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Synchronic and diachronic readings of the contemporary text: Angela Carter's and Eowyn Ivey *Snow Child*

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The present paper situates its concerns at the crossroads between the synchronic and the diachronic approaches to the literary text, as it attempts at demonstrating that the latter becomes mandatory for a full experience with the contemporary texts. In this sense, the paper focuses on the intertextual mechanism which triggers a diachronic interpretation of the text and which can take the extreme form of literary vampirism, as is the case of Angela Carter's texts, or more subtle disguises, as illustrated by Eowyn Ivey's eponymous debut novel. The study also discusses the problematic relationship of contemporary literature to literary tradition, a relationship whose dynamics puts the reader in the uncomfortable but eventually rewarding position of constantly looking elsewhere for meaning. Fantasy is seen as the perfect excuse for intertextuality and for providing an alternative not only to reality but also to the literary tradition, as these texts rewrite important parts of the consecrated literary canon.

Keywords: *synchrony, diachrony, contemporary Anglo-American literature, literary tradition, intertextuality, fantasy*

1. Introduction

Born at the intersection between synchronic and diachronic forces that govern the acts of writing and reading, intertextuality has its roots in Bakhtin's notions of dialogism and heteroglossia. Often described as an invisible network of cross-references which foreground other texts and other voices, intertextuality seems to replicate, at text level, what sociologist Manuel Castells has recently identified at the social level as the network society, i.e. a society where meaning is circulated through a system of interconnected nodes, some more important than others, a system facilitated by modern technology and social media. In this society, cultural models and practices circulate freely, allowing meaning to be constantly defined and redefined at these nodal points. The consequences of living in such a network society are primarily related to the cause-effect phenomenon which postulates that

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any action in any part of the network will cause effects for the entire network. Then, there is the question of producing and receiving meaning, which happens instantenously and which is context-bound. Thus, the local becomes global and the global becomes local. According to Castells, the construction of the subject within the network society is no longer based on the civil society, but rather on communal resistance to it (Castells 2009, 11). The subject emerges thus as a construct at the intersection of local and global.

Keeping the model in mind and transferring it at text-level, intertextuality operates on a similar logic. It transfers concepts from one place to another, from one subject to another and from one context to another, bonding texts and subjects through an invisible network of meaning. Intertextuality emerges as a crossroads, a place of intersection between a text and its predecessors, a web of diachronies in synchrony, as well as a play of absence and presence.

Intertextuality is by no means new. It is as old as literature and the forces that govern it. What is new is the theoretical fuss around it, as well as its intentional use as a new subversive literary device. All these belong to the contemporary scene. Coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s, as a development of Bakhtin's dialogism or heteroglossia, the term intertextuality has come to be emblematic in describing the contemporary text. Kristeva's semiotic analysis proposes that a text is never stable and frozen in a certain spatio-temporal context. It is alive, fluid in its boundaries and in a continuous transformation (Kristeva 2000, 56). The role of readers in Kristeva's model is crucial. They are the ones to produce a text's transformation, according to their individual capacity of understanding, their expectations and their epistemological competence.

Synthetically, intertextuality implies that a text is never fully accomplished, but under permanent construction, which implies that a synchronic analysis of the text only is insufficient for a full understanding of its underlying messages.

This also implies that a text is never new; it is created and re-created from other texts, as Umberto Eco prophetically stated decades ago. A text will therefore always represent a place where power relations are re-established and re-enforced. This place of intersection can only be found by using a diachronic approach. For these reasons, I believe that synchrony only can no longer secure a complete reading of the contemporary text.

This paper focuses on two different texts bearing the same title, yet of slightly different inspiration, with the intention of illustrating how the contemporary intertextual practice can take either radical forms, as is the case of Angela Carter's *Snow Child*, or more subtle accents, as displayed by Eowyn Ivey's eponymos novel. Both texts are discussed within the larger framework of feminine writing, with its particular concerns and modes of expressions, departing from the assumption that for both, the intertextual gesture represents the starting point. While in the first case, that is Angela Carter's *Snow Child*, the writer violently and deliberately unmasks intertextuality's capacity to subvert, revalue and expose latent meanings by

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unscrupulously feeding on literary tradition, the latter, i.e. Eowyn Ivey's novel, is preoccupied with how the contemporary text can positively recuperate that same literary tradition.

Thus, the present study situates its concerns at the crossroads of contemporary literary theories, gender studies and reception theories, in an effort to understand how literary tradition is both undermined and revalued by the contemporary text, which can no longer be decoded by a synchronic analysis only.

2. Intertextuality in the hands of women: feminist and feminine

In trying to establish a parallel canon, which would include texts by women writers, feminists have fallen back to the same narrow ideology which excluded women writers from the official canon in the first place. In this sense, Elaine Showalter, for instance, proposed *gynocritics* as a form of criticism which would investigate the particularities of feminine texts and would establish intertextual connections among them, without minding the male-produced canon.

Such an enterprise is not only harmful but also extremely narrow-minded. It actually reinforces women's exclusion from the literary canon which represents in fact the very reason of complaint for feminist criticism. The feminist stance turns out to be fundamentally flawed as a critique of patriarchy, because it departs from the very same binary system of thinking it has accused the latter for using and abusing. Feminism rests its edifice on the male-female binary, trying to swap the terms of the binary in terms of positive/negative attributes, but keeping the same matrix of binary thought. Consequently, reaching a fundamentally different conclusion becomes impossible. Empowering women and giving them a voice which would silence or at least overpower that of men was exactly what patriarchy did to women, but in reverse. Creating a body of literature and critical discourse which would follow this logic proved to be counterproductive. On the other hand, rethinking difference as diversity and not binary opposition, having Derrida's *differance* as a starting point, turned out to be far more clever and rewarding. By replacing feminist with feminine, contemporary discourses about the woman and her cultural representations and performances have been able to recuperate the women-written texts from the derisory area feminism had thrown them into. No longer viewed as mere counter-discourses to patriarchy and male supremacy, these were able to reveal their true potential as complex texts.

It is in this context that intertextuality is being discussed in the present paper, as a wilful interrogation of norms and canons altogether, and of those of patriarchal ideology in particular. In the hands of contemporary women writers, intertextuality becomes a powerful subversive tool meant at interrogating the legitimacy of consecrated master narratives like history, religion, literary tradition. It is always intended and it always asks for competent readers that would detect the intertextual

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web and that would be able to complete the text which is most of the times left open. As Cristian Moraru puts it, is "a fairly discriminate operation. It selects the bodies of literature it feeds off to attain specific objectives. It unfolds in response to precisely defined-aesthetic, social, political-conditions and picks out its "matrix" text according to the specifics of this response" (Moraru 2001, 171).

In this respect, later in this study, a connection will be made between the "digestive" feature of intertextuality and its potential to incorporate other texts. This has led me to the coinage of "literary vampirism", a term I find particularly suitable to describe Angela Carter's fictional manner of incorporating and digesting master narratives and which I have described in an ampler study.

3. Angela Carter's literary vampirism: *The Snow Child*, a case study

In an ampler study (i.e. *Narrating the Difference: the Fiction of Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson)* I proposed the term literary vampirism in order to describe Carter's use of the intertextual practice. I explained there that while intertextuality is often covert, literary vampirism is strikingly overt, blindingly exposed to the eye, and, therefore, utterly shocking. In addition, literary vampirism is never the result of accident; on the contrary, it is always the cleverly devised scheme of a skilful author. As Linden Peach argued, Carter's exploitation of intertextuality is meant to render her acute skepticism about frameworks, as well as her faith in new creative possibilities which would represent reality in a fundamentally different way (Peach, 18). In her case, "intertextuality becomes not so much a characteristic of her writing but a boldly thematised part of it" (Peach 1998, 19).

Angela Carter's short-story collection, The Bloody Chamber, which hosts one of this study's focus texts, *The Snow Child*, completes an extreme exercise of intertextual subversion: feeding on what is traditionally considered the stock of European popular culture in order to create monstrous but accurate mirrors of contemporary society. Intertextuality, in its hypostasis of literary vampirism, becomes the thematic principle. Based on Charles Perrault's 1697 collection of fairytales, Carter's stories depart from literary tradition in obvious ways. The duty principle which organizes the traditional fairy tale is replaced by the pleasure principle, which seems to be the sole reason for living. The tone is far from moralizing, the male hero is turned impotent in so many ways, either castrated or blind, the stories lose their standard value and are rendered sordid.

Although annihilating the pleasure principle of escapism in the literary text, Carter's stories do concentrate on pleasure but, in this case, pleasure is strictly related to the body. In fact, this functions as just another mechanism of subversion, focusing on the physical aspect of pleasure, in order to dislocate the authority of spiritual pleasure.

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So does *The Snow Child*, a one-page story, the shortest in the collection, which by itself does not make much sense, were it not for its intertext. Readers find it easy to identify it as *Snow White*, due to the symbolical elements Carter preserves precisely to ensure fast recognition.

The story features a mature couple, the Count and the Countess, having a ride on a winter's day and witnessing the materialization of the Count's wish: "I wish I had a girl". The girl materializes out of thin air and melts after the Count has intercourse with her dead body. A storyline that is neither rewarding nor commonsensical, were it not for its subtext, which is rendered obvious by Carter's artistry with visual effects and key-elements. The Count's three wishes which replicate exactly the queen's three wishes in *Snow White*, the wintery landscape, the condensed chromatic range (white, black, red), the snow child herself who for a brief while replaces the Countess, all of these warn the reader that this is not a text to be read alone. That this is a vampire text which feeds on another well-known piece of literature for very clear purposes. That this is subversive, wicked, clever and rich and that it requires an equally clever, well-read and alert reader.

Unlike the original story, Carter's text is about desire in its bodily form of lust, about growing old together as a couple, about the dynamics of gender power relations, about presence and absence. The snow child never really materializes. She is a fantasy, a naked white body in mid-winter, a voiceless, therefore lifeless creature who is there only because she has been objectified by the male gaze. The same male gaze which, through an act of metaphorical aggression, the rape, causes her to melt down and disappear. Carter's agenda is complex. Her artistry subtle. Her literary vampirism obvious. And hence, the reader's diachronic decoding necessary.

On a metatextual level, Kelly Hurley argues that vampirism is a reversal of Freud's Oedipal complex, as the vampire first penetrates the victim (biting), and then extracts its vital content (sucking). The phallic biting canine restates patriarchal authority, as it incorporates the vampire into a male/incubus (phallic) order, while the sucking establishes a close connection to the mother/succubus, integrating the vampire into the matriarchal order (Hurley 2004, 135). Eventually, vampires can only be suppressed through the insertion of the phallic stake, as a return to the rule of the father. Plunging the stake at the heart of literary tradition and its normative stance, Carter undermines its ideological supremacy and asserts a literature of resistance to any norm.

5. Eowyn Ivey's *Snow Child*

Eowyn Ivey's 2012 debut novel *The Snow Child* is based on Snegurochka, a Russian folktale which has many common elements with the Western story of Snow White, but which is much more relevant to the novel's Alaskan setting. As an Alaskan born

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and raised novelist, Eowyn Ivey opts for a Russian intertext to subtly refer back to the province's troubled history as a former subject of dispute between the Russian empire and the American government. Set in the Alaskan wilderness, the novel rewrites the story of a childless elderly couple who, in the middle of a winter storm, craft their own snow child that miraculously comes to life the next day. The snow child cannot be pinned down and will come and go as she pleases, living in the woods, hunting for hares and glutons, having a fox as a pet and making brief visits to the couple's home. Year after year, she will leave when spring comes and come back with the first snow. Completely immaterial at first, vanishing into thin air every time her adoptive parents want to make her stay, the original Snegurochka will eventually melt when she experiences romantic love. Ivey's snow child is slighty different. Although she appears to have materialized out of thin air and as a response to the couple's desperate wish to have a child, we learn that she has a history of her own, with a dead father whose corpse she guards deep in the winter woods and with a long lost mother whose memory she recollects from an old photograph she keeps in a wooden box in her den.

Ivey's novel allows for a synchronic analysis because, unlike Carter's short story, it can be read on its own and still make sense. However, a diachronic approach allows for a much deeper understanding of the text. The fantastic is no longer at the core of the story, as Ivey manages to suspend the reader between belief and disbelief, at least for the first two thirds of the novel. Faina, the snow child, gradually materializes as a real flesh and blood creature, who will eventually be fully achieved by maternity. Her romance with Garett, a mountain boy, and her subsequent pregnancy are twists of the plot which weaken, I believe, Ivey's well started narrative, through their predictability and their obvious endeavour to please mass audiences. Giving birth to a baby boy exhausts Faina's living potential and she disappears into thin air weeks after having the baby, out, on a winter night similar to that of her first appearance.

In the case of Ivey's narrative, a diachronic approach that would necessarily incorporate the Russian subtext is the one that can give depth to a disappointing ending. The displaced fantastic is actually the backbone of this story that would otherwise be bland. Rewriting a very popular Russian folktale allows Ivey to explore the intensity of the Alaskan experience, the ongoing conflict between nature and culture, between wilderness and humanity, and the ontological fracture between reality and fantasy. The snow child becomes a metaphor not of desire, as was the case in Angela Carter's story, but rather of the lack, of the missed goals of a couple's growing up together.

Ivey nicely rewrites an ancient popular folktale with no subliminal messages. For her, it is not about planting a stake at the heart of patriarchy's master narratives, but rather about recuperating a storyline that is worth exploring and expanding. It is true though that without this fantastic subtext, Ivey's novel would be linear and even poor. But her recuperation of tradition is clever and well designed. In this case, the

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reader is offered not a vampire text, a distorted, subversive rewriting of the literary canon, but a thankful glimpse back at what constitutes the essence of humanity: storytelling.

5. Conclusion

Moving from text to metatext, it is obvious that Angela Carter allows the traditional and seemingly innocent, fairy-tale to contemplate its own potential for corruption in the intertextual mirror. She develops and subverts the link between the traditional perception of women as property and their objectification as flesh. In Carter's story, the woman is both the aggressor and the victim, both the wicked witch and the innocent, voiceless, faceless snow child, which may be read as a reaction to the overall categorizations of women in literature: […] all the mythic versions of women, from the myth of the redeeming purity of the virgin to that of the healing, reconciling mother, are consolatory nonsenses […] Mother goddesses are just as silly a notion as father gods. (Carter Notes from the Front Line 12).

The strong connection between vampirism, eating, and fairy-tales is located precisely at the oral level. If this is obvious for the first two elements of the enumeration, the last is connected to it through its means of enactment. Fairy-tales are always told or read to children, as these are unable to read for themselves. The mouth is thus turned into the sole object of providing pleasure. By rewriting classical fairy-tales, Carter deconstructs the oral tradition as the foundation of canonical literature. Her texts feed on traditional fairy-tales and release new vampire-like stories in the literary world. The revolt against mainstream discourses is euphemized through this symbolic practice.

By way of contrast, Eowyn Ivey feeds on the folktale tradition in order to reinstaure its magic appeal. Actually, her text completely relies on the allure of classical storytelling and good old-fashioned fantasy in order to ensure her novel the success it might otherwise miss. Her *Snow Child* recuperates the simple story-telling in a way that might be read as a powerful message at a metatextual level: contemporary writers need to tell the stories again, in a remarkable, but sometimes desperate effort to build a literature/discourse of their own and exit the canon. Re-enchanting the world is only possible through storytelling, which is no longer meant to subdue people to phony master narratives, but rather to heal their fragmented identities.

As readers, we witness thus two very different instances of using similar subtexts. We find ourselves in the position of either opting for a text that requires reader authorship in the process of making sense or comfortably enjoying a text that works well by itself and gratifies people's basic need for stories. Thus, Angela Carter's story encapsulates postmodernism's fundamental destabilization of references, in what I have called a disenchantment of the world, whereas

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Ivey's respectful revisiting of literary tradition signals the death of postmodernity and the re-enchantment of the world through storytelling.

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