

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Poetry as Hypertext: Milton, Eliot, and the Possibilities of Intertextuality Today

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ABSTRACT

The Internet and technologies have revolutionized the experience of reading and understanding literature. Since the audiences of literary works have changed, a change in the creation of literature seems inevitable. Because the writer should have their audience in mind at the moment of literary creation, they now have to change their perception of that audience. Literature can now integrate a much greater element of intertextuality, so much so that the authors do not need to worry whether their references can be recognized. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* are instances of highly allusive works in two very different eras. Due to this allusiveness, these two works serve as suitable instances to show how audiences and their abilities have changed over time. For the two poems, the choice of sources and their audiences' ability to understand the allusions differ markedly. A shared center for referencing was lost at the time of Eliot, which made him abstruse. This center is being restored as the accessibility of the Internet and technologies rises. The audiences of literary works have powerful tools at their disposal to help them understand those works. Thus, a development in literary creation can be proposed: the writer can implement more intertextuality as the audiences' ability grows to meet it.

Keywords: *hypertext, intertextuality, John Milton, T. S. Eliot, Paradise Lost, The Waste Land, Stuart Moulthrop*

1- Introduction: Poetry as Hypertext

The world has become a giant ball of hypertext. Any unfamiliar thing can easily be “googled”; Smartphones and e-readers have got built-in dictionaries and smart-searching which works by scanning any object with the phone camera; VR and AR technologies are embedding this hypertextuality in our lives more than ever. The word “hypertext” was coined by Theodor Nelson in 1965 and it refers to “electronic documents connected by links that the reader can activate” (Leitch, 2001) Stuart Moulthrop developed the theory of hypertext in the 1990s, especially with his essay “You Say You Want a Revolution; Hypertext and the Laws of Media.” Moulthrop is an American critic who has been among the first to work on hypertextuality both as a critic and a fiction writer. He believes that hypertext can revolutionize our patterns of reading and thinking, dispensing with linear structures and ushering in a more wide-ranging, critical, and democratic perception of the world. Moulthrop shows us that hypertextuality works alongside poststructuralist theory in that it promotes intertextuality

and demands an active reader (Leitch, 2001). This study intends to shed light on the possibilities of this intertextuality in poetry in the hypertextual world today and in the future. The move towards intertextuality, however, had started long ago with Barthes's preference for a "writerly text", which asked the reader to be a part of literary creation (Leitch, 2001).

Intertextuality has been present in fiction much before Julia Kristeva gave it a name and critics started promoting and denouncing it. Milton's work, especially his chef d'oeuvre *Paradise Lost* (1667), demonstrates a strong element of intertextuality. Nevertheless, his references to religion, literature, science, etc. had been deducible for the readers of the poem. In other words, the allusions were familiar to the limited circle of literate people at that time. Milton's descendent in this regard, T. S. Eliot, however, brought a higher level of sophistication to this practice. His poetry is erudite, packed with obscure references, and enigmatic even for the highly literate at his time. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Eliot's *The Waste Land* remain two of the most promising works in terms of intertextuality. These two works can make clear the stance regarding intertextuality in an age much before the advent of hypertext, and they can be reread to show the difference made by this life-changing use of technology.

1.1 Approach and Method

Stuart Moulthrop's essay "You Say You Want a Revolution; Hypertext and the Laws of Media" was first published in 1991. At that time, people were still guessing what media and the internet could do and how deeply they could impact our lives. Today, however, we can see that technology has indeed revolutionized our lives and our perception of the world in many ways, just as it continues to do so. When the term was first coined in 1965, the application of "hypertext" was quite limited. A hypertextual document had certain links embedded in its structure which would redirect the reader to another specific file, whether it be a text, an image, etc. Today, nearly all digital documents are hypertexts, and nearly every part of them. Moreover, each hyperlink can redirect the reader to infinite other results. The AR technologies have even turned objects into hypertexts, making what can be called hyperobjects, linking everything to an inexhaustible array of results. In the nineties, this new concept provided hopes for new kinds of writing. Moulthrop himself engaged in creating hypertextual fiction. However, the author of the present essay believes that this new and radical kind of writing was not the answer that the world of the hypertext demanded. In 2021, we see that there is no need for the writer to create specific links inside their work. The technologies today instantly change every simple text into a hypertext. Authors can write much more freely considering their references if they bear in mind the tools at their audiences' disposal.

Hypertext has conquered the world: every word of every document is already a hyperlink. Such a huge change in the way we can perceive texts calls for a change also in the ways that we create and appreciate works. This essay proposes that for such a change to take place, it needs to be subtle and simple. The incompatibility between literary creation and its ways of perception was not in the task of the writer as the creator of hypertext. Hypertext is itself created and has regenerated itself infinitely. The writer needs only be keen enough to be able to use this ecosystem. In other words, the nature of writing needs to be modified. The writer should be aware of the possibilities of the reader to activate links throughout the document to look up words, search concepts, look for images of obscure objects, and so on. This means that the hypertextual nature of literary creation today gives the writer unprecedented opportunities for intertextuality.

To establish the point of this essay, two literary works famous for their intertextuality will be analyzed: Milton's *Paradise Lost* and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. These two works appeared quite differently to their audiences at the time of their first publication, and they certainly appear differently to a 2021 technology-equipped audience. The original audiences did not have the capabilities brought about by technologies that are becoming smarter every day. This means that the audiences today can more readily search for and understand the underlying references of these works. This change in accessibility can establish the possibilities of intertextuality for fiction and poetry today and in the future.

2. Discussion: The Centre for References from Milton to Eliot to the Present

In his “‘Heat of Milton’s Mind’; Allusion as a Mode of Thinking in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*”, Steven Aaron Minas (2019) tells us that rather than being just an ornament, allusion is in fact “a thinking mechanism” for Milton. Milton knew that his learned audience would probably understand a good deal of his allusions, which can partly account for his extensive use of the technique. For example, in lines 324-326 of the second book, Milton writes “For he, be sure/In height or depth, still first and last will Reign/Sole King.” The Reigning Sole King is a reference to numerous phrases of the Bible (Bryce, 1940). On the one hand, to ignore the reference is to lose part of the significance of the lines; on the other hand, the lines flow so naturally that the borrowed phrase does not stand out in any way. Milton does not feel the need to make his allusions eye-catching. He trusts his audience would notice most of them without help. The difference between Milton and T. S. Eliot lies exactly in this matter. Milton lived at a time when literacy was not at all widespread. However, those who were literate, were usually highly literate. Milton knew that nearly all his audience would at least have a deep knowledge of the Bible. Throughout the centuries to come, this universal knowledge of a single source for information was undermined significantly as many stopped reading the Bible or believing that staunchly in religion.

Eliot, therefore, did not have that unified source to draw upon for his allusions. *The Waste Land* harbors at least a hundred allusions, but not to a single work; rather to works by more than thirty writers in many different languages and cultures (Faiz, 2020). Over the centuries, just as the rate of literacy rose, poets’ confidence in the deep and varied knowledge of their audience declined. By the time of T. S. Eliot, his deep knowledge of many disciplines was extremely rare. Although Eliot claimed in his 1921 “The Metaphysical Poets” that “our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity,” he seems to have meant that it has *the potential* to comprehend great variety, because he tempers the statement by adding that “the poet must become more and more comprehensive” in order to “produce various and complex results” (Greenblatt, 2006). This potential was not realized until a century later when the reader of a literary work was equipped with external sources of infinite variety and complexity, the Internet, and technological gadgets.

One of the essays that have mapped out the allusions of *Paradise Lost* is “The Biblical Allusions in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” an MA thesis by G. P. Bryce (1940), which is possibly plagiarised in “The Biblical Allusions in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*” by Sathyaveti Peter and Vaavilala Sri Ramamurthy. Bryce’s work has cataloged Milton’s allusions comprehensively. A close examination of his work leads us to the fact that Milton could have relied upon nearly all his audience having read the Bible or been exposed to it extensively in their lives. That is how he could stand firm by his allusive mode of thinking; he was sure he would be understood. Bryce’s work catalogues more than a hundred pages of

Biblical allusions in *Paradise Lost*. To consider the sheer volume of allusions in Milton's poem suggests his confidence in using this technique as an overarching formal characteristic of his work. In later centuries, however, as in the time of Eliot, this one single book that everyone had read was becoming harder and harder to find. That is why Eliot is allusive but not to a unified body of works shared by a large number of his audiences. He is allusive, but also sprawling and abstruse for many.

Despite this apparent progress in allusiveness and the loss of a unified body of reference, it would perhaps be naïve to assume that this development over the centuries continues today. In our hypertext-equipped world, this center of referencing is being restored. The more we rely on the internet for our information, the more we convert texts into hypertexts by looking up every unfamiliar detail. It is not like before when people had to rely on their personal libraries or circle of acquaintances to obtain new information. There is a new source to track all references, and that source is the World Wide Web. Whereas in the time of Milton most literate people knew the Bible well, in our time many know their way around the Internet well. While there was at least one Bible in every house in the Christian world, there is access to the Internet in most places in the world now. Therefore, while it was still too soon to say that "our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity" at the beginning of the twentieth century, we can perhaps say that now with more confidence. This is not to claim that the world comprehends great variety already, but that people have the means to do so literally at their fingertips. Thus, one can concur with Eliot that:

our civilization [can] comprehend great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, . . . in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning. (Greenblatt, 2006, p. 2287)

Now, one century after Eliot wrote these lines, it may finally be the time for the poet to "become more and more comprehensive." Now that the reader is equipped with hypertext technologies, the writer can, with more confidence, try to "dislocate . . . language into his meaning." One important factor that is always to be considered in literary creation is the audience. The writer has to bear in mind for whom they are writing and tailor the language to the size of the audience. Now with the advent and profusion of hypertext, the writer can take into consideration this accessibility when they think of their audience. As Haraway (2001) put it, people are becoming "cyborgs," constantly using the help provided by technology.

Tanzeela Faiz (2020) writes of Eliot's *The Waste Land* that it "sounds overintellectual because of the excessive use of allusions as he has used more than a hundred allusions referring to more than thirty writers." This over-intellectuality can be accounted for by the fact that the audiences of *The Waste Land* did not have access to the sources of the allusions. This, in turn, splits the critics of *The Waste Land* into two opposite camps: those who admired it for its "variety and complexity" (Greenblatt, 2006), and those who did not approve of it for the same reason. While, for example, Ezra Pound was a staunch supporter of *The Waste Land* and he even took on the task of editing it, F. L. Lucas (1923), an English literary critic and poet, was so critical of this aspect of the poem that he put Eliot among the "bookworms" and "maggots which breed in the corruption of literature." There were not many readers at that time who actually grasped a great deal of the allusions without getting any help. In order to untie the knots of this great "epic of a godforsaken age," (Tambling, 2006) their only tool was the

notes provided by Eliot himself, which were by no means comprehensive, even if they had access to them.

This is not at all the case now. With the advent of the Internet and the development of hypertext, access to information has become much more convenient. Today technology has made it possible to look up every word in a text on the instant in a dictionary or in Wikipedia and other databases. Also, unlike older, print dictionaries, a wide range of digital dictionaries provide all the data, including etymological data, on the word. For instance, the author of this essay has used the concept “kintsugi” in one of his short stories. If there was no access to the internet, the audience not well versed in Japanese arts and culture would probably be baffled by the unfamiliar word, and call this work esoteric. However, in the age of hypertext, only one or two clicks will get them to the meaning of the word either in a dictionary or in Google. To further illustrate this point, another of Eliot’s poems can be of help. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1915) features an epigraph in Latin at its beginning, which is taken from Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*. This heavy six-line epigraph would be enough to scare away any 1915 reader who had not been well-versed in Latin. However, when today’s readers face this epigraph, their immediate reaction is to select the text and look it up on the Internet. That is even if they do not have a translator already built in their device. Or when perplexed in the face of the meaning and significance of *The Waste Land*, the reader can seek the help of the Internet as an instructor to explain the subtleties of this poem. While the internet is a huge bin for all kinds of data, reliable and unreliable, and you still have to make sure you look for data from reliable sources, it can be said that what you need to know can be found quite conveniently, compared to the 1922 audience of *The Waste Land*. That is why this essay proposes that literature, including poetry, can now go back to being more allusive.

3. Conclusion: Possibilities of Poetry Today

The rapid development of the internet and technology in the twenty-first century has made the world a giant piece of hypertext. In 2021, the world is immersed in hypertext with worldwide access to the internet, computers and mobile devices, e-readers, and VR/AR devices. A revolution in every aspect of our lives means an inevitable change in literature as well. Moulthrop was among the pioneers of hypertext fiction, a kind of digital fiction augmented by links. However, was hypertext fiction the change we were looking for? The author of this essay believes that the revolution in literature in keeping with the technological age is something simpler and subtler: a change in the infrastructure and appreciation of literary works. Since all works have become hypertexts, the readers’ access to information on and about each work has become much more convenient. This change in the way that texts are perceived and received calls for a change also in the process of creation. That is because the author needs to consider their audience upon literary creation, and now they have to consider a different audience: an audience equipped with ever-growing technology; a “cyborg” assisted by the hypertextual nature of reading today.

In this essay, the focus was on Milton and Eliot. The reason for the choice of these quite different poets is that they are both highly allusive in their work. *Paradise Lost* is learnedly written, especially in its allusions to the Bible and classical mythology. Nevertheless, this epic aims at sources that have been familiar to the learned people of Milton’s time: mainly the Bible. T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, went to extremes in his allusiveness in *The Waste Land*. That is why this work was considered violently abstruse for its readers at the time it was published. It was “various and complex” to the extent that its

audience could not possibly grasp the full extent of its allusiveness. This, however, is not the case anymore. From the late twentieth century, the internet began to permeate every aspect of life. Access to unlimited databases became easy. If someone in 1922 wanted to decipher all the allusions in *The Waste Land*, they needed to spend many an hour in huge libraries that were to be found only in a few cities in the world. Nearly a hundred years later in 2021, the sources to many of *The Waste Land's* allusions are only a few clicks away.

The world has changed, and so will literature. Access to a wide range of information has become insanely easy. In the age of Milton, poetry could be allusive since it only addressed a coterie of literate people who were already familiar with the sources that Milton drew upon. By the time of Eliot, literacy had expanded significantly, and that central source shared by all was lost. That is why Eliot's poetry had to draw upon a wide range of sources and was branded as inscrutable to many. Finally, in the twenty-first century, we have regained that center for referencing, and that is the internet. Access to data has become so convenient that the audiences of any literary work can easily get to the sources of allusions with a simple Google search. This is the time that poets can finally attempt what Eliot had proposed a century ago: to achieve higher levels of variety and complexity and to use the whole of their knowledge of different discourses without being bound by their reckoning of the knowledge of their public audience.

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