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The Rise of Cross-Cultural Intertextuality

In isolation texts, including literary texts, have no significance. They express thoughts and feelings and refer to social reality, but can do so only because every text has been written or pronounced in response to other texts. This is what theorists of intertextuality and rewriting, such as Julia Kristeva and Michael Riffaterre, maintained. In 1969 Kristeva wrote in a now classical phrasing: "tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte" (146). Almost ten years later Riffaterre posited: "the text always refers to something said otherwise and elsewhere" (138). Here intertextuality is raised to a general principle of writing, but, if intertextuality is everywhere, how can it be made amenable to research? Is it a concept that can be used in the analysis of texts and contribute to our understanding of verbal communication?

Forms of Intertextuality

Intertextuality itself is a dialogic concept, introduced in opposition to a restricted focus on the text as in New Criticism and other schools of immanent interpretation. It drew attention to the world of texts outside the text under consideration and detracted from the idea of the text as a structured work of art with clear boundaries. The concept of intertextuality is a crucial instrument in our understanding of how a text was made or could have been made; it correlates with an open-ended concept of discourse. The term intertextuality has the connotation of potentiality: how a writer may invest significance in a text and how readers may attribute significance to it. For clarity's sake we must distinguish between the cultural debate in which intertextuality is effected in writing and discussed in literary criticism on the one hand, and the study of that debate on the other; between intervention in

the cultural debate and the empirical examination of that debate. The latter approach allows us to make the following distinctions: 1) intertextuality has been intended by an author, and has been recognized by readers; 2) intertextuality has been intended by an author, but has not been recognized by readers; 3) intertextuality has not been intended by an author, but has been recognized by readers; 4) intertextuality has not been intended by an author, and has also not been recognized by readers.

The first three cases occur often and must be well distinguished. About the last case there is, of course, not much to be said.

As a general principle of writing, intertextuality is a wide concept that is operative on two different levels: at the level of semantics (for instance: plot, themes, metaphors) and text syntactic form (for instance: genre, style, narrative form, poetical structure, rhyme). Since, as Lotman suggested, formal features often have a semantic effect, a strict division between semantic and syntactic intertextuality is untenable. For example, the major genre differentiations are based on form but by convention do have a semantic effect. Similarly, rhyme and other poetic structures, though largely formal in nature, are also semanticized.

Any poetic or narrative form can be seen as a rewriting of other literary and nonliterary utterances. This corresponds with Riffaterre's view that texts always "refer to something said otherwise and elsewhere." As a consequence, it can be argued that all texts are made of used language, previously spoken or written fragments of discourse. However, readers are not always aware of that, but such awareness increases if the text they read is read as literature, i.e., if they look not only for references to private experience and social reality, but also for the formal organization of the text and the intertextual relations with one or more pre-texts.

Motivations for Intertextuality, Effects of Intertextuality

We do not know much about the real motivations of writers for turning to specific intertextual devices. In their diaries or interviews they may raise a corner of the veil, and through the personae in their fiction or poetry and metanarrative and metapoetical commentary we may get some idea of why a particular discourse is chosen, why a particular text is imitated, emulated, criticized, or parodied. However, such references are seldom straightforward, and not always reliable. In the case of rewritings — a most outspoken form of intertextuality — the motivation is sometimes partly commercial, as in the

case of Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001). When the rewriting ostensibly tries to profit from the fame of its predecessor, the accusation of plagiarism may follow.

As Liedeke Plate has argued, the effect of rewritings is that they "always imply a return to a classic text and a continuation of its literary life" (11). The writer's motivation may be grounded in particular philosophical, ethical, cultural or political views, focusing, for instance, on issues of gender (Christa Wolfs *Kassandra* 1983; J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* 1986), or on a postmodernist reinterpretation of crime and punishment (Vladimir Makanin's *Andeground, Hi Geroj nashevo vremeni [Underground, or a Hero of Our Time]* 1999).

But whatever the motivation for rewriting well-known literary texts, the effect is that the rewriting places itself in a literary tradition and conveys the hint that the rewritten text also requires a literary reading. The device of rewriting distances the text from journalistic and scholarly writings. It is a signpost asking for an aesthetic interpretation, with the resultant de pragmatization and emphasis on intuitive holistic views. Although references to social reality are subdued, they continue to compete with the pleasure of recognizing the formal and thematic similarities with *and* differences from the earlier text. The double referentiality, both to social reality and to a pre-text, cause an ambiguity, an *ambiguite hypertextuelle*, which, as Genette suggested, enhances the aesthetic reception of the new text (451). Perhaps intertextual correspondence is a postmodernist compensation for the loss of symbolist and modernist textual coherence. This is not to say that there was no intertextuality before postmodernism, but it cannot be denied that the references to preceding texts proliferated under the postmodernist regime, and one of its effects is an emphasis on the formal nature of literary discourse which had lost ground in other respects.

The Cross-Cultural

The papers by Jeanne Hong Zhang, Lisa Wong, Li Xia, Kishori Nayak, and Marta Skwara, which were presented at the workshop "A New Concept of World Literature: Cross-Cultural Intertextuality" of the ICLA Congress in Hong Kong in August 2004, deal with various forms of cross-cultural intertextuality, but do not problematize the notion of cultural boundaries. In fact, there is no methodological difference between research into intercultural and into intra-cultural intertextuality, just as Jan Mukafovsky once argued that there is no methodological difference between interliterary and intra-literary

comparative studies (Durisin 94). For why should our method of examining, for instance, Edward Bond's play *Narrow Road to the Deep North* (1968), partly a rewriting of Basho's travel sketches published by Penguin under the same title, be different from our method of analyzing his play *Lear* (1971) which has *King Lear* as a pre-text? Certainly the English and Japanese cultures are different and understanding Bond's rewriting of Basho's travelogue requires expert knowledge of both cultures, but the research method will be the same as in the case of intra-cultural rewriting.

The notion of cultural boundary becomes questionable if we are to study a German rewriting of an English play, for instance, Botho Strauss's *Der Park* (*The Park*, 1981), for which again Shakespeare provided the pre-text. We can as well argue that German culture differs from English culture, or present-day Western culture from that of the Renaissance — or even that often years ago, or of yesterday — as that we may depart from the idea of *one* world culture. It depends on how a culture is defined. If we consider a culture as a system of conventions, it is logical to conclude that with the change of one convention, at least in principle, a new cultural system appears. However, the contributors to the workshop kept away from these theoretical considerations and took the common-sense position that the notion of "cross-cultural" implies differences between cultures widely apart as to location and time.

In this way the authors are referring to Chinese, Indian, American, and European literature, dealing with migrant texts and concepts which provide an ever shifting pattern to that loose idea of world literature. And living in three different continents — Asia, Australia, and Europe — the contributors present their arguments from highly different existential positions, which adds to the value of their scholarly discourse that allows for comparison and generalization.

The tide of my introductory observations suggests, not very surprisingly, that there is more cross-cultural intertextuality now than ever before. When launching his idea of *Weltliteratur*, Goethe referred already to the increasing international traffic and the speed with which messages could be sent to distant locations. Nowadays we have, of course, even more reason for assuming a world literature, and indeed the concept is underscored by the ever increasing production of translations, criticism of translated works, international prizes, and cross-cultural intertextuality. I would argue that in particular the latter phenomenon — the creative assimilation of texts and ideas from another culture in new work — indicates an ultimate form of cultural integration, an explicit sign of transcending cultural barriers.

However, the following articles also evince that the main motivation of the writers they discuss is *not* the unification of the world through literature, or the advance of world literature, or a similar abstract goal. What are the motivations that come to the fore? Or what effects do these cross-cultural

literary interventions have?

Apart from literary intentions, which we have hinted at above, each writer turning for inspiration to a faraway culture may also have more specific objectives in mind. Jeanne Hong Zhang argues quite explicitly that Chinese poets used the form and substance of American confessional poetry to revive the individual self and a gendered identity that had long been suppressed by "orthodox socialist realism and ... the old collective-oriented literary tradition." She concludes that Sylvia Plath "provides contemporary Chinese women poets with a darkened, powerful language to speak of womanhood and female sexuality." Clearly, the intertextual relation to American confessional poetry is motivated by the need to find a lever for dislodging official and conventional notions of poetry and the self. Similarly, Marta Skwara shows how Mickiewicz used the work of Emerson for underscoring his own call for a romantic, national awakening, an appeal with long-lasting echoes that was reinforced by later authors, such as Stefan Zeromski, who used the stratagem of incorporating a poem by Walt Whitman in one of his influential novels. Lisa Wong observes that the Taiwanese poet Yang Mu absorbs notions and phrases from the classical Chinese, English and German traditions in order to expand his semantic universe to cosmopolitan dimensions. Only in this way can he effectively develop a philosophical discourse on space, time, and humanity. Though more implicitly, Li Xia's discussion of Gao Xingjian's *Soul Mountain* leads to a strikingly similar conclusion. Kishori Nayak shows that intertextual references in Shashi Deshpande's *A. Matter of Time* enhance the author's attempt to rewrite family history from the point of view of women, whereas Arundhati Roy uses intertextual references to underscore her morbid world view. In all five studies the technique of intertextuality is a ploy to enhance the effect of the argument, but not the argument alone.

Most writers who turn to the device of intertextuality seem to be aware of its potential to elicit a literary reading of the new text, and readers do not doubt that the poetry of Yang Mu or Zhai Yongming and the fiction of Gao Xingjian, Zeromski or Deshpande should be read as literature. As argued above, the ambivalence of the double referentiality, to social reality on the one hand and, mostly literary, pre-texts on the other, alert readers to the necessity

of a careful reading that allows them to see things in a new light. References to texts from another culture serve literally to "make things strange" (*ostranenie veshchej*) (Shklovsky 14). I am not saying that the Russian Formalists were always right, but their observations on the device of "making strange" and the resulting intensified perception cannot be ignored in any theory of literary production and reception.

With cross-cultural intertextuality, literary production has reached the limits of its expanded universe. There is no beyond the most distant culture, no beyond the devices of cross-cultural intertextuality. If I am not mistaken, this confrontation with the outer limits of literary communication has the boomerang effect of making us aware of the ultimate closure of our semantic universe (which, of course, is large enough to further explore and surprise us). As I cannot foresee the consequences of this conclusion, I hope it may once become the topic of another workshop.

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