

WHO YOU ARE IS (NOT) WHAT YOU WRITE

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Abstract: Based on George Steiner’s concept of cultural topologies (the transformations, “re-tellings” or re-workings that any cultural artifact may go through and still be “the same”—text, film, drama, ballet, cartoon, music, painting...) the paper starts from a play—Parfumerie—and a short story—Appointment with Love—by more or less obscure authors (Miklos Laszlo and Sulamith Ish-Kishor) to follow several translations, adaptations, variants, plagiarized “versions”... in a surprisingly long series of such closely related artistic products. The explanation for this “huge appeal” of the two texts is found in the simplicity of the template narrative fable and the two fundamental human components—identity and communication—that form its substance.

Keywords: topologies of culture, template, variants, identity, communication

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds
Or bends with the remover to remove...

.....
Love’s not Time’s fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come.
From “Sonnet CXVI”

If by some kind of supreme pronouncement (like Will’s?) no impediments would ever be admitted to the union of true minds, what we could get is a topological series made up of ten to fifteen (and more) compositions based upon this simple template: two feuding young people—clerks or co-workers in the same place—who detest each other on sight, reserve their words of affection for their respective secret romantic pen pals or e-pals whom they’ve never met; i.e. in a manner of speaking, as, again secretly, they hope their other selves would at least resemble their real ones; so the format will also contain a disclosure, revelation, or recognition scene, with recognition “signals” and a test; as a matter of fact, their double experience/relationship pattern may represent a test in itself, one by which the real protagonists (“real” in their respective fictions) test their constructed selves’ attitudes, feelings and decisions. Time to mention that one of our working titles for this paper was “Somebody Else’s Words” (probably a more appropriate one), as, properly speaking (something most of us almost never or very seldom do), in writing you become someone else, so “your” writing is someone else’s writing (a form of split identity plagiarism?).

The topological components (we are using here George Steiner’s concept and theory concerning literary-cultural transformations and variations as “topologies of culture”) in this case are plays (texts and performances), short stories, films and film scripts, remakes, musicals, adaptations, translations and re-writes, whose settings are in Budapest, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Paris, Geneva, Bangkok, and... cyberspace; a perfume store, a leather-goods shop, bookshop, music or gift shop, maroquinerie, a train station or an airport.

Where a recognition identifier was required, this was a flower (red or yellow rose, carnation...) and/or a book—just any book or, in specific cases, Maugham’s Of Human Bondage, Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, or Austen’s Pride and Prejudice; no motivation for any of these choices is given,

but a reader can guess: Maugham's 1915 title is a borrowing from Spinoza's Ethics and is continued—or The Strength of Emotions; moreover, Philip Carey's disability (a club foot) may be an invitation for a test; then, Tolstoy's 1878 masterpiece ("the best ever written"—William Faulkner) is a complex imaginative exploration of the problems of love, hypocrisy, fidelity, marriage, passion..., while Austen's 1813 novel is, first, one that Kathleen of You've Got Mail "must have read 200 times" (and "when you read a book as a child it becomes part of your identity.../who you are is what you read..."); and, second, one whose message is "Do not judge a book by its cover..."(see Cassie Nelson)

As secrecy, confusion, misunderstanding, inversion, error, radical dualism, incongruity..., plus humour, satire, wit, play, fun and irony are the elements that all these compositions extract their substance from, in Northrop Frye's philosophy of literary mythoi we are dealing with the comic fictional mode; going much further back, one could invoke Plato (Philebus) and his idea of the ridiculous as a failure of self-knowledge, i.e. the character's efforts to live up to an ideal (constructed in the letters or e-mails) of self that he/she is not fit for; and hence the mask and the distance between one self and the other.

The whole thing seems to have started in Budapest in the 1930s, when Miklos Laszlo (1903-1973), Hungarian playwright (The Happiest Man, Katherine, St. Lazar's Pharmacy ...) of a German-Jewish extraction, with a personal identity problem (his other pen-names include Nicholas Leitner, Miklos Leitner, Nikolaus Laszlo, Laszlo Miklos, Leitner Laszlo Nicholas), wrote and published his Illatszertar—"an upscale Parfumerie establishment—health and beauty aids, knick-knacks...", as described by E. P. Dowdall/infra in an e-mail answer to our request of 2 March 2018, which had its premiere at the Pest Theatre in 1937. In 1938 he and his family left for New York, in 1939 he married actress Florence Herman, and gradually came to have several writing contracts with MGM (for The Big City of 1948 among them); a Hungarian TV film based on the play was directed by Miklos Hajdufy in 1987.

So in pre-WW II Budapest, weeks before Christmas, in Mr. Hammerschmidt's parfumerie, (Dowdall again) "the head clerk George Horvath and the new girl Amalia Balash argue constantly, but it is evident this conflict comes from repressed attraction to each other... /which they express in/... a long-term /two years/ postal letter anonymous romantic correspondence..., each writing as 'Dear Friend.'" And there is a variation to the template: the shop owner's troubled marriage with his younger adulterous wife and his failed suicide attempts.

The play seems to have enjoyed limited popularity in Europe ("an old-fashioned romantic Christmas tale"; "a delightful Hungarian play"; "a charming, wise and deeply human play"...), but its real international career began in 1939, when Ernest Lubitsch bought the rights to Parfumerie and adapted it (movie script by Samson Raphaelson and Miklos Laszlo) for the big screen as The Shop Around the Corner, which was dramatized in two separate broadcasts: with Jimmy Stewart and Margaret Sullavan (Sept. 1940) and with Van Johnson and Phyllis Taxter (Febr. 1945); it was also dramatized on Lux Radio Theater (June 1941) with Claudette Colbert and Don Ameche. In these adaptations we are still in Budapest, the setting is a leather-goods shop owned by Mr. Hugo Matuschek this time, with two employees—Alfred Kralik and newly hired Klara Novak—who can barely stand each other, but unwittingly falling in love as anonymous correspondents; the revelation takes place on Christmas Eve, with Kralik pretending to have met Klara's mystery man ("overweight, balding, and unemployed"—as a test, n.b.) as he puts a blue carnation in his lapel (infra). The Stewart/Sullavan film was described either as "the greatest of all films" (film historian David Thomson) or a "charming piece of Hollywood schmaltz" (see Halliwell); plus several reviewers did not quite see the two actors fitting the profiles of shop assistants.

This would be the place where we anticipate that our linear topological history/paradigm branches out as a result of an insertion: "Appointment with Love," a 1943 story by Sulamith Ish-Kishor; since our paper is descriptive and illustrative rather than demonstrative, we shall just mention that the pen pals, the recognition token and the test are also used in Kishor's story and that

she may have seen this movie; so, we move on, promising to return and follow this new development.

Parfumerie—the play was not completely overshadowed—as it often happens—by MGM or Hollywood productions (that we will continue to introduce); on the contrary, in 1956 Florence Laszlo/Herman collaborated with her husband in the first English translation of Parfumerie, which was then adapted by their nephew, Edward P. Dowdall (*supra*), as The Perfume Shop and produced in various theatres (and other adaptations) across the United States and Canada (the LA Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, the Asolo Repertory Theatre in Sarasota, Florida, Plymouth Massachusetts, Soulepper Theatre in Toronto), amounting to sixty-eight performances in all; moreover, in 2001 the Laszlo/Raphaelson MGM script was quite faithfully adapted (by Evelyne Fallot and Jean Jacques Zilbermann) for the stage as a straight play, La Boutique au Coin de la Rue (at the Theatre Montparnasse); the shop owner is Wojtek Pasoniak, and the two pen pals are Florence Pernel and Samuel Labarthe; another French language production is recorded in December 2016 at the Conrege Theatre in Geneva.

Another type of successful adaptation is Joe Masteroff's 1963 musical (director Harold Prince, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick, music by Jerry Rock) She Loves Me, which premiered on Broadway, at the Eugene O'Neill Theater (302 performances, with a revival in 1977, another one in 1993—354 performances, and a third one in 2016), and then in London (1964 and 1994 and again in 2017). The setting is mostly Maraczeck's gift shop in 1934 Budapest, with Georg Nowack and Amalia Balsh as the protagonists, who arrange to have a blind date at Café Imperiale, where Amalia waits with a copy of Anna Karenina and a rose; in Act II, when Georg visits Amalia at her apartment, he makes up a story about "Dear Friend" as a much older, bald, fat gentlemen (the test); the first two Broadway actors were Daniel Massey and Barbara Cook; the musical was nominated for five Tony Awards.

In the meantime, the movie-makers continue their own topological adaptations (of both the play and the 1940 film), as well as a remake of the stage musical with Robert Z. Leonard's MGM In the Good Old Summertime (1949); the title of the screen semi-musical version is from a 1902 Tin Pan Alley song by George Evans (music) and Ron Shields (lyrics) that became one of the big hits of the era, with several notable recordings (Bing Crosby in 1954 and 1977, Connie Francis in 1961, Nat King Cole in 1963...), and also featured in such novels as Upton Sinclair's The Jungle (1906) and Sinclair Lewis' Elmer Gantry (1926); the play was re-written for the screen by Albert Hackett, Frances Goodrich, Ivan Tors and Samson Raphaelson (see *supra*, The Shop Around the Corner). Hammerschmidt becomes Otto Oberkungen, the owner of a Chicago music store, where assistants Veronica Fisher and Andrew Delby Larkin crash into each other, developing an instant and mutual dislike as Judy Garland and Van Jonson; Buster Keaton and Liza Minelli (Garland's three-year old daughter) also have their cameo appearances. As always, one remembers the final exchange: Van Johnson—"Oh, Veronica..., won't you open box 237 and take me out of my envelope?"; and Judy Garland: "Psychologically, I'm very confused, but personally I feel just wonderful."

This series also includes the first cinematic comedy in cyberspace, You've Got Mail (1998), which begins: "Fade in on: 1. Cyberspace. We have a sense of cyberspace-travel as we hurtle through a sky that is just beginning to get light. There are a few stars but they fade and the sky turns a milky blue and a big computer sun begins to rise.

We continue hurtling through space and see that we're heading over a computer version of the New York skyline. We move over Central Park. It's fall and the leaves are glorious reds and yellow.

We reach the West Side of Manhattan and move swiftly down Broadway with its stores and gyros and movie theatres and turn into a street in the West 80s." Gradually, the image moves to real life, it is "early morning in New York...", in Kathleen Kelly's apartment.

Kathleen is thirty and /Meg Ryan/ is "as pretty and fresh as a spring day," i.e. "rosy lips and cheeks," (plus *infra*) and her code name for an over-30s chat room is "Shopgirl"; her boyfriend is a newspaper writer, Frank Navasky, a typewriter user; only she gets an e-mail (her online service

provider, America Online/AOL Inc. frequently greets her with “You’ve got mail”) from Joe Fox/Tom Hanks, who has his own girlfriend, Patricia Eden, and whose online identity is NY152; Nora Ephron (director and writer), Delia Ephron (sister and writer) and Nikolaus Laszlo (credit for screen play) give us yet another romantic comedy about these two young people in an online romance, who are unaware that they are also business rivals (Kathleen Kelly has an independent children’s bookstore—“The Shop Around the Corner”--, while Joe Fox is the owner and corporate executive of a chain of mega bookstores run by his family). After several meetings face to face, both break up with their significant others, but still keep their on-line identities a secret.

By and by, Joe decides to arrange a meeting between Kathleen and his on-line persona (and his dog Brinkley), but he also reveals his feelings for her; now it is late afternoon, Kathleen goes out on Riverside Drive, then down a path in the park, hears a dog barking and Brinkley comes around the corner, followed by Joe: “And she /Meg Ryan/ starts to cry. And he comes to her. And puts his arms around her... ‘Don’t cry, Shopgirl, don’t cry.’ Kathleen: “I wanted it to be you. I wanted it to be you so badly.’ And as they kiss, we /the camera guys/ hold on them. And crane up and away as we see them, a couple kissing in the park on a beautiful spring day. A dog is leaping around them. And as we get further and further away from them, the screen turns into CYBERSPACE... And we tilt up to see the clouds and the sky and hear the sound of computer keys, clicking, clicking, clicking. FADE OUT.”

So, what we finally get is an updating of the 1940 The Shop Around the Corner and the 1949 musical version In the Good Old Summertime to the Internet Age; the script also tells us, symbolically, that Kathleen’s “Shop Around the Corner” slowly goes under and she enters Fox Books; that Joe and Kathleen discuss, during one of their meetings, Mr. Darcy and Miss Bennet (of Austen’s Pride and Prejudice); that for their second meeting, at Café Lanlo, the identifier is this book with a rose in it; and that Joe’s “test” for Kathleen is “how about your pen pal is a fatty, who has to be lifted from his house by a crane?”; and, finally, that Joe Fox’s grandfather had shared a brief pen pal romance with Kathleen’s mother, Cecilia Kelly.

Now back to 1943 and Sulamith Ish-Kishor (1896-1977), who, in her forties, might—or might not—have seen the Jimmy Stewart-Margaret Sullavan The Shop Around the Corner. Born in London in a writers’ family (father Ephraim and sister Judith wrote children’s literature in Hebrew and English respectively), who emigrated to the US/New York in 1909, Sulamith herself wrote and published over thirty books (fiction, history, religion), among which Our Eddie (1969) about this very journey and relocation. Her “Appointment with Love” (soon to be described as a “classic story”) was first published in an issue of Collier’s magazine for 1943.

The slightly re-worked template is the story of a first meeting of two pen pals after a long-distance correspondence that lasted for something like one-and-a-half years. Before joining the army and being shipped overseas for service in WW II (and becoming a lieutenant), John Blandford had picked Of Human Bondage out of the hundreds of Army library books sent to the Florida training camp, found marginal notes in it that impressed him, identified their author as Hollis Meynell of New York and started the correspondence that led to their long expected meeting in New York’s Grand Central Station. He had written about his frightful experiences in the war and she answered with “Psalm 23” (“I shall fear no evil...”); he had pleaded for a picture of her and she denied on account of the “looks do not matter in love,” or judging a book by its covers /or “marriage of true minds”/ argument, while the lieutenant is not allowed to use the “picture worth a thousand words” one. For their meeting the indentifiers are a red rose on her lapel and the Maugham book in his hand; only Hollis (who “was like spring come alive”—supra) decides to test him and gives the rose to an older woman (“well past forty”), who agrees to help her with her scheme; and the ending is undecided, with Blandford feeling “as though he were being split in two.”

Decades later, the story (sometimes titled “The Rose”) had come to be widely circulated on the internet as a “true story” (Barbara Mikkelson), either as by S. I. Kishor or without attribution, or by “Author unknown.” The four versions we found differ in some irrelevant changes, unimportant

omissions or additions and even misreadings; like “officer” for “lieutenant,” 18 for 13 months (correspondence), his heart beats shocked/choked him, even “Sumalith” for “Sulamith” and others.

To save himself trouble, Christian author (over 100 books with one million copies in print + videos), actor, writer, sometime preacher at the Oak Hills Church of Christ in San Antonio, Texas, missionary and (false) prophet Max Lucado simply plagiarized the story, retitled it “The Rose,” “The Book and the Rose” or “The People with the Roses” and made it known as his own in collections (And the Angels Were Silent: Walking with Christ Toward the Cross of 1992 and 2013, and Stories from the Heart of 1996; Alice Gray’s Stories for the Heart..., Jack Canfield and Mark Victor Hansen’s A 3-rd Serving of Chicken Soup for the Soul of 1996), in DVD format (as Treasured Stories Collection) or films; of these, the best-known is Jeff Bemiss’s 2001 30-minute The Book and the Rose, where the hero is John Barnes, a hunky young math teacher who finds a copy of Anna Karenina with scribbling on the margin; one internet reviewer described it as “based on the popular short story ‘The People with the Roses’ by Max Lucado... a timeless love story about divergent paths, choices, and a meeting of hearts /rather than Will’s minds/ and ideals;” it was filmed in Indiana and Chicago (downtown’s Union Station) and set in 1942. In other Lucado “versions,” the young man’s name is John Blanchard and he tracks Hollis to a Philadelphia address, plus he himself tells the second half of the narrative in the first person (“I’ll let Mr. Blanchard tell you what happened...”).

In July 2012 (updated October 2016) David J. Stewart publishes his “Beware of Max Lucado’s False Gospel,” from which we randomly quote: “a perfect example of the dangers of ecumenism. Max Lucado desperately tries to HIDE what he believes about the doctrine of Christ;” “I’d burn all his books... for which he rakes in millions of dollars”; “a dirty compromiser,” who “teaches numerous heresies” and “perverts the Gospel message”; Max Lucado “is pulling on the same rope as the Devil” and is “sinfully compromised” as he “wallows like a pig in apostasy.”

As we read such other sites as “Preaching and Plagiarism...,” “Plagiarism of Sermons” or, even better, “Preaching Plagiarism,” we also come upon Marcel Barang, a translator from Thai, who turns down a story by Saneh Sangsuk, “The Third Eye” (in his collection Duang Ta Thee Sam), and who explains in a postscript that “the real model” for his story is “Appointment with Love” by Utsana Phleungtham, one of the six pen names—identity problem once more?—of Pramool Unhathoop (1920-1987), though he, Barang, had warned him, Sangsuk, that Utsana had shamelessly plagiarized an American story by S. I. Kishor; the Thai author (best known for his novel The Story of Jan Darra, translated and edited by Barang) “most probably read ‘Appointment with Love’ in the May 1951 issue of Reader’s Digest (reprinted from a 1943 issue of Collier’s—supra) and helped himself to it...” After mentioning that the same story, “re-named ‘The Rose,’ was also plagiarized by preacher-author Max Lucado...,” Barang publishes the two parallel texts—Kishor’s and a retranslation into English of Utsana’s “tweak”; just to make sure; i.e. to make sure that you do not need to be a false prophet and a fake preacher to plagiarize something. Anyway, U. Phleungtham’s hero (First Lieutenant Boon Krit-rak—with Maugham’s volume) and heroine (Miss Krusae Suksathian—“with a wooden flower clipped to her blouse”) meet at noon (rather than in the evening) at the Hua Lamphong Station in Bangkok.

As far as Kishor’s “real” story goes, having come this far on the globe, let us add another “modern retelling” (published in For Me, 1998) about Gwen and Brian, who meet in an Internet chat room for writers and refuse to swap photos, with the two ladies at the end and a yellow rose for a change as identifier in an airport in Sydney, Australia; and there is another short film by Luke Pent and quite a number of other versions of “Appointment with/of/for...Love”...Worth a special mention is James A. Whitney’s rewrite of 1998 (probably of some Lucado version), where the point of view throughout is that of the older lady (37, two children, dead husband); she takes a cab, goes to Union Station to meet John, tells him about the young lady who asked her to wear the red rose, John is disappointed and walks away in a hurry; “I wonder where John is; I wonder whether he

found the young lady or what he did when he found out that she wasn't me. Sometimes I sit and look at the stars, and wonder what might have been."

And we wonder, with other readers, what is wrong with the unintended message of this story (the hesitation brackets inside our title, plus the dubious necessity of a final test between the mail pals) and how one could explain its "huge appeal" (Mikkelson), an appeal that ignores—we have just seen—all sorts of boundaries—national, linguistic, generic, cultural, of age, reader/writer ones, moral-philosophical, religious...

The answer here could be a very long or a very short one; and ours is—simplicity, identity, communication. The template fable—a superposition of Laszlo's and Kishor's—is one of the simplest possible: boy meets girl after **anonymous correspondence**; and these last emphasized two words contain two fundamental features of the human individual—identity and communication; and that explains it all, as far as the "huge appeal" goes; the protagonists are caught in the existential(ist) dilemma of being who they are (their authentic selves, in case anything like this really exists) and being who they say/write they are (constructed/marketed/epistolary/online selves—like the avatars in computer mediated communication).

Quite appropriately, in one of "his" versions' ending, Lucado—one of his selves—inserted the French novelist and man of letters Arsene Houssaye, with—"There are two persons in the world we never see as they are, one's self and one's other self"; and this becomes a problem of identity management and personal branding (the process of establishing a certain image or impression—impression management and reputation management—in the minds of others), self-construal (Weinreich) or an actively constructed presentation of oneself (by both letter/e-mail writers), which all pen pals or mail pals—many millions of them—have been known to do (see all the social media and networking services); one may notice wonderingly how in all of our texts the content of the correspondence is only partially and vaguely hinted at (not because of its being a secret, but because of its being too well-known). And from here to online dating services and blind dating ones was a very small step; so small that most of these many millions have not had time to see the Laszlo-Kishor (rather obscure) texts, or their many imitators, adapters, plagiarists...--all writers/authors projecting their other selves onto "texts" that readers/critics are expected to perceive as genuine representations of split personalities.

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