not – but is often made out to be – particularly recent/contemporary or purely Western. It is, as comparatists may know, actually universal and there are countless instances across human history as also in World Literature. For example, Indian Prince Siddhartha (before he became Buddha), King Bhartrhari (before he became a philosopher), Sophocles' King Oedipus (before he became a visionary)—all were faced with the Absurd in life. Prince Siddhartha discovered much to his horror and for the first time in his 29 years of life, that suffering was a stark reality of life. King Bhartrhari (brother and predecessor to King Vikramāditya) discovered that his beloved Queen was unfaithful and, more importantly, that fidelity was probably a myth. King Oedipus discovered that he was a victim of fate. Viktor Frankl, one of the founders of the school of Humanistic Psychology, faced the Nazi Holocaust earlier in his life and as a result became a psychologist and counsellor. That is to say that they all surely learnt to cope with the Absurd in their several different ways. Similarly, Matthew Arnold was confronted with the Absurd in the wake of the Darwinian discovery that Amoeba – not Adam – was the first organism created. He could see Faith receding with the advancement of Science. So, recoiling in horror, he universalized the experience in these famous lines:

> "Sophocles long ago
> Heard it on the Ægean, and it brought
> Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
> Of human misery; we
> Find also in the sound a thought,
> Hearing it by this distant northern sea [12]."

8. *Godot* as a Judaeo-Christian Allegory

What, however, has not yet been touched upon is another aspect of the play—*Godot* as a Judaeo-Christian Allegory. To explain, Vladimir and Estragon's perpetual waiting can be taken to be emblematic of a common Judaeo-Christian predicament, waiting almost endlessly for the millennium to come. The millennium, it is prophesied, will be ushered in by the coming of the Judaic Messiah or by Christ's Second Coming. Taken in this sense, then, *Godot* is surely a religious allegory—in a broader sense, though. The play, then, seems to enact the frustration accrued in the minds of millions and millions, generation after generation, as a result of endless waiting. Thus the play depicts a highly serious and perpetually absurd situation, worsened by the fact that all those concerned, Jewish or Gentile, believe to be born only once, unlike the Hindus, who believe to be born again and again. This is but a simple interpretation, probably simplistic! It may, however, sound plausible particularly in the light of Beckett's own cryptic remark on "endless interpretations" of his play: "Why people have to complicate a thing so simple I can't make out" [23].

9. International Analysis - An Introductory Note

Now, it must be demonstrated how 'accidental intertextuality' can work in and around *Godot*. Specifically, as made clear at the outset, this part is a study of the intertextual relationship, as it is perceived, between Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* and two other texts, viz. Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* and Timothy Findley's novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage*. In terms of origin, *Godot* is originally French, Milton's *Paradise Lost* (anachronistically) British and Findley's novel actually Canadian. In this study, the three texts are considered synchronically, ignoring (that is) the chronology, which does not matter in this intertextual context. To put it in thematological terms, Milton's motif (or trope) is affirmation of faith, Findley's is negation and Beckett's is negation-affirmation. Thus the three texts seem to form a dialectical pattern: Milton's epic forming the *thesis,* Findley's novel signifying the *antithesis* and Beckett's play offering the *synthesis.* Now to the evidence and explanation.

10. Milton's *Thesis*

The poem, as is well known, concerns the Biblical story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by the fallen angel Satan and their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. In *Paradise Lost*, at the very outset, Milton makes his motif and tone clear:

> "I may assert eternal providence,
> And justifie the ways of God to men [27]."

Milton's work, with its affirmative motif, thus forms the 'thesis' in the dialectical pattern.

11. Findley's *Antithesis*

Findley's novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage* [14] forms part of the intertext. The novel is Findley's antithetical version of the biblical 'flood' and Noah's Ark (*Genesis*). Findley, at the very outset, takes his antithetical swerve. He, as the omniscient narrator, quotes the Bible, only to dismiss the biblical account summarily:

> "And Noah went in, and his sons,
> And his wife, and his sons' wives
> With him into the ark, because
> Of the waters of the flood…"

Genesis 7: 7

"Everyone knows," Findley comments, "it wasn't like that…they make it sound as if there wasn't any argument: as if there wasn't any panic…there wasn't any dread… well, it wasn't an excursion. It was the end of the world" [14].

Later in the novel, Noah's wife, nicknamed 'Mrs. Noyes', looks round at all the animal wreckage in the yard, rainblown and scavenged, and yells: "… Who the hell you pray to, I wonder, when you want to live and there isn't any God?…Maybe we should pray to each other" [14].

Here is evidence of Findley's sustained rage even after finishing the novel:

"…You know," says he in an interview nearly two decades later, "the anger, and the fury and the rage. When I finished *Not Wanted on the Voyage,* I sat in my kitchen feeling very bleak, but basically I felt rage…" [28]. This novel, then, constitutes the exact antithesis of Milton's epic poem and fits in with the dialectical pattern.

12. Beckett's Synthesis

Paradoxically, Beckett's work or text (if you like), as noted earlier, has a portmanteau motif of negation-affirmation, which may be construed as a *synthesis* of Milton's affirmation and Findley's negation. My thesis here rests on my paradoxical perception of *Godot* (discussed earlier in Part II), which of course militates against the popular

view that the play focuses (only) on the failure of Human to overcome "absurdity," as observed by Knowlson in his book *Damned to Fame* [23]. Knowlson also adds that Beckett's work focuses "on poverty, failure, exile and loss — as he put it, on man as a 'non-knower' and as a 'non-can-er' [23]. But neither the Absurdist notion nor its existentialist source would admit of such a truncated view. That is because, according to these theories, meaning is not there in life or a life situation. Meaning is supposedly attributed to or found in life by the 'authentic self.' Meaning, according to Kierkegaard, is a lived experience [22]. Beckett's *Godot*, then, would elegantly fit into the dialectical pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. But, to reiterate, the play tends to suggest – to not express or enact – a solution.

13. Scope and Limitations

As for the scope, the same intertext may be considered in the light of Harold Bloom's poetics [7]. To explain, belief may be considered as a (Bloomian) *trope* and the intertext as made up of three different 'misreadings' of the trope by the three authors in question, as is often done in similar cases [30]. But that would be an entirely different interface and is likely to take the comparatist far beyond the scope of Comparative Literature.

As for the limitations, I could not, in this paper, do justice to the exposition of intertextuality, whose reach and range is far and wide, sometimes beyond literary texts. It may, for example, take a reader into various domains such as Philosophy, Psychology, Linguistics, etc., especially in the case of postmodern texts [31]. Again, from my discussion here on Existentialism and Phenomenology, it may appear as though Existentialism or Phenomenology is something monolithic or originated from a single source. There are – as we all know – several existentialists and several phenomenologists, some of them radically different from or violently opposed to each other. But, for want of space and reasons of scope, I had to focus on the prime sources. For the same reason, I had to dilute the discussion on Existentialism vis-à-vis Phenomenology, with the result that this section of the paper may look sketchy and sound simplistic.

14. Conclusion

Now, in conclusion, I would like to emphasize just three points:

- Intertextuality, as is demonstrated in this paper, turns on comparison—necessarily because comparison, like reasoning or memory, is a basic cognitive function.

Comparison, comparatively speaking, is also a central epistemological category in Indian Pramānā Theory, known as *upamāna,* which of course stands for both comparison and analogy [29]. Intertextuality, therefore, ought to be added to a comparatist's toolkit without any reservations.

- Traditional comparative framework will not readily accommodate the intertextual intervention. Nor can it, it must be noted, survive as an academic discipline, in the present day context of 'Transnationalism,' without this intervention or a similar kind of retooling from time to time.

- When all is said and done, admittedly, there is no rigorous theory or algorithm of intertextual analysis, nor can possibly be. In any case, every reader has the freedom to exercise his or her own freedom of perception. Even as there is freedom, there is the responsibility (of presenting a plausible, coherent account), hence the existential *angst*!

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