

21 Intertextuality

"We must try to haul this mainsail close up," I said. The shadows swayed away from me without a word. Those men were the ghosts of themselves, and their weight on a rope could be no more than the weight of a bunch of ghosts. Indeed, if ever a sail was hauled up by sheer spiritual strength it must have been that sail; for, properly speaking, there was not muscle enough for the task in the whole ship, let alone the miserable lot of us on deck. Of course, I took the lead in the work myself. They wandered feebly after me from rope to rope, stumbling and panting. They toiled like Titans. We were an hour at it at least, and all the time the black universe made no sound. When the last leech-line was made fast, my eyes, accustomed to the darkness, made out the shapes of exhausted men dropping over the rails, collapsed on hatches. One hung over the after-captain, sobbing for breath; and I stood amongst them like a tower of strength, impervious to disease and feeling only the sickness of my soul. I waited for some time, fighting against the weight of my sins, against my sense of unworthiness, and then I said:

"Now, men, we'll go aft and square the mainyard. That's about all we can do for the ship; and for the rest she must take her chance."

JOSEPH CONRAD *The Shadow-Line* (1917)

THERE ARE MANY WAYS by which one text can refer to another: parody, pastiche, echo, allusion, direct quotation, structural parallelism. Some theorists believe that intertextuality is the very condition of literature, that all texts are woven from the tissues of

other texts, whether their authors know it or not. Writers committed to documentary-style realism will tend to deny or suppress this principle. Samuel Richardson, for instance, thought he had invented an entirely new kind of fiction which was quite independent of earlier literature, but it is easy to see in *Pamela* (1740), his story of a virtuous maidservant who marries her master after many trials and tribulations, a fairy-tale archetype. The next important English novel was Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), which starts out as a parody of *Pamela*, and incorporates a reworking of the parable of the Good Samaritan and many passages written in the mock-heroic style. Intertextuality, in short, is entwined in the roots of the English novel, while at the other end of the chronological spectrum novelists have tended to exploit rather than resist it, freely recycling old myths and earlier works of literature to shape, or add resonance to, their presentation of contemporary life.

Some writers signpost such references more explicitly than others. James Joyce tipped off his readers by entitling his epic of modern Dublin life *Ulysses*, Nabokov by giving Lolita's precursor the name of Poe's Annabel. Conrad may have been conveying a subtler hint in the subtitle of *The Shadow-Line*: "A Confession."

This novella, autobiographical in origin, is the account of a young merchant naval officer who, while waiting in a Far Eastern port for a passage home, is unexpectedly offered his first command, a sailing ship whose captain has died at sea. Setting out into the Gulf of Siam, he soon discovers that the deceased captain was deranged, and his own first mate believes that the old man has put a curse on the ship. This fear seems confirmed when the vessel is becalmed, the crew fall sick with fever, and the young captain discovers that his predecessor has destroyed all the stocks of quinine. Then, in the middle of a pitch-black night, there are signs of a change in the weather.

The description of the sick and enfeebled sailors obeying their captain's command to haul up the mainsail, so that the ship can run with the wind when it comes, shows in its technical detail ("leech-line", "after-captain", "square the mainyard") that Conrad knew what he was talking about — he was of course a master mariner with twenty years experience at sea. But it also recalls a

passage in one of the most famous poems in English literature, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", where the dead sailors rise from the decks of the enchanted ship and man the rigging:

The mariners all gan work the ropes,
Where they were wont to do;
They raised their limbs like lifeless tools –
We were a ghastly crew.

The Mariner kills an albatross, brings a curse on his ship in the form of calm and pestilence, is released from it when he blesses the watersnakes unawares, and wafted back home by supernatural agencies; he alone survives the ordeal, but feels guilt and responsibility for his shipmates' fate. In Conrad's story the evil deed which curses the ship is transferred to the dead captain, but for the narrator the sequel is a quasi-religious experience not unlike the Mariner's. What might have been merely a ripping yarn becomes a rite of passage across the "shadow-line" that divides innocence from experience, youth from maturity, arrogance from humility. Unaccountably spared the fever (like the Mariner) the young captain feels "the sickness of my soul . . . the weight of my sins . . . my sense of unworthiness." He is haunted by the "vision of a ship drifting in calm and swinging in light airs, with all the crew dying slowly about her decks." After the mainsail is raised and the wind springs up, he reflects, "the malicious spectre had been laid, the evil spell broken, the curse removed. We were now in the hands of a kind and energetic providence. It was rushing us on . . ."

Compare:

Swiftly, swiftly flew the ship,
Yet she sailed softly too:
Sweetly, sweetly blew the breeze –
On me alone it blew.

When the ship in Conrad's story finally arrives in port, flying the signal requesting medical assistance, the naval surgeons who board her are as astonished to find the decks deserted as the Pilot and

the Hermit are, in Coleridge's poem, at the return of the Mariner in sole charge of his ship. Like the Ancient Mariner, the captain cannot rid himself of a sense of responsibility for the sufferings of his crew. As they are removed from the ship, he says, "They passed under my eyes one after another – each of them an embodied reproach of the bitterest kind . . ." Compare:

The pang, the curse, with which they died,
Had never passed away:
I could not draw my eyes from theirs,
Nor turn them up to pray.

Like the Mariner, who "stoppeth one in three" to unburden himself, the captain is impelled to make a "confession" of his experience.

Whether Conrad consciously intended these allusions cannot be proved from the text, and though it might be interesting to try and find out, the answer wouldn't make much difference. The echoes are evidence that he knew Coleridge's poem, but he might have reproduced them unconsciously (though I personally doubt it), just as they may have a subliminal effect on readers who have read the poem and forgotten it, or know it only through selective quotation. It was certainly not the first or only occasion on which Conrad employed literary allusion in this way. Marlow's journey up the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* is explicitly compared to Dante's descent into the circles of hell in the *Inferno*, and his late novel *Victory* is modelled on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

James Joyce's *Ulysses* is probably the most celebrated and influential example of intertextuality in modern literature. When it appeared in 1922, T. S. Eliot hailed Joyce's use of the *Odyssey* as a structural device, "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity", as an exciting technical breakthrough, "a step towards making the modern world possible for art." Since Eliot had been reading Joyce's novel in serial form over the preceding years, while working on his own great poem "The Waste Land", also published in 1922, in which he manipulated a contin-

nous parallel between contemporaneity and the Grail legend, we may interpret his praise of *Ulysses* as part acknowledgment, and part manifesto. But in neither work is intertextuality limited to one source, or to structural parallelism. "The Waste Land" echoes many different sources; *Ulysses* is full of parody, pastiche, quotations from and allusions to all kinds of texts. There is, for instance, a chapter set in a newspaper office, divided into sections with headlines that mimic the development of journalistic style, a chapter written largely in a pastiche of cheap women's magazines, and another, set in a maternity hospital, that parodies the historical development of English prose from the Anglo-Saxon period to the twentieth century.

Since I combined writing fiction with an academic career for nearly thirty years it is not surprising that my own novels became increasingly intertextual; and, as it happens, both Joyce and Eliot were significant influences in this respect, especially the former. The parodies in *The British Museum is Falling Down* were inspired by the example of *Ulysses*, as was its one-day action, and the last chapter is a rather cheeky *homage* to Molly Bloom's monologue. The "break-through" point in the genesis of *Small World* came when I perceived the possibility of basing a comic-satiric novel about the academic jet-set, zooming round the world to international conferences where they competed with each other both professionally and erotically, on the story of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table and their quest for the Grail, especially as interpreted by Jessie L. Weston in a book that T. S. Eliot had raided for "The Waste Land". I have written elsewhere about the genesis of these novels (in the Afterword to *The British Museum* and in *Write On!*) and mention them here to make the point that intertextuality is not, or not necessarily, a merely decorative addition to a text, but sometimes a crucial factor in its conception and composition.

There is however another aspect of the art of fiction, known only to writers, which often involves intertextuality, and that is the Missed Opportunity. Inevitably, in the course of reading, one sometimes comes across echoes, anticipations and analogues of one's own work long after the latter is finished and done with, too

late to take advantage of the discovery. Towards the end of *Small World* there is a scene set in New York during the MLA Convention, which is always held in the last days of December. Following the triumph of the hero, Perse McGarrigle, at the session on the Function of Criticism, there is an astonishing change in the weather, a warm southerly airstream raising the temperature in Manhattan to a level unprecedented at that season. In the mythic scheme of the book, this is equivalent to the fertilization of Fisher King's barren kingdom in the Grail Legend, as a result of the Grail Knight asking the necessary question. Arthur Kingfisher, the *dogyn* of modern academic criticism presiding over the Convention, feels the curse of sexual impotence miraculously lifted from him. He tells his Korean mistress, Song-mi:

"It's like the halcyon days . . . A period of calm weather in the middle of winter. The ancients used to call them the halcyon days, when the kingfisher was supposed to hatch its eggs. Remember Milton - 'The bird sits brooding on the charmed wave'? The bird was a kingfisher. That's what 'halcyon' means in Greek, Song-mi: kingfisher. The halcyon days were kingfisher days. My Song-mi: Our days."

He might have gone on to quote another, wonderfully apposite snatch of verse:

Kingfisher weather, with a light fair breeze,
Full canvass, and the eight sails drawing well.

And he might have added: "They were the best lines in 'The Waste Land', but Ezra Pound persuaded Tom Eliot to cut them out." Unfortunately I didn't come across these lines, in Valerie Eliot's edition of *The Waste Land: a facsimile and transcript of the original drafts including the annotations of Ezra Pound*, until some time after *Small World* had been published.