



---

Intertextuality vs. Hypertextuality

Author(s): Michael Riffaterre

Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 25th Anniversary Issue (Part 2) (Autumn, 1994), pp. 779-788

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/469373>

Accessed: 22/02/2014 08:00

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *New Literary History*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# Intertextuality vs. Hypertextuality

Michael Riffaterre

THE INSTITUTIONS OF INTERPRETATION have remained largely unchanged since Aristotle, with one exception. Born almost unnoticed initially in the backyard of the humanities, first mistakenly seen as a mere improvement in the techniques of inquiry available to literary scholars, computer programming evolved almost overnight from a system of information retrieval to one of real analysis, to one capable of producing first critical discourse and later creative writing. This last avatar is the significant one, the first break with traditional humanism, the first instance in the history of hermeneutics of a radical revision of the traditional passive role of the readers, and, as a result, the first time when the epistemology of interpretation must consider giving equal rights to readers and to the text alike.

In short, a computer revolution became the symbol as well as the means of a revolution in the concept of literature itself by replacing the reactive reading process with an interactive one. It was one of the merits of Ralph Cohen to have heralded this change back in 1989 with the *New Literary History* issue subtitled "Technology, Models, and Literary Study." With so sudden a shift in the aims of literary computing came an equally sudden leap from pessimism or plain prudence to an assertive and even conquering attitude. Foresight is still the cautionary warning, sounded only a year earlier when Rosanne G. Potter urged analysts to define the parameters of criticism and therefore the data to be counted before turning to statistics.<sup>1</sup> It is quite a jump to William Paulson's confident prophesying in *New Literary History* the imminent dominion of the computer as creator in its own right: "computers and information technology are more important to literature as conceptual models and shapers of intellectual and social context than as concrete devices with immediate applications in the production, storage, and manipulation of texts."<sup>2</sup> To be sure, Paulson remains prudent and careful not to go beyond examples of the similarities between computer and literary production that are convincing but resistant to generalization (such as the Oulipo experiments or Perec's lipograms). Equally cautious and thoughtful, Rutherford Aris explores the kinship "between the activities of the poet and those of the mathematical modeler,"<sup>3</sup> and W. John Harker the applicability of the information processing paradigm to the

*New Literary History*, 1994, 25: 779-788

discourse of criticism.<sup>4</sup> But others, such as Richard Ziegfeld and David Porush, do offer less plausible projections of computer-originated utterances, for which they claim literary status, namely interactive fiction.<sup>5</sup>

Since then the aims of the pioneers of the New Alexandria—the electronic libraries—have become more radical. For them the end of the page-bound text and the book-bound library is in sight. The most striking innovation, as yet still far from being fully realized, is the hypertext, the use of the computer to transcend the linearity of the written text by building an endless series of imagined connections, from verbal associations to possible worlds, extending the glosses or marginalia from the footnotes of yesteryear to metatexts. The concept, after encroaching further, from metatext to the discourse of criticism, is now seen by its creators, George P. Landow and Paul Delany, as an “almost embarrassingly literal embodiment of intertextuality.”<sup>6</sup>

I am afraid that this identification of hypertextuality as intertextuality rests on a twofold confusion. First, Landow and Delany wrongly conclude from the difference between the limitless potential of computer reading and the limited reality of human reading that the former is superior to the latter. This assumption, however, would have merit only if the two models of reading were analogous, which is not the case. I shall try to show that live, human reading retains the advantage since readers’ limitations are not merely an inability to decipher as many signs as the computer registers. They represent in fact a most positive ability to react only to certain signals that computers have not yet been taught to heed. Human readers limit themselves to those sign-systems proven pertinent to literariness. The computer will indeed supersede human reading, but only when programmed to limit itself to such systems.<sup>7</sup> The other confusion occurs between the hypertext as the sum total of the verbal cognates of the text, and the hypertext construed as a generative model for recycling these cognates creatively. The confusion is now between exploration and imitation, based on the hypothesis that tinkering with literary material in traditional or new combinations will produce literature.

Both confusions, it seems to me, are related in a way crucial for an understanding of the interpretive process. For the same reason that identifying relevant sign-systems is essential to reading literature, using *only* such systems is essential to *writing* literature. In both cases, relevancy is defined by intertextuality.

One cannot begin to discuss literary phenomena without considering literature’s textuality—that is, the fact that all aspects of verbal art can only be observed in texts. Anything less, or shorter or simpler than a text, is a fragment, a quotation, or an allusion. For the sake of simplicity,

we may neglect borderline cases in which a text is limited to a single sentence. They seldom occur, except in the genre of the moral maxim or apothegm. When they do occur, the sentence thus sublimated compensates for its brevity with an increase of features characteristic of all other literary texts, such as semiotic changes caused, in literal and figurative discourse alike, by spatial factors: closure, symmetry, rhyme, repetition, rhythm, and so forth.

Textuality, however, is inseparable from intertextuality. Because of their practical, pragmatic, utilitarian aims, nonliterary texts rely on referentiality to carry meaning and on explanatory features to clarify it. By contrast, literary texts replace referentiality with ad hoc linkages from sign-system to sign-system. Furthermore, having to make up for symbolism, fictionality, figurality, and so forth, they must channel readers' interpretations, and this they achieve mainly by substituting intertextuality for reference: what the text does not say, or says obscurely, the intertext spells out. But to get the point, readers have to hypothesize, rebuild, or just wonder, a task they are not at liberty to avoid, since it is dictated by gaps in the fabric of the text or by linguistic anomalies that the hypothesis of figurality fails to solve. Of all types of signs, gaps and ungrammaticalities are those which readers are least likely to ignore. Any explicit and normal (sociolectically acceptable) sign can be bypassed or misunderstood and hardly noticed. An unacceptable sign (in terms of the reader's linguistic competence) may be acknowledged. But a missing link, an implicit sign, a gap must be consciously skirted, negotiated, and ultimately filled out.

Intertextuality, then, depends on a system of difficulties to be reckoned with, of limitations in our freedom of choice, of exclusions, since it is by renouncing incompatible associations within the text that we come to identify in the intertext their compatible counterparts. Whereas hypertextuality proffers an endless supply of opportunities to choose from without limitations other than those of language. Or to put it more succinctly, intertextuality, a structured network of text-generated constraints on the reader's perceptions, is the exact contrary of the reader-generated loose web of free association that is hypertextuality.

I argue that the assumption that all scannings of literary texts must survey words as they appear vitiates the hypertextual approach. The only way to remedy this, it seems to me, is to specify the conditions under which the words of a text are pertinent to its textuality before beaming the computer's eye at them. Fortunately, it may be shown that this specification is done by the text itself.

The text itself makes clear what segmentation of its own verbal sequence is relevant to its literariness—that is, what groups of words or what individual word or even what component of a word constitutes a

literary sign to be analyzed electronically. This segmentation takes place at each and every point where the surfacing of intertextuality is made manifest either by syllepsis or by a gap, or again by an ungrammaticality. These three categories of signs pointing to intertextuality will henceforth be called *connectors*. Each of these is immediately perceptible to readers, who need no more, to respond to the text, than the senses nature gave them. And for each pointer I think it must be technically possible to adjust the computer's sights.<sup>8</sup>

All three types of connectors demand that computer programmers free themselves from their exclusive attention to words. Instead of taking for granted that a word can be counted as one signifying unit, whether or not it has a literary function, they must be alert to the possibility that literariness (here, intertextuality) may render such units larger or smaller than a word, or that an anomalous decoding may make a word function as if it were a phrase.

I shall exemplify this last instance with a sylleptic connector. Syllepsis we know as a familiar trope that consists of the simultaneous presence of two mutually exclusive meanings for one word. The meaning required by the context preceding the word represses the meaning incompatible with that context. Repression at the lexical level generates a syntagm (that is, the context following the sylleptic word) in which the repressed sense surfaces. When the syllepsis acts as connector, the intertext represents that repressed sense in its full, explicit development. In my example, from Dickens's *Bleak House*, the conflict between the contextual and the intertextual significance causes the reader to split the word into separate lexemes and to reread it therefore as a phrase or as a compound formation. Dickens describes the worst slum of London, the filthiest underside of the Victorian metropolis. The slum's name, Tom-All-Alone's, lends itself to collective personification: "Darkness rests upon Tom-All-Alone's . . . as the lamp of Life burns . . . heavily, heavily, in the nauseous air. . . . All-Alone's is fast asleep."<sup>9</sup> Personification immediately serves as a prop to facilitate the staging of a plausible hallucination: "The blackest nightmare in the infernal stables grazes on Tom-All-Alone's."

It would not do to try to explain the impact of the image as that of a sustained metaphor. *Stables* and *grazes* point to a pun, and, as a context derived from *nightmare*, they make it necessary for us to reread the bad dream as a female night horse. Here the editors of the Norton edition stop and rest their case: "*Nightmare* means night-spirit, not night-horse. Dickens's pun may have been inspired by 'Witches, and Other Night Fears,' an essay in which Charles Lamb spoke of keeping a 'stud' full of nightmares."<sup>10</sup>

Dickens does not need Charles Lamb. The pun is everywhere. An

emblem of its popularity is Fuseli's famous painting *The Nightmare*, in which a woman in an alluring negligee fights in her sleep the weight of an incubus on her stomach. Under the bed's curtains a big horse shows its head. The title now suggests the horse is female. The pun alone, however, would not justify specifics like the detail of the *stables*, or better, that of the *stud*, in Lamb's tale, a more technical term for *stables* that only ostlers would know. All these realistic details, to which we may add *graze*, a word which completes the actuality of the mare, have two functions. First, they make the vision a true hallucination—that is, they hide the pure irrelevance of the play on words. Second, this realism posited by the “horsy” details and at the same time denied by its ostensible nonreferentiality, permits the addition of the adjective *infernal*. As a modifier of *stables*, it is disconcerting; and in a realist context it is jarring, except, of course, if it compels us to identify the intertexts in which bad dreams are literally coming from Hell—that is, both Homer and Vergil and their evocation of the netherworld from whence dreams emerge through the gates of horn and the gates of ivory.

Hence humor acquires a grating Dickensian touch, and a parody of classical style and of the grand images of high culture becomes shockingly subordinated to the bitter reality of social ills: *infernal* now appears as the most accurate indictment of the fate reserved for the *miserables*. To achieve this transformation from convention to truth is worth the repression of a prestigious intertext.

Needless to say this whole complex signifier cannot escape the reader's attention because the segmentation of one word into two makes it look as if reading identified a sign, but interpretation demanded that it be a misspelling. It cannot therefore escape electronic scanning either since it is possible to program word processors to locate lexemes the syllables of which may be decoded as separate signifiers.

Another example characterized by a stunning disproportion between a minute connector and the wide-ranging connotations of a vast intertext will further demonstrate the compelling nature of intertextuality's constraints on the reader's freedom, and how totally these constraints exclude the freewheeling interpretations advocated by the proponents of hypertextuality. My text is a French sonnet by the mad poet Gérard de Nerval, who is famous for his arcane writing.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, his madness once served critics as explanation for his obscurity. But one poem in particular does seem to legitimate this cavalier cop-out. It tells of a love story between Apollo and the sibyl, the Pythia of the god's temple of Delphi, the *Delfica*. Her name is also the sonnet's title. Thus madness as divine inspiration (*furor poeticus*), love as madness, and poetry as a disorder of language, all mesh together. Two discourses, one mystical, one erotic, develop side by side, each alternately interpreted

through the other. Addressing the sibyl, the god vows to return to her once Christianity has faded away. This promise is preceded by his rhetorical questions, the first part in a lovers' duet. Does the sibyl still remember the love song she used to sing under various trees? (Each of these trees is a variation on the place of tryst, the *locus amoenus* of the erotic pastoral.) Would she still recognize the shrine at Delphi? Does she remember the cave near the sanctuary and the dragon in that cave? Apollo had killed the foul beast whose skin was used to cover the sibyl's throne.

Yet the promise, the faith kept, and the love remembered may seem to end on a note of anxiety, for the second tercet evokes the sibyl still asleep, apparently deaf to the voice of the returning god. Indeed, the end of the poem would jar with the confident hope of eleven out of fourteen lines if it were not for the intertext. It is only in the intertext that the many details of the quatrains and of the first tercet that seem to be mostly peripheral, descriptive synecdoches of the landscape of a regretted past, are each discovered to be the catalysts of a powerful evocation of desire.

The answers to the lover's questions, which put an end to the anxiety, are spelled out by means of a Goethe poem, where their meaning is exclusively libidinal. The questions have been literally taking readers for a ride (is this hope? or melancholy mourning through cherished reminiscences?) until they put two and two together and join in unison text and intertext in the recitation of a fuller, more rewarding significance. This is indeed an interactive process—interactive but fully programmed by the text to make readers act out, in the privacy of their minds, the experience of a spiritual communion: the officiant (the text) asking the questions, the faithful (here the intertext) answering through the intercession of the readers—a chorus singing back the antiphons.

This intertext is none other than the most famous love song of romantic European literature, Goethe's *Mignon* poem, excerpted from *Wilhelm Meister*, translated everywhere and into French by none other than Nerval. It was first set to music by Beethoven himself. "Know'st thou the land where lemon-trees do bloom, And oranges like gold in leafy gloom."<sup>12</sup> Here then is the old tune the speaker asked the sibyl about. In Goethe's first stanza grow the trees of Nerval's first quatrain: but the German model only uses them metonymically to exemplify Italy's welcoming clime. Goethe's second stanza now depicts the place where the memories of earlier happiness await her, a mere house, but one that boasts the pillars of Nerval's temple. Even dragons are found in Goethe, although in his verse the mythical term may do no more than beautify a picturesque allusion to local snakes.

We may think that for readers to identify the intertext, they need only match Nerval's sketched or allusive descriptions to the corresponding details of the locale in a *Lied* known to everyone. But this would make interpretation depend on the history of a work's reception, on changing or obsolete factors, thus limiting its validity to a culture shared at some point by some readers. By contrast, intertextuality's mechanism, the lure of an *absentia in praesentia*, suffices to dictate an incontrovertible interpretation, for it provides clues that are not historical and subjective in nature, but grammatical or lexical, and objective. There is indeed a self-evident connector that may have primed the still-fresh memory of nineteenth-century readers, but that now compels modern readers to ask themselves the question that identifies the intertext.

This connector is the minuscule difference of the same aberrant letter in two names: in *Delfica*,<sup>13</sup> the designation of the Delphic sibyl, and in her own name *Dafné* (that is, the Greek for "laurel," the emblem of Apollo), both illustrious Greek names in which the French transliteration of the original *f* sound should be *ph*. Yet Nerval chose an *f* transliteration instead, which is the Italian transliteration from the Greek. The misspelling is the more conspicuous because the Italian rendering of Greek spelling strikes average, slightly xenophobic French readers as parodic: they see the *f* as the poor man's *ph*. Nor is this all: if the point were merely to suggest Italian or Vergilian connotations, Nerval had at his disposal two celebrated Latin sibyls, the Cumaean and the Tiburtina, both familiar literary characters. Why then insist on maintaining a Delphic denotation with an Italian modifier? Why specify (line 12) that she has a Latin face when she should have a Greek nose? The contradiction in terms could not be more paradoxical, nor the ungrammaticality of the two *-f* names more striking. Nor could the device be more effective since the sign triggering it is the smallest available linguistic unit. Needless to say, interpreted as a misspelling, the literary ungrammaticality alerts the computer's spellcheck.

As for its significance, the sonnet's lyric tension rests on two complementary opposites: regret and yearning that the lost object of desire be found again. To possess no longer, to possess not yet is a definition of nostalgia, which is what Goethe's song is all about. Hence the combination of sacred, eternal love, of a mystic union injected back into Nerval's Greek text, and of plain erotic drive introduced from Goethe's Italian intertext. These ingredients that could be contradictory or mutually exclusive are now evenly distributed and tightly intertwined as classical form and romantic content. Had we not recovered the intertext, the poem's topographical details would have lent themselves to all sorts of separate, and thus irrelevant, symbolic interpretations (and indeed such



has been the frustrating practice of Nerval specialists). Hypertextuality applied here would bring about the same confusion of images but in larger quantity, indeed an infinite number of them. The unity of the text would be destroyed.

 [pace Google](#)

The control that text and intertext exercise upon each other is not unlike the functioning of an entropic system. Whatever evocative power the intertext packs is brought to bear on one point only, on the connector(s), as if the poem “wasted” a wealth of symbols by using these and their authority only to repeat again and again the same message, harnessing a mimetic overflow in the service of semiotic unity.

Here lies, I think, the first principle differentiating intertextuality from hypertextuality: the latter collects every available datum, but this exhaustive inclusion exposes the reader to a wealth of irrelevant material. Intertextuality, by contrast, excludes irrelevant data. It underscores the main point(s) of the text by making explicit those data that are only implied or presupposed in the text, thus defining their relevance. The remainder is excluded, but not erased, through entropy. A list of differences between hypertextuality and intertextuality will serve for a conclusion.

First, hypertextuality is derived from the text in a concerted effort to approximate the sum total of the ideas, of the descriptive and narrative sign-systems, of the thematic material the text has appropriated to its own purposes, and, finally, of the text’s social, cultural, and historical backgrounds. Intertextuality is generated by textuality; that is, it continues, beyond the text’s limits, the production of those formal features that make for the text’s unity and that substitute an overall significance for the successive meanings of the text’s discrete components (words, phrases, and sentences).

Second, hypertextuality is a metalinguistic tool for the analysis and interpretation of an existing text. This analysis may go beyond the text, producing variations on it. Intertextuality is a linguistic network connecting the existing text with other preexisting or future, potential texts. It guides reading.

Third, hypertextuality contextualizes the text, analyzing literature in the light of what is not literature but what may lead to the creation of it. This however is no basis for value judgments in particular, and for analyzing reader-response in general. Intertextuality decontextualizes the text, focuses on its autotelism, and therefore its literariness.

Fourth, hypertextuality is open-ended and ever-developing; but, while it may be an exercise in creativity, it cannot distinguish between the creation of utterances that resemble literary ones and the generation of utterances that do not. Intertextuality is a closed-circuit exchange between text and intertext. As this closed circuit defines the autonomy

of the text and depends on necessarily perceived signs, it accounts for literary communication proper. That is, it accounts for a reader-response narrowly controlled by the text.

## COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

## NOTES

1 See Rosanne G. Potter, "Literary Criticism and Literary Computing: The Difficulties of a Synthesis," *Computers and the Humanities*, 22 (1988), 91–97.

2 William Paulson, "Computers, Minds, and Texts: Preliminary Reflections," *New Literary History*, 20 (1989), 299.

3 Rutherford Aris, "Ut Simulacrum, Poesis," *New Literary History*, 20 (1989), 323.

4 See W. John Harker, "Informational Processing and the Reading of Literary Texts," *New Literary History*, 20 (1989), 465–81.

5 See Richard Ziegfeld, "Interactive Fiction: A New Literary Genre?" *New Literary History*, 20 (1989), 341–71, and David Porush, "Cybernetic Fiction and Postmodern Science," *New Literary History*, 20 (1989), 373–96; see also David Porush, "Reading in the Servo-Mechanical Loop," *Discourse*, 9 (1987), 53–63.

6 George P. Landow and Paul Delany, "Hypertext, Hypermedia and Literary Studies: The State of the Art," in *Hypermedia and Literary Studies*, ed. Paul Delany and George P. Landow (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), p. 6; see also pp. 17–29, 37–40. See also George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory* (Baltimore, 1992).

7 With all due reservations of principle such as those I am outlining here, a plain sensible assessment of foreseeable technical developments in computer reading of texts can be found in *Computers and Written Texts*, ed. Christopher S. Butler (Oxford, 1992), esp. John F. Burrow, "Computers and the Study of Literature," pp. 167–203.

8 I am well aware that Jean-Jacques Thomas has recently raised doubts about the possibility that computer analysis of texts in its present state can be programmed to produce the kind of semiotic interpretation inspired by Charles Sanders Peirce that I advocate and practice (J. J. Thomas, "Texts on Line," *Computers and the Humanities*, 27 [1993], 93–104, esp. 102–3). Thomas's reservations, however, do not affect the connectors I define here, and existing data processing methods seem quite sufficient to identify the words actualizing such connectors (for example, lexicological filters designated to measure word proximity).

9 Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. George Ford and Sylvère Monod (New York, 1977), p. 551.

10 Ford and Monod, editors' note to Dickens, *Bleak House*, p. 551n. 2.

11 I first attempted a less systematic reading of this sonnet, "Delfica," in "La Trace de l'intertexte," *La Pensée*, 215 (1990), 4–18; esp. 14–18. The Italian intertext functions as an interpretant between Nerval and a Greek intertext. This is therefore an example of the Peircean analysis to which Thomas alludes. It is, as we will see, electronically accessible through a peripheral spellcheck.

12 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1787), bk. 3, ch. 1. The translation is by Thomas Carlyle (1827): of the many English versions, only Carlyle's preserves the rhythm of the original.

13 Gérard de Nerval, *Les Chimères* (1854), ed. Jean Guillaume and Claude Pichois (Nouvelle Pléiade, 1989), vol. 1, pp. 733, 1773–75, and vol. 3, p. 647; in English *French Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present*, tr. Elaine Marks (New York, 1962), p. 40 (minor alterations are mine).

## Delfica

La connais-tu, DAFNÉ, cette ancienne romance,  
 Au pied du sycomore, ou sous les lauriers blancs,  
 Sous l'olivier, le myrte ou les saules tremblants,  
 Cette chanson d'amour qui toujours recommence? . . .

Reconnais-tu le TEMPLE, au péristyle immense,  
 Et les citrons amers où s'imprimaient tes dents?  
 Et la grotte, fatale aux hôtes imprudents,  
 Où du dragon vaincu dort l'antique semence? . . .

Ils reviendront, ces Dieux que tu pleures toujours!  
 Le temps va ramener l'ordre des anciens jours;  
 La terre a tressailli d'un souffle prophétique . . .

Cependant la sibylle au visage latin  
 Est endormie encor sous l'arc de Constantin  
 —Et rien n'a dérangé le sévère portique.

## Delphica

Do you know it, Dafné, that old ballad, sung at the foot of the sycamore, or under the white laurels, under the olive tree, the myrtle, or the trembling willows, that song of love that always begins anew! Do you recognize the Temple and its vast peristyle, do you recognize the mark of your teeth left on the bitter lemons? Do you recognize the cave, fatal to imprudent visitors, where sleeps the vanquished dragon's ancient seed? They will return, those gods for whom you still weep! Time will bring back the order of ancient days. The earth has trembled under a prophetic wind . . . Yet the sibyl with the Latin face is still asleep beneath the arch of Constantine: nothing has yet disturbed the austere portico.