

THE 'AUCTORITEE' OF WORDSAND REREADING: A STUDY ON ITALO CALVINO'S *THE CASTLE OF CROSSED DESTINIES*

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Abstract

Speech has been associated with power and control in all forms of literature. The constitutive elements of speech are the words and they are the structures of power. Postmodernism and Post-structuralism have proved that words have no origin in authority but in disruption. In this paper, I want to propose what happens when words fail to grasp their authority. If words symbolise completion and meaning, loss of words digresses from traditional authority and control of narrative to an endless rereading. I will try to explain the advantages of rereading and see it not as an appendage to the meaningful act of reading, but as a tool for endless substitution. I shall analyse the tenets of the Chaucerian 'Auctoritee' and review it in terms of Calvino's endless narrative as well as the contemporary writing culture. The word has lost authority and control of narrative only to regain in continuity and confusion. In this paper, I will try to show rereading as a connective tool between narratives and conclude with the idea that the art of rereading lies in claiming a kind of continuity without closure.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Calvino, Rereading, Reading, Chaucer, Closure.

Introduction: Geoffrey Chaucer and his writings are marked as the maiden voyage of English prose. His greatest work, *The Canterbury Tales*, is still viewed as a success of narrative production. It is more than a simple estate satire, it is Chaucer's vision of narrative authority engraved in the mouths of characters. Whereas some try to imitate authority, some only make us question their validity. The hierarchy of speech reflects the hierarchy of social position. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale* is a tale of disruption of narrative authority. The Prologue to this tale begins with the lines, "Experience, though noon auctoritee/ Were in this world, is right ynough for me" (Chaucer 15). Here the wife pronounces her experience as her learning because she was never taught the scriptures for betterment of character and spiritual experience. The experience is her own way of interpretation of the Christian faith. From the very beginning she renounces the authority of scriptural learning. This learning has long since been associated with a pronounced authority of interpretive narration. In subjugating the commoner to the faith of belief a total control has been the mission of the clergy. The sermons and interpretations of the scriptures offered as an authorial tool for control of meaning and the way of life. She, on the other hand uses her experience as a tool for interpretation. The authority of speech crumbles under the wayward experience of

Alisoun. She uses the same tenets of vocal control over all the problems in her life. It is like an imitative power that stands in contrast to the sermonic control of spoken interpretation. In this way she pronounces judgement upon herself and her self-styled faith. Her representation, according to English medieval canonical faith, stays as an arrogant woman beyond the borders of representative control. Even Chaucer, the character, fumbles for words as he describes the nuances of the new woman. So, the tenets of speech are helpful in asserting a different kind of authority- extratextual identity. This imitative speech has been handed down to the contemporary feminist interpretation of societal control over women and seen as a proto-feminist movement that establishes an authority of its own. The tool for this achievement is none but the authority of words. She, for one, imitates the same method that the church uses to exert control- sermonising the tale. Chaucer's tell-tale characters are not only trying to assert their position but also using the dynamics of speech as a political tool. The whole of Canterbury Tales is filled with a power struggle that can only be delved through the control of narrative authority. The wife of bath is just one of Chaucer's sketches. The power of speech and appreciation of eloquence seems to be the primary concern for Chaucer and his characters. The wife of Bath's tale is but one example. All of them, mostly the characters, whose position were not widely accepted by the social norms, are either trying to or succeeding in securing their stand with their gripping tale. These tales have been chosen by Chaucer primarily for entertainment, but the strain of struggle and the will to justify themselves is not far behind. The undercurrent of positional politics played through word games is Chaucer's primary concern. The 'Auctoritee' in my title does not only refer to the scriptural interpretation and the authority of the clerical reading, but also to the authority of spoken word in context of narrative authority. The audience must submit to the authority of the tales and their teller. Here I will take a moment to say that even Chaucer understood the dynamics of reading and writing, and perhaps their control of the narrative act.

Methodology: Reading and theories of reading have been developed from the same genus of authority. It has been seen as a tool for extraction of truth from the narrative and a complete whole that enhances understanding. Reading has been explored in many ways and for many purposes but all of them refers to a final component called authorial understanding. Reading is sharpened by the truth emanating from the metaphysics of presence inside the author's mind. Derrida in his theories of deconstruction have shown us the game of signified behind any such textual position. Meaning cannot be pinned down to one exact location. Reading looks to assert control over the narrative from the validity of written words. Reading as a theory takes its first appearance from hermeneutics and through its great journey in time many truths have tried to redeem it. Reader response and structuralism built their own grounds but was mostly based on the same platform of verbal authority. While the latter focused more on exploring all the possible combination of the syntactic and semantic possibilities of language, the former concentrates on the receiving end of the narrative

authority. It was almost taken for granted that a perfect reading of a narrative can be achieved until post-structuralist theories ruined the authority of the written word. In a similar space, dwells the concept of writing. Formerly a gesture for authorial control, writing appears at the same fag-end of signification. The writer's work was considered complete until it was challenged by the likes of Derrida and Roland Barthes from the same angles of narration. The world of signifier/signified is nothing but a mirroring act, an endless labyrinth. Writing slowly becomes an impossible task and the narrative closure impossible to achieve. In this context I want to propose the advantage of rereading. Rereading has been seen as only a secondary concept, an appendage to the primary act of reading. Rereading has been associated with secondary truths influenced by the first reading and a way of recontextualising the validity of reading. But it can be seen in another way. Like a perfect postmodern tool, it offers many facets for exploration. Rereading, as a tool, can transcend the constrictions of the acts of narrative such as the monopoly of words, reading and writing, and become only a tool for exploration. The contemporary setting makes it impossible to explore any text in terms of the signifier/signified chain. I want to show how rereading works to undermine the authority of the word and then show how through semblance of continuity it recaptures the textual progression as an endless narrative play. Matei Calinescu in his book, *Rereading*, talks about Borges' works and the idea of rereading. He goes through concepts like intertextuality, the Kabbalistic philosophy and re-visions it in the intertextual continuity of a narrative. My point is to review it as nothing more than a temporary tool for going beyond the concepts of traditional narrative construction. If we could only reposition it in the context of narrative incompleteness, rereading can become the primary idea behind narrative progression. Writers, like Borges, envision the text as incomplete and the idea of writing as an impossible task. His works are a primary source for the idea of rereading. What I mean by narrative continuity does not mean multiple endings but the idea of any narrative endeavour as unending. Here the narrative loses its grip on validity that provides the necessary closure. According to authors like Borges and Calvino, texts should be open to the narrative will of the readers, essentially to the rereaders. Rereading has the choice of going beyond the necessary constraints and denying the authority of textual reading. The only logical way for our times is to discard the idea of reading altogether and opt for a continuous rereading to negate the 'auctoritee' of narrative construction. Whereas reading necessitated a context, rereading has none. This is perhaps why Vladimir Nabokov in a lecture, 'Good Readers and Good Writers', from *Lectures on Literature* proposed that, "one cannot read [author's italics] a book, one can only reread it" (Nabokov 3). No form of narrative can achieve completion within the play of signifiers. Since narrative authority relies on the process of signification for an ending it is always a substitution. Rereading, on the other hand, denies substitution and opts for an indirect progression and continuity within the incomplete universe of tales.

The most important idea for our times is the continuation of narrative. The inconclusive nature of narrative leads to an endless series of rereadings. In the beginning, it was only a

secondary act and now it becomes a primary source of narrative play. It can also be taken as a visualisation of the postmodern play but whereas the former tries to undermine the authority of signification the later tends to take the narrative process out of the traditional framework. Rereading no longer stays as a tool for explication but is envisioned as pure play. Narrative intensity and readership are no longer the valid mode of textuality. As textuality gave way to intertextuality, reading gives way to rereading. Even with the contemporary world of the web and electronic media, the hypertextual markings delay the closure of the textual progression. Rereading is not limited by the medium. A text can easily be transported from the written page to the virtual world of computers and in a way continue beyond the borders of the process of signification. The concept of rereading has been implemented by the change of visual media. For instance, the writings related to the web in forms like wikis and blogs also incorporate the play of rereading. I do not seek a definition of rereading as it only connects it more to its past form limited by the written page. Rereading should be seen as a tool for linking the incommensurable writings spread across the different spaces. The spatiality of writing can no longer be seen as limited to the process of signification but an expanding web of miscellaneous short pieces coming together across time. Textual relation can no longer be a process of marking out similarities and bland criticism. Every discussion, reworking, criticism and virtualisation becomes part of the text. Borges believed in the insurmountable barrier of textual production and tried to bypass the constrictions with a form of rereading that can incorporate the whole world. Anything and everything becomes part of the textual production. For instance, a book can continue beyond the borders of the text and into the real world as in Borges' story, 'The Garden of Forking Paths'. For Calvino, reading becomes an infinite act as he shows us in his take on reading in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*. The perfect book cannot be read to its whole capacity as it is against the norms of textuality. The display and use of words cannot build up authority, only confusion. Signification leads to uncertainty over the meaning of the text as it dwells with ideas like meaning, reading and writing. The post-structuralist view of writing calls forth a new dimension of textuality, one questioning borders and meaning. But rereading remains unanswered for. In the contemporary setting, it becomes more than a secondary phase of reading. If the perfect reading of a text cannot be achieved then the narrativity must dwell within the inconclusive realm of endless rereadings. The reader, like a traveller, loses the grip of narrative progression and progresses through substitution, one book for another. This is how reading becomes nullified. Calvino's works are indented with extralinguistic acts that proliferate beyond the borders of the text. Rereading becomes an important part of this endless progression.

Rereading and the absence of words: Chaucer, in incorporating the storytelling method, stresses on the presence of the significance of words. Words establish the relation and the use of language establishes the authority of the characters. This acts as a key to the presence and

evaluation of the characters. Each character is presented by a stock element but the storytelling part describes Chaucer's individual talent. Each character asserts authority by dominating with their narrative flow and this authority remains behind the pleasurable reading it throws. Every tale acts as a supplementary/substitution to the formal progression of the tale. Their voice and use of words assert their authority over the text and the narrative progression. The 'auctoritee' is shared by all individuals who use the storytelling method as it primarily heightens the gullible word to a place of authorial intensity and takes it beyond the play of signification. The tales become as intensive as speech while remaining in the plane of the written page. But what happens if this voice loses expression? How does the signification continue if the voice loses its authority? Here I offer Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* as a rereading of Chaucer's intensity of authorial voice; not against it but complementing it.

The art of storytelling demands the authority of words, words flowing down from the depths of subjectivity and replicating the self in a verbal skirmish to establish authority. As a medium, the signifying system works with substitutions and transcendence. The art of character building has never been far from the art of eloquence. Chaucer's characters are living examples of this domination. Even characters like the knight and the priestess have to assert authority with the art of narration. These characters perform on the stage of narrative art to exhibit a drama more real than reality. Narrative art, from this point of view, also uplifts common branches of social evil to a universal level. Perhaps, that is why Chaucer's art has found such high praise. What if this art of deception itself was questionable? The deconstructionists have not only questioned the system but also the authorial intent. But when left with the art of reading we seem to fumble for words. Deconstructionist reading has opened new platforms but what I propose is somewhat different. Instead of undermining hidden lexicons, rereading only supplies the necessary link and nothing more. The play of presence and absence within a narrative is quite complex and to locate them we must undermine the whole tale. My point is that it still stays as part of the tale, a continuation of the reading process. But the characters, without authority, lose their identity. This is what happens in a rereading. Rereading only continues the tale, not only the author's, but the interpolations of many. The modern media such as blogging and electronic medium has implemented many such instances. One would be a blog that continues the craze of *The Canterbury Tales* into a new medium. In his book, *Geoffrey Chaucer hath a Blog: Medieval Studies and New Media*, Brantley L. Bryant tells the story from many angles and adds the perspective of blogging into it. Recent trends of blogging can easily incorporate the tool of rereading to tell the tale from diverse angles. The blogposts collected together redeem Chaucer's text from the pangs of incompleteness and portends a relatively new dimension to practices of storytelling. Anyone can contribute as no text is completely under the authority of the writer. It is a project that replicates the world of the Chaucerian narrative with additional rhymes from contributors. That is one way of rereading. A tale never ends, it

continues with our rereadings. Calvino serves to point out an important idea concerning rereading. What if the authorial narrative loses its hold? What happens if the characters lose their power of speech? They lose their authority and their identity. It all becomes a commotion of empty signs that roam the halls of nothingness.

The tale by Calvino begins with the individuals trapped inside a castle on account of the weather and end up in a play of tarot cards to display their narrative authority instead of words. This magical setting offered by Calvino gives us an opportunity to see the confusion as it spreads. Just like Chaucer's characters, they also come together to pass the time narrating their stories and their lives but end up laying bare their incomplete identities. This serves as an experiment, Calvino does it with a pack of tarot cards but it could be done with any other medium. The original scheme revolves around Chaucer's fine tale where everyone gets to say what they want to. With the absence of speech, the characters like the innkeeper disappear as there is no need for a proposal, a beginning to the tale. The characters only find a pack of tarot cards and start the game on their own. So, speech is not the beginning of storytelling but the presence of a medium. Here the tarot cards serve the purpose. They start playing the cards as they sit around the medium in an almost virtual setting. The beginning of every tale are in play. The characters try to portray their story through the sequence of cards on the table. As it is found soon enough, one string of cards offers many tales and the players vie for the hold of cards as stories overlap. Fighting ensues as they play for dominance. But unlike Chaucer's tale where the best instance of eloquence shall receive the prize, there are no rewards as the dominance cannot be established. What happens on the table is nothing but a series of rereadings. The perfect reading of the tale cannot be achieved as the word has lost its grip of the tale. The empty signifiers tell only instances and never a whole. One story sets off another like in a hyperlinked electronic narrative. But the final tale, the closure cannot be achieved. The cards stare at an endless sequence of tales and at one instant they even go beyond the control of the players. For Chaucer, the advent of the inn-keeper and his determination to judge the quality of the tales goes hand in hand with authorial domination. In the general prologue to the tales, Chaucer also mentions his definition of storytelling as he says that, "If he relates the tale, he must be true/ To every word, . . ." (Morrison). Chaucer chooses to present the characters as they speak and vouches for minimum intervention. In another line he says that, "Better some breadth of language than a lie!" and by that he relates to the truth of the linguistic endeavour called storytelling (Morrison). He calls upon Plato to vouch for his theory of storytelling and in like manner uses the potency of language to narrate his epic tale. The whole plot revolves around the framework of language and Chaucer's authority becomes part of linguistic medium. The use of direct speech provides a sense of immediacy to the narrative and increases the narrative authority. Calvino, on the other hand, dismantles the very root of language. These silent signifiers can no longer propagate the idea of authority. Not even speech can restore this narration to a closure. Even though we might consider the narrative level and the textual level that adhere to language but the signifiers that

tell the tale are pictorial. For Roland Barthes, all signs lead to nothingness. Speech, whenever it uses the potential of written language, loses its authority of narration. All language use ends up like the deck of tarot cards, immensurable and incomplete.

Conclusion: If reading exists within language, rereading exists beyond the borders of common language. The medium always acts out with the excess of meaning. Rereading, on the other hand, do not base itself on the premises of meaning and signification, but on a manic progression. The beginning of the new age of reading starts with the change in medium. Rereading can jump the validity of medium and become a tool for exploration of narrative. Whereas earlier concept of rereading looked at foils for the initial reading, rereading now can be achieved without any specificity. Textual progression is no longer limited to authorial understanding but a novel spatiality that incorporates the whole universe. Borges saw the universe as a library with catalogued books to eternity. Calvino sees the essence of narrative as progression. The entirety of narrative theory must be re-assessed on the premise of the new mediums that have emerged. All tales must continue in the beyond of language and textual reading. In Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* "each story runs into another story" and he is astonished to see the noise¹ associated with the medium of expression (Calvino 41). This is true for any medium as the excess of meaning engulfs the whole tale. Rereading, on the other hand, offers continuity and an infinitely deferred closure. The reader feels his position threatened as he says that, "what is left me is only the manic determination to complete, to conclude, . . ." and the continuous reshuffling of cards ruins the linear progression of the tale (46). In every rereading, to end in Calvino's manner, "the same cards . . . are read and reread with different meanings; . . ." and in the process loses its penchant for meaning and determination (87).

Notes

1. A term used in Information Theory that discusses the excess of information that disrupts the clarity of the message in an electronic medium.

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