

A Critique of Originality

Andrew BOON

Abstract

This article examines the changing signification of originality in the theory of art from Mimesis, Neo-classicism, Romanticism, Structuralism to the Post-structuralist period and argues that the modern conception of originality is problematic.

1. Introduction

It is common for universities to require students to demonstrate original insight when researching and writing theses. This article questions this requirement by demonstrating how problematic originality is. The first part examines the changing signification of originality in the theory of art. Originality is shown to have little importance in the theories of Mimesis and Neo-classicism but to gain prominence in the Romantic period. It focuses on the work of Wordsworth and Coleridge and their ideas on the creation of literature. These notions are compared to the denotations and connotations of originality. The argument forwarded is that the modern conception of originality is dominated by Romantic ideology. The second part examines Barthes' (1977) "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), and places it in context with other Structuralist thinkers. Structuralism presents a challenge to originality as language is seen as primary, preceding subjectivity and determining humanity's knowledge of reality. Self-expression involves the activity of language, however, for language to have meaning presupposes a prior system of rules which governs that meaning. In Barthes' analysis, all narratives are shown to be reducible to how they function within the language system. Although individual utterances change from text to text, the function remains the same; there are no preexisting ideas. The author of a text has only the ability to select and combine words from a predetermined language storehouse. The final part concentrates on Derrida's Deconstruction and Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) and "The Death of the Author" in *Image-Music-Text* (1977), to present a Poststructuralist perspective on language. Post-structuralism critiques Structuralism as it relies upon the language system as the origin of meaning. Post-structuralists argue that the ability to understand such underlying structures is contained within language itself

and yet these structures are themselves linguistic constructions. Signification is unstable and does not allude to an ultimate signified. Meaning is a process of differences; a sign requires the coexistence of other signs to be able to have meaning. A sign is never fully present to itself, but is involved in a play of differences; an infinite network of signifiers. 'Difference' subverts the origin of meaning. The foundations or origins of knowledge and meaning are questionable.

2. Origins of Originality

'Originality' is defined as:

the power of creating or thinking creatively, an original act...existing from the beginning...
the quality of being independent of and different from anything that has appeared before...
novel, inventive, creative (Tulloch, 1993, p.1072)

These definitions are associated with ideas of creativity, imagination, individuality and genius which are central to the preoccupations of Romantic thought and dominates the very signification of the word. As Prickett (1970) states:

If we have come to realize that major scientific or mathematical geniuses are creative, in the same sense that an artist is creative, we are, whether we know it or not responding to a model of the way the human mind worked that comes to us from Coleridge and Wordsworth (p.2).

Abrams (1953) acknowledges the prevalence of romantic ideology in recent criticism; in the examination of a text consideration is made to a work of art in relation to the artist who produced it and the artist is then admired for his or her display of originality and creativity. He argues, however, that:

this point of view is very young measured against the twenty-five-hundred year history of the Western theory of art, for its emergence as a comprehensive approach to art...dates back not much more than a century and a half (1953, p.2).

The earliest recorded theory of art is Mimetic. This dates back to the dialogues of Plato and Aristotle. Plato considered art to be imitation and postulated a metaphysical realm of ideas from which everything existing in this world is an imperfect copy. The work of the artist is seen as a representation of this world and therefore becomes a copy of what is already a copy; further removed from what can be considered as the pure original. In *Poetics*, Aristotle develops Plato's

ideas. A work of art is still a “mode of imitation” (1920, p.23) that mirrors the nature of the universe but whereas Plato believed the arts to be a distraction from attaining true knowledge, Aristotle (1920) argues that imitation is a natural human instinct and people “delight to view the most realistic representations of imitation in art” (p.23).

For the Neo-classical artist, Mimesis meant imitation or emulation of the styles and techniques of what had already been written in the Classical Era to achieve the delight Aristotle describes. Horace (as cited in Selden, 1988) states, “I would advise one who has learned the imitative art to look to life and manners for a model, and draw from thence living word” (p.125) and in this way, the neo-classic critic attempts to establish rules and maxims of art to parallel what was seen as a rational universe. If the laws governing nature are ordered and harmonious, it follows that art as nature’s imitation must also be ordered. Pope also considers the rules of previous Classical writers as warranting the criteria for good taste and producing the desired effect of pleasure on an audience. Nature is the source of imitation that by following the precedence of the ancients can be reproduced in art. Pope (as cited in McFarland, 1974) states:

Learn hence for ancient rules a just esteem;
To copy nature is to copy them.
True wit is nature to advantage dress’d,
What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d (p.451).

The idea of imitation remained prominent through to the eighteenth century with such critical terms as ‘representation’, ‘reflection’, ‘copy’, ‘counterfeiting’ or ‘image’ being used to describe art. The genius of the poet was in the ability to imitate, interpret and extract the form from natural things rather than being original.

The turning point for what is now termed ‘original’ and ‘creative’ began with the introduction of Romanticism into Western thought. Originality had previously been considered to be a divine act applicable only to God. God made the Universe out of nothing and was original by being primary, initial, and first. The artist unable to create something out of nothing could only imitate and emulate the original creation and represent the rational laws of nature. However, with the advent of Wordsworth and Coleridge, the human artist began to be characterized in a different way. Kristeller (1983) states:

The artist was guided no longer by reason or by rules but by feeling and sentiment, intuition

and imagination: he or she produced what was novel and original, and at the point of highest achievement was a genius (p.107).

The Preface to the Lyrical Ballads is a manifesto for such poetic inspiration and creativity. The poet for Wordsworth (1923) is elevated above common man because of a greater insight into “the primary laws of nature” (p.935). Wordsworth writes:

The poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel without immediate external excitement, and a greater power in expressing such thoughts and feelings as are produced in him in that manner (p.942).

The genius of the poet is in the capability of “creating that taste by which a truly original poet is to be relished...in breaking the bonds of custom” (p.943). The poet is original by the “introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe” (p.943) or if not, by representing an object in a “hitherto unknown” (p.943) manner. Wordsworth considers the task of the poet as “widening the sphere of human sensibility, for the delight, honor, and benefit of human nature” (p.944). This original insight is communicated to the reader through their understanding of the poem and a “re-experiencing of the original expression” (p.944) of the poet. He describes the creative process or ‘origins’ of poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility” (p.938). The original spontaneous emotion must be contemplated in order to complete a successful composition. The poet must create the internal impulse of feeling and convert this into the external artistry of the poem whilst keeping constant the original state of mind. Poetry is therefore an estimation of the inner emotion originally experienced after the poet has “thought long and deeply, for our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts” (p.938). The primary source for these thoughts ceases to be a mimetic reflection of nature or adherence to specific rules but is an insight into the individual expressions and inner workings of the poet concerned. It originates externally but is imaginatively reshaped via the internal subjective creations of the poet.

Coleridge also believes the imagination to be the most vital activity of the poet’s mind and intrinsic to poetry creation. In *Biographia Literaria*, the ‘primary’ imagination is defined by Coleridge (1907) as an unconscious act, it is the very thing that enables perception and “in the finite mind” (p.202) is a repetition or parallel of the activity of God in “the eternal act of creation” (p.202). The ‘secondary’ imagination differs only in degree to that of the ‘primary’ but it:

dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize, to unify (p.202).

This process is creative imagination; fundamentally the same as every day perception but differing in the respect of perceiving “hidden and alogical connections, seeing and symbolizing one thing in terms of another to suggest new aspects of each” (p.202).

Derived from Kant, the external world is seen as a mass of unrelated sounds, colors and objects. The mind synthesizes these to create a unified whole, even when this seems impossible the secondary imagination attempts to recognize or realize the perception. The power of imagination is considered to be a repetition of the original creation by God. The secondary imagination is an echo of God’s own imagination and represents the unification of the human mind with the physical world and with God. In *The Prelude* (1959), for example, Wordsworth sees the creation of poetry as resembling the activity of God and unifying humanity, nature, God into one great mind:

For feeling has to him imparted power
That through the growing faculties of sense
Doth like an agent of the one great mind
Create, creator and receiver both,
Working but in alliance with the works
Which it beholds (Lines 255-260).

For Coleridge, the imagination necessary for creating poetry occurs when the sense of sight is elevated to the capacity for insight into the external world and is “an original gift” (1907, p.203).

However, the Romantics realized the problematic nature of originality. Wordsworth believed that to convey to the reader an original emotion, the poet must meditate on what was spontaneous and produce an estimation of that experience, but it follows that the estimation can no longer be an original. The Romantics became increasingly concerned with the failure of the medium of language to capture an original true emotion and convey this to a receptive reader. Shelley (as cited in Olsen, 1978) writes:

The most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet (p.32).

The Romantics' quest for originality and hope for a new age could not succeed in being free from the problems that language presented. Ferguson (1977) suggests:

Language as an inevitable mediator of men's thoughts and emotions would perhaps reveal all varieties of origins if only it would yield up the secret of its own origin (p.4).

This summarizes the problems of originality as language becomes a prominent part of later literary criticism.

3. Language as Origin

Structuralism challenges the fundamental assumptions of Romantic originality. To be original requires the ability to create something that is considered to be independent of and different from anything that has previously appeared. Literature, however, involves language and this is neither independent nor different from the overall governing system of the language model. To write is to create meaning but meaning presupposes the prior existence of a system of rules that allows that meaning to have been created in the first instance. Eagleton (1983) states, "however far back we push the origin of meaning, we will always find a structure already in place" (p.113). Human actions and creations are seen to be predetermined by systems that allow the possibility of meaning. The individual rather than being free to express language is a prisoner of language. The poetic imagination is not an original gift but is subordinate to language. Language constructs self and determines humanity's knowledge of the external world. Eagleton (1983) states, "at the hands of Structuralism reality is not reflected by language but produced by it" (p.108). Thus, Structuralism challenges the uniqueness of literary texts. All texts can be reduced to how they function in their meaning. The concern of the Structuralist is with language and linguistic function rather than the individual manifestations of an author. The author becomes a secondary function able to communicate only through the use of language.

The Structuralist movement evolved out of the ideas forwarded by Saussure (1974). Saussure argues against the traditional view of language as a naming-process; that words naturally correspond to external objects and ideas in the world. Saussure believes language is not a naturally occurring phenomenon; without words, "our thought...is a shapeless and indistinct mass. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language" (p.111). Language occurs when there is a "link between thought and sound, under conditions that of necessity bring about the reciprocal delimitations of units" (p.111). The 'necessity' mentioned is that of human communication. Words as the medium of communication are signs that are made

up of the combination of sound (signifier) and concept (signified). However, the relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, determined by social and cultural convention rather than the individual. Once a sign has been established in usage and accepted into the community, individuals do not have the power to change its value. Saussure states:

(language) is a storehouse filled by the members of a given community through their active use of speaking, a grammatical system...not complete in any speaker; it exists perfectly only within the collectivity (p.13).

Individual acts of language (parole) only have meaning within the framework of the overall system of language (langue). Saussure suggests, "language is a system of inter-related terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (p.282). Language is a system of differences in which meaning is conveyed in relation to other signs. For example, the word 'ball' means because it is not 'tall', 'hall', 'bill' and so on. In this way, Saussure argues that, "language is a form not a substance" (p.240). In other words, it is langue that makes the individual act of speech or written language possible. In Saussurean terms, the individual act of literary creation (parole) is derived from the impersonal storehouse of langue that determines the possibility of meaning. Originality requires the ability to be independent or different, however, the system governs meaning and parole cannot exist outside of the governing langue. The author of a text is reduced to selecting and combining language from a conventionalized storehouse and the text is only recognizable in relation to other texts. A particular text is understood in relation to other texts of that genre, which enable the possibility of the creation of that text in the first instance. Although diachronic elements may influence the meaning of a text as it is understood in relation with later texts, the synchronic elements of the governing system remain unalterable.

Structuralism applies the Saussurean model to all areas of human activity. The task is to discover the underlying structures that govern and determine all conscious thought. Levi-Strauss (as cited in Culler, 1975) believes that:

particular actions of individuals are never symbolic in themselves; they are the elements out of which is constructed a symbolic system which must be collective (p.5).

He argues that social and cultural phenomena operate in the same way as language. For example, a marriage ceremony acquires meaning from and is determined by a prior system of rules. In his study of primitive myths, Levi-Strauss examines the universal structures of langue, which he

considers to be constant in the heterogeneity of all myths (parole). Myths, like language, are reducible to a function that acquires meaning in relation to other functions. The different transformations occurring within the myth are reducible to the same common function. In one example, he argues that tribal variations on one particular myth are all concerned with the origin of fire and are homogeneous in their functioning. Levi-Strauss (as cited in Sim, 1992) concludes that, “in all instances (of differing narratives) we are dealing with the same myth” (p.390).

In *Morphology of the Folk-Tale*, Propp (1968) is concerned with discovering the constant elements that govern the narrative within Russian fairy-tales. Like the myth, the fairy-tale has importance as the prototype of all narrative. Propp analyzes a large number of fairy-tales, reduces the narratives and identifies thirty-one different functions, which are distributed among seven spheres of action inherent in the tales. Functions do not have to be present in all fairy-tales but if they appear, they always do so in systematic order. Thus, Propp identifies an underlying, stable structure within narrative and argues that component parts of fairy-tales are limited. Although instances of parole change, he concludes that all fairy-tales can be considered identical with regards to their structure.

In “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives” (1977), Barthes builds on the work of Saussure, Levi-Strauss, and Propp by considering, “the narratives of the world to be numberless” (p.79). Literature is just one possibility from the system of language. Narratives are extended to the classification of any form of signification. Such social and cultural phenomena as stained glass windows, cinema, even a sequence of traffic lights can be included as narrative, acquiring signification from its operation within the system. Barthes attempts to provide a model to show that infinite narratives contain a common underlying structure. Using Saussurean linguistics as a basis, Barthes reduces narratives to their lowest linguistic unit to determine how their construction contributes to meaning. Barthes (1977) identifies three levels in narrative that:

are bound together according to a progressive integration: a function only has meaning insofar as it occupies a place in the general action of an actant (actant being in the sense this word has in the work of Greimas when he talks of characters as actants) and this action in turn receives its final meaning from the fact that it is narrated, entrusted to a discourse which possesses its own code (p.88).

Operating at the lowest level of unit are ‘functions’ which are sub-divided into distributional and integrational, cardinal function and catalysers. Distributional functions are actions that correlate

at the same level in the narrative, such as the act of buying a revolver correlates to its later use in the narrative. Integrational functions or indices draw together the narrative which correlates with an element of a higher level in the narrative, classified as 'actants' these are units that contribute to the meaning of a character. Divided into units of importance a functional unit can either be hinge-points (cardinal functions) in the narrative which are crucial to the development of the narrative, it should open or conclude an alternative in the narrative, or (catalysers) which are incidental to development and fill in the narrative space therefore separating the cardinal functions. The cardinal function provides the logic of the narrative. Barthes (1977) states, "a sequence is a logical succession of nuclei bound together by a relation of solidarity" (p.101), nothing could come logically before or after the sequence. He uses the example of such cardinal functions as ordering a drink, obtaining it, drinking it, paying for it. To posit something after the sequence of 'having a drink' would move out of the sequence and begin another. Thus, the logic signifies to the reader in relation to the codes learnt "from all the narratives which have fashioned in us the language of narrative" (p.102). Therefore, in narrative the characters or psychology, names and places of particular utterances may differ from text to text but the function remains constant. The independence or difference between one text and another is in the ability to redistribute the components of the overall system but the meaning of the text is ultimately determined in its relation to other texts.

In Structuralist terms, it can be seen that narratives are variations (*parole*) made possible only by the governing system (*langue*). Language precedes individual utterance and *parole* cannot be independent of what has already gone before; its meaning is determined in relation to other codes. Every newborn human enters a world in which codes are already in place and the process of identity of self is achieved via the symbolic order of language. In other words, the concept of subjectivity is constituted by the system, which in turn challenges ideas of originality, uniqueness and individuality. The notion of an author as an inspired origin is problematic as Structuralism de-centers the importance of the "individual consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action" (Belsey 1980, p.60).

However, Structuralism is itself problematic. Structuralists appear more concerned with a scientific approach to analysis than a study of the aesthetic value of literature. It reduces narratives to functions rather than analyzing the value of content. Traffic lights and Shakespeare reduced to a system are classified as one and the same. Structuralism is not concerned with aesthetic value but is not the ability to realize the possibilities of the language system an original use of *parole*? Moreover, Structuralism presupposes a transcendental language system that

produces humanity's understanding of reality. The linguistic model is the centre of meaning and governs the unity of signifier and signified in the text. However, this only fixes a new origin of meaning; a transcendental signified which acts as the structuring denotation of originality. This criticism of Structuralism led to the development of Post-structuralism and the later displacement of origins.

4. The displacement of Origins

Whereas Structuralism appeals to a transcendent linguistic model (*langue*) which enables the possibility of communication and operates as the centre of meaning, Post-structuralists believe that if the ability to understand *langue* is contained within language itself, it follows that *langue* cannot be the originator of meaning rather *langue* is itself determined by the very language it is considered to have determined in the first instance. Thus, the centre of meaning shifts beyond to a different centre and so on *ad infinitum*.

Structuralism and Post-structuralism have differing opinions concerning the Saussurean model. Structuralism believes it to be a closed signifying system. The sign is compared to two sides of a sheet of paper, it exists as a stable binary opposition of front (signifier) and back (signified):

one cannot cut the front without cutting the back at the same time; likewise in language, one can neither divide sound from thought nor thought from sound (Saussure 1974, p.111).

Post-structuralists, however, consider signification to be unstable and that the signifier can never correspond to an ultimate signified. Saussure believes language to be a system of signs that are arbitrary and conventional. Saussure (1974) states that signs are purely relational units, "in language there are only differences, without positive terms" (p.166). Meaning is formed from distinguishing one sign from another via difference. The relationship of signifier to signified is determined from all other possible signifier-signified or signifier-signifier relationships. As meaning is distinguished from what a sign is not, meaning is in a sense absent and never immediately present in one sign. A sign cannot be understood in an original form as it requires the co-existence of other signs to be understood at all. Meaning requires the movement of differences, the traces of endless chains of past and future signifiers. Thus, the notion of a stable origin, whether it is man, God, or *Langue* as creator of meaning is problematic.

Barthes' *S/Z* (1970) heralds a move away from Structuralism and critiques his previous attempts to classify the numberless narratives in the world into a single structure so that each individual

utterance (parole) acquires meaning by operating within the grammar of a narrative structure (langue). Barthes refuses the idea of a transcendent model of narrative and develops the idea of 'textuality' arguing that each text opens an endless play of signifiers irreducible to an ultimate signified. Barthes (as cited in Young, 1981) states "each text is in some sort its own model...each text...must be treated in its difference" (p.7). A text is no longer considered as a stable structure, difference subverts closed signification and the notion of origins, "difference does not stop and is articulated upon the infinity of texts, of languages, of systems: a difference of which each text is the return and not the origin" (Barthes, 1970, p.3).

Barthes introduces the idea of the 'writerly' text; a text where signifiers remain open and transforms the role of the reader into an active producer of meaning. In the 'writerly' text, difference and plurality are infinite, the 'I' that reads the text is itself a plurality of other texts, cultures and experiences, "of codes which are infinite or, more precisely, lost, whose origin is lost" (Barthes, 1970, p.10). This cannot be fixed by a single narrative structure but correlates with the text being read to form new meanings and new signifieds. Barthes states "this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible" (1970, p.5). To find meanings within the text is to relate them to other meanings from an infinite resource in a never-ending process. Whilst reading, the subject names these meanings and in a process of name association produces limitless potential for new dimensions; "I name, I unname, I rename: so the text passes" (1970, p.20). Meaning therefore transcends the boundaries of structure by correlating with all that has gone before. Meaning is infinite, circular, dispersed along a network of signifiers and without origin; "we know only its departures and returns" (1970, p.11).

Barthes also refers to the 'readerly' text; a text that leaves the reader with a passive role in the reading process. The passage from signifier to signified is unambiguous. This text attempts to subjugate the network of plurality and give an illusion of a stable structure. However, Barthes reverses a 'readerly' text, the Balzac novella *Sarrasine*, by providing a 'writerly' interpretation of it and furnishing the text with a plurality of meanings. The plural text for Barthes becomes a thing in process; a structuration rather than a structure that is freed from the closure of an ultimate signified. To discern the plural meanings the text requires the step-by-step approach of arbitrarily cutting up the narrative units into units of reading termed 'lexias' not only to fragment and disperse the signifier but also to prevent the reader's desire to re-structure. 'Readerly' texts become transformable to 'writerly' texts. The interpretation of a text is to "appreciate what plural constitutes it" (Barthes, 1970, p.20).

Barthes posits five codes each of which operates as a different access to the narrative in a text:

The five codes create a kind of network, a topos through which the entire text passes (or rather in passing, becomes text). Thus, if we make no effort to structure each code, or the five codes among themselves, we do so deliberately, in order to assume the multivalence of the text, its partial reversibility. We are fact concerned not to manifest a structure but to produce a structuration (1970, p.20).

Barthes presents the codes not as a system of langue but as instances of parole that open up infinite perspectives in the text. The codes are a “perspective of quotations, a mirage of structures” (1970, p.20), that do not refer to a transcendental signified but cross-refer to each other. Each code, rather than restricting meaning, contributes to one thread of the meanings that run through the narrative and creates the network of plurality and textuality. For example, the ‘semic’ code is one access to the opening of networks in the narrative. Its feature is connotation and it is the way into the polysemy of a ‘readerly’ text by furnishing logical narrative sequences with a network of endless connotations constantly deferring meaning along a free play of signification. Denotation provides an illusion of a closed signifier but is in fact a double-play of reference to connotation and further connotation and so on.

Another code that provides entrance to the network of structuration is the cultural or referential code which represents a point of cross-reference between all texts. These are the codes of the already written, read, seen and done that a reader brings to the text. However, these codes are not subjective associations but are already inscribed into culture. Although each text is treated in terms of its difference, Barthes does not allude to an individual or original element within the text. The text’s difference is simply it not being another text. The self (creator or reader) and the text are all an interweaving of the codes, “the vast perspective of the already-written which de-originates the utterance” (Barthes, 1970, p.20). The codes are not a closed set of oppositions but a selection from an undetermined possibility, “a perspective opened up by the text” (Barthes, 1970, p.20) in an on-going process of structuration. There are no origins or endings; meaning is deferred, infinite and circular. As Eagleton (1983) states, “(for Barthes) there is no such thing as literary ‘originality’, no such thing as the ‘first’ literary work: all literature is intertextual” (p. 138).

In “The Death of the Author” (1977), Barthes de-centers the importance attached to the concept of ‘author’ in modern society; a concept developed from the Romantics who believed the literary

work to be a medium for communicating the thoughts of the 'genius' author to a reader. Barthes believes such Romantic ideology to dominate literary criticism and works to devalue the notion of a genius creator:

The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end...the voice of a single person, the author confiding in us (p.143).

The author has only the ability to mix writings from the "immense dictionary of discourse...a writing that can know no halt" (1977, p.147). The text is not the inner emotion of the author but is a montage of other writings, a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture...none of them original (1977, p.146). The author cannot be truly original but requires the, "ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words" (1977, p.146), to be able to construct a literary text. The author and his or her biography become strands in the multiplicity of textuality, "an imitation whose origin...is lost, infinitely deferred" (1977, p.147). Barthes signifies the symbolic 'death' of the author to de-originate the final signified of authorial intention and liberate the plurality of meaning that resides in the reader and critic. Plurality dissolves the dominant transcendental signified. For the author to be understood as the centre of meaning requires the existence of other centers of meaning in an infinite regress of prior traces. The transcendental signified becomes an indefinite network of signifiers; "a field without origins" (1977, p.146).

Like Barthes, Derrida also questions the origins of meaning. Derrida believes all discourse relies on 'Logocentrism'; the presupposition that there is an absolute truth or fixed centralizing origin that provides the foundation for knowledge, presence and meaning. Derrida (1967) identifies this as, "the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire for a transcendental signified which will place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign" (p.49). With this starting assumption, discourse is able to validate its own truth claims but cannot provide an explanation of how this is achieved. Derrida believes that discourse can only give the illusion of stable signification as the governing presence of meaning is itself not subject to analysis. This is like questioning the idea of truth, one can only say that it is either true or not true but:

It is only to itself that an appeal against it can be brought, only in itself that a protest against it can be made...it leaves us no other recourse than to strategem and strategy" (Derrida, 1967, p.59).

Logocentrism manifests itself in discourse via hierarchical oppositions which privileges one distinction in the text whilst seeking to repress the other. The strategy of Deconstruction is to undermine and reverse such oppositions to show how internal inconsistencies dismantle the logic of a text. A process of double reading provides at first the determinate meanings of a text and then a second reading of the 'aporias' (blind spots) yields contradictions and paradoxes that unsettle these meanings. Metaphors and incidental turns of argument demonstrate the tension between rhetoric and logic within a text, between what Norris (1987) states as "what the text manifestly means to say and what it is constrained to mean" (p.19). Deconstruction, therefore, is a practice that opens out the signifier-signified relationship, reversing and re-reversing meaning to produce a general displacement of the system.

Derrida's ideas exist in conjunction with works infected with Logocentrism. He also provides a critique of the work of Husserl. Phenomenology attempts to secure a valid origin for knowledge by bracketing all previous constituted knowledge and relying on the primordial presence to see the immediate world it inhabits before the world becomes an object known. Husserl distinguishes between two signs; 'indicative' and 'expressive.' The former sign is considered to mislead and can signify something that does not exist whilst the latter is pure in origin, expressing the signifying intention. However, Derrida (as cited in Tallis, 1995) argues that, "we have no primordial intuition of another's lived experience" (p.31), for pure expression to be able to mean anything and be communicated to another it is necessary for that expression to be indicative. Derrida (as cited in Norris, 1982) states, "whenever the immediate and full presence of the signified is concealed, the signifier will be of an indicative nature" (p.46). Derrida therefore reverses the hierarchical order of Husserl's argument and shows how the indicative sign cannot be so easily repressed. Husserl believes that the temporal present is the source point of the primordial self-presence but for Derrida presence is elusive, complex, and differential involving the trace of that which is present and non-present. Culler (1983) uses the example of the flight of an arrow to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of presence. To focus on the flight of an arrow is in fact to see it in a particular spot and never in motion and yet the insistence is made the arrow is in motion but that motion is never fully present. The flight of the arrow suggests self-presence is never fully present but is the continuous pursuit of traces of itself. The consciousness that perceives the self and then retains that perception and returns to itself is no longer the now but rather the not-now. An original meaning cannot be contained within communication as a sign is never fully present to itself, but is rather present within a chain of infinite signifiers. Self-presence does not precede language or the indicative sign but reveals "the movement of *differance* which always inhabit the pure actuality of now" (Norris, 1982, p.47).

Derrida also deconstructs Plato. Plato's dialogue, *The Phaedrus* posits a hierarchical opposition of speech (expressive sign) over writing (indicative sign). Derrida terms this prioritization as 'phonocentrism.' Speech is seen as primary, self-present, nearer to the originating thought and writing is considered as a distortion of speech. In Plato's text, the Greek word 'pharmakon' is used metaphorically to attack the notion of writing and yet this introduces a double logic into the text as pharmakon signifies simultaneously both 'poison' and 'cure.' By disallowing one interpretation to stand over another it becomes possible to show on one hand, writing being described as the poison or an infection (and other endless connotations of the word) of living speech and on the other hand, the implication that speech is already infected with impurity and writing is the remedy of this. Hence, the order can be reversed and re-reversed. As Derrida (as cited in Norris, 1987) states, "metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic" (p.39).

For Derrida, 'pharmakon' has wider implications by disrupting the traditional notion of the logic of identity (Russell, 1973):

- 1) The Law Of Identity: 'Whatever is, is.'
- 2) The Law Of Contradiction: 'Nothing can be and not be.'
- 3) The Law Of Excluded Middle: 'Everything must either be or not be.'

These laws presuppose an origin that must also share the same qualities; it must be identifiable and non-contradictory. However, pharmakon is supplementary to this order and works to undermine the argument with a play of oppositions that deny any attempt of structure. They are ultimately 'undecidables.' As Derrida (as cited in Kearney, 1986) states:

If the pharmakon is ambivalent it is because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the movement of the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, speech/writing)...The pharmakon is the production of *differance*. It is the *differance* of difference (p. 119).

Differance undermines phonocentrism. At the level of speech the meaning of *differance* is open to distortion; *differance* means 'to differ' whilst difference means 'to defer,' the word has to be in the written form for the specific meaning to be detected. Therefore, if writing is considered impure and speech can also be shown to distort meaning, the origin of meaning is also beyond trace:

The signified concept is never present in itself, in a presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is by right and necessarily inscribed in a chain or system within which refers to the other, to all other concepts through a systematic play of differences (Derrida, 1978, p. 11).

Differance also undermines logocentrism and subverts the nature of its origin. Saussure believes that meaning is formed from distinguishing one sign from another via difference and states that “in language there are only differences, without positive terms” (1974, p.166). The law of identity posits X as X because it is not Y, but this is placing positive terms to difference that Saussure has rejected. Difference therefore becomes that element which is unperceived or a non-concept. *Differance* as ‘to differ’ represents the difference of each sign from one another but it also means ‘to defer’; deferral having no origin and no finality. Meaning is always postponed along an endless chain of signifiers. *Differance* denies classification within discourse but is the paradox that deconstructs discourse. It conceptualizes meaning but at the same time it puts the truth-value of concepts into question by dispersing them into chains of signifiers that cannot be fixed. The starting assumption of *differance* cannot allude to a source of meaning as it deconstructs the possibility of origin, Derrida (1978) states, “*differance* is the non-full, non-simple origin, the structured and differing origin of *differances*. Consequently, the name of origin no longer pertains to it” (p.12). *Differance* is the “possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual process and system in general” (1978, p.11), and Derrida proposes a sort of writing before writing; (*arche-writing*) which is the precondition of knowledge in the respect of having to exist if the ability to think of knowledge is at all possible. Derrida (as cited in Kearney, 1986) states, “it is the very thing which cannot let itself be reduced to the form of a presence” (p.121). This seems close to implying a sort of logocentric metaphysical writing that operates as the origin of meaning, however, this description can be displaced by being able to refer to it. To explain, such reference to a metaphysical origin requires meaning to be able to refer to what is meant. This meaning is predetermined by language, which is not an ultimate reality but a differential play of endless signifiers - a construction of that reality. Derrida (as cited in Descombes, 1980) states, “it is non-origin that is originary” (p.145).

Deconstruction, however, falls prey to its own work. Derrida cannot escape the medium he is trying to deconstruct and must communicate his ideas via language. To discuss Deconstruction as a form of discourse is to betray its very nature by reinforcing the logocentric assumptions it is trying to subvert. Yet, Derrida (as cited in Rajnath, 1989) realizes that Deconstruction must

“borrow from the logic it deconstructs” (p.45), and he resists any attempt to place Deconstruction within the framework of theoretical discussion. Derrida places his key terms ‘sous rature’ to represent the idea that meaning is never fully present to itself; it can never refer only to itself but has always the traces of other signifiers. A signifier does not only refer to a signified rather meaning is dispersive; a signifier refers to a signified or another signifier which in turn refers to another signifier and so on. Derrida describes this as the free-play of language or the play of differences. The style of Derrida’s writing is purposely difficult with emphasis on wordplay, paradox and pun to undermine the reader’s assurance of a stable meaning and defer a final signified. Neologisms that are introduced are never constant and are replaced with new ones so as to prevent any of them becoming part of a central concept; they are ‘undecidables’ or non-concepts.

For Derrida, therefore, the notion of origin or logocentrism cannot be sustained as its meaning can only be expressed in a language system that cannot transcend its boundaries to explain itself. The signs that construct humanity’s perception of reality can never be fully present but require the existence of other signs to be understood. If one sign is considered as an original it is always possible to look behind and beyond that sign ad infinitum. To illustrate further, if a sign is considered to be the first original, it must contain the quality of difference to be able to distinguish it from its subsequent copies. If there is no difference then it could not be considered as original as it would be considered as nothing at all. The copy allows the original to be the first but it then follows that the copy precedes the original. The original can never be the pure original but can only consist of the traces of the already written. As Derrida (1978) states, “there is only a trace which replaces a presence which has never been present, an origin by means of which nothing has begun” (p.295).

5. Conclusion

Ruthven (1979) states, “that writers must be original is so ubiquitous an assumption in our time as to appear a self-evident truth” (p.102). However, early theories of art advocate imitation, emulation and representation. Originality is considered unachievable; there is nothing new to be discovered. For example, Chaucer (as cited in Ruthven, 1979) wrote:

out of olde bokes, in good feyth,
Cometh al this newe science that men lere (p.102).

The Romantics believe originality to be a necessity in the creation of literature. Literature takes

its origins from the subjective emotions of the poet. The inspired poet has the ability to break with tradition and be truly original and in doing so parallels the original act of creation by God. The poet is able to bring forth a new element into the intellectual universe. Ideas of individuality, genius, imagination and creativity dominate the modern signification of originality. However, this signification is unstable when Structuralism and Post-structuralism are taken into consideration.

Structuralism argues that meaning is only possible due to a pre-existing system of language. To write is to bring into operation a system of rules that allows the words on the page to mean. Language determines subjective expression and constructs humanity's perception of reality. Originality is not possible within the system as an individual can never be separate from the language that determines the individual. To be original is not even possible in the sense of creating something without meaning, as this would generate the binary opposition of sense/nonsense. The creation would be incorporated into the system under the classification of 'non-sense.' Structuralism determines underlying structures and relates all phenomena back to the system. All literary texts (*parole*) are reducible to how they function within the system (*langue*). Therefore, individual utterances are not original in the sense of existing from the beginning but are dependent on the prior existence of the system. It follows, however, that the language system can thus be considered as original.

Post-structuralism questions the assumption that the language model is the origin of meaning as the ability to understand the underlying structures is contained in language itself. In Saussurean linguistics, meaning is seen as a process of difference. A sign 'means' because it is not another sign. A sign can therefore never be fully present in itself but requires the coexistence of other signs for it to be understood. Difference generates meaning but has no origin, for X to be different requires the existence of Y, Z and so on. There are no origins of meaning, only endless traces of past and future signifiers. Originality cannot be fully present in literature as meaning involves the traces of other texts. The author and reader of literature both bring to the text a plurality of other texts, cultures and experiences. A literary text is never pure in origin but is intertextual; a montage "drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (Barthes, 1977, p.46). Thus, with respect to university thesis writing, the ability to demonstrate original insight is indeed problematic; one can only demonstrate an insight of what has already been written.

References

- Abrams, Meyer. The Mirror and the Lamp. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953.
- Aristotle. Poetics. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1920.
- Barthes, Roland. S/Z. Paris: Seuil, 1970.
- Barthes, Roland. Image-Music-Text. London: Fontana Press, 1977
- Belsey, Catherine. Critical Practice. London: Methuen, 1980.
- Coleridge, Samuel. Biographia Literaria. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.
- Culler, Jonathan. Structuralist Poetics. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1975.
- Culler, Jonathan. Barthes. London: Fontana, 1983.
- Derrida, Jacques. Of Grammatology. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967.
- Derrida, Jacques. Writing and Differance. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1978.
- Descombes, Vincent. Modern French Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980.
- Eagleton, Terry. Literary Theory: An Introduction. London: Blackwell, 1983.
- Ferguson, Frances. Wordsworth: Language as Counter Spirit. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977.
- Kearney, Richard. Modern Movements in European Philosophy. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986.
- Kristeller, Paul. "Creativity and Tradition." *Journal of History of Ideas*, 44, 1983, pp.105-113.
- McFarland, Thomas. "The Originality Paradox." *New Literary History*, 5, 1974, pp. 447-476.
- Norris, Christopher. Deconstruction: Theory and Practice. London: Methuen, 1982.
- Norris, Christopher. Derrida. London: Fontana Press, 1987.
- Olsen, Stein. The Structure of Literary Understanding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978.
- Prickett, Stephen. Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Poetry of Growth. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970.
- Propp, Vladimir. Morphology of the Folktale. Texas: University of Texas, 1968.
- Rajneith. Deconstruction: A Critique. London: Macmillan Press, 1989.
- Russell, Bertrand. The Problems of Philosophy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Ruthven, Kenneth. Critical Assumptions. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. Course in General Linguistics. London: Fontana Press, 1974.
- Selden, Raman. The Theory of Criticism. London: Longman, 1988.
- Sim, Stuart. Art: Context and Value. London: Open University Press, 1992.
- Tallis, Raymond. Not Saussure. London: Macmillan Press, 1995.
- Tulloch, Sara. Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Wordsworth, William. "Preface to the Lyrical Ballads". The Poetical Works. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1923. pp. 934-44.
- Wordsworth, William. The Prelude. Oxford: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1959.
- Young, Robert. Untying the Text. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1981.

