Sign and Discourse

Dimensions of Comparative Poetics

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Preface

This collection of essays produced during a span of nearly forty years has a title, *Sign and Discourse*, which may sound banal to readers familiar with contemporary critical theory. Banal as it may seem, the title can be misleading and therefore needs some clarification. First of all, there is an inherent, necessary and reciprocal relationship between "sign" and "discourse": Discourse has to be encoded in the linguistic sign before its enunciation, and sign can perform its signifying and communicating functions only through discourse, that is, when language is put in social use. Accordingly, one has to concur with Émile Benveniste's highly idiosyncratic usage that "semiotics" is embedded in "semantics" — a noble attempt at reinstating the historicity of language users' interaction (Benveniste 1974: 64). As he puts it, "With the semantic, we enter into the specific mode of meaning which is generated by discourse" ("Avec le sémantique, nous entrons dans le mode spécifique de signifiance qui est engendré par le DISCOURS.") (1974: 64; 1981: 19). But at the same time, he points out the two domains' dialectic relationship. "Semiotics (the sign) must be *recognized*; semantics (the discourse) must be *understood*." ("Le sémiotique [le signe] doit être RECONNU; le sémantique [le discours] doit être COMPRIS.") (1974: 64–65; 1981: 20). However, the two orders of language in-put do not represent two disciplines, but follow temporality and causality. One recognizes sign, in the Saussurian sense of word (*moneme*) as its elementary form, based on acquired rather than innate language competence, and the signification process of signs (or semiosis) gives rise to sentence and discourse in an infinite generative process. The difference, then, is not that between semiotics and semantics, but between the cognition of individual signs and the cognition of semiosis in discourse.

Nevertheless, one could argue that, where social use is concerned, there is little difference between semantics and

pragmatics, and for that matter, semiotics. Only in this sense can sign be conceived of as discourse and, in other words, semiosis as a life process. One is reminded of Saussure's announcement of semiology as the "studies of signs and their life in human societies" ("études des signes et de leur vie dans les sociéties humaines") (Saussure 1967: 48; Saussure 1993:71 and 71a), or as a conceivable science which deals with "the life of signs at the heart of social life" ("la vie de signes au sein de la vie sociale") (Saussure 1931: 33.). The minor difference in wording, as one surely remembers, resulted from his students' note-taking, which was reflective of at least three lives, of the master lecturing and the two pupils listening and recording.

The communication or "autocommunication" (*pace* Lotman 2001) circuit of lecturing, listening and writing in various institutions of higher learning in Greater China, North America and Europe thus summarizes a life of signs as *apologia pro vita mea*. Therefore, the volume is in every sense autobiographical; it toys with the notion of realizing "self" or "life" through "writing".

Having said this, I am aware, as chapter 19 suggests, that there cannot be a life (*bio*) of self (*auto*) made available through writing (*graphein*). All the three entities that constitute the genre of autobiography, in name as well as in substance, are ephemeral whilst entering into an intricate semiotic web of relationships. If I may be allowed to stretch a bit farther the figure of corpus as life and book, the division of the book into five "thematic" parts is tantamount to five chapters of a floating life, at once adhering to and defying chronology. Finally, as the essays were delivered and published in different times and places, there cannot be a unity in format. I have chosen to let them stay in their original forms. This explains the inconsistency in spelling (e.g., Americanism and Anglicism), transliteration (e.g.,Wade-Giles and Hanyu pinyin), and style sheet (e.g., MLA and APA), amongst other formalistic and rhetorical infelicities.

The publication of my life corpus has been made possible by the encouragement and kind guidance of Professor Chen Sihe 陈思和 of Fudan University and the Editorial Staff of Fudan University Press, led by Mr. He Shengsui 贺圣遂. I owe both of them a profound debt of gratitude. Dr. Hu

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Chapter 18 was published in *New Asia Academic Bulletin* 1 (1978).

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Part I

ANCIENT AND EARLY MODERN SIGN SYSTEMS STUDIES

Chapter 1

The Rise of Chinese Literary Theory:

Intertextuality and System Mutations in Classical Texts

It seems anachronistic to talk about *intertextuality* in the beginning of the twenty-first century, almost forty years since the term first appeared with Julia Kristeva's introduction of Mikhail Bakhtin to the Western world (1969: 143–173). Popular as the term is, and controversial as its changing concept has been, very little modern Chinese critical writing deals with the issue of intertextuality (Yip 1988; Fokkema 2000). But comparable textual strategies have governed Chinese critics' and poets' reading and writing about literature throughout the dynasties. My analysis probes into the matter by relating two highly influential ancient texts, the Confucian *Classic of Changes* (hereinafter cited as *Changes*), dated as early as the fifth century B.C.E. and Liu Xie's *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons* (cited as *Dragons*), an *ars poetica* in the third century of the Common Era. But first, a theoretical and methodological framework is in order.

The use and abuse of the term "intertextuality" over the past three decades have less to do with the word's novelty than its ambiguity. Like all conceptual words, its root *text* has undergone a process from concreteness to abstraction. Its Latin etymology and hence metaphor of textile aside, the concept's changing shape in modern scholarship can be seen from the ways in which the word *text* is used by traditional textual critics, the New Critics, and members of the *Tel Quel* group. Modern critical history witnessed *text*'s metamorphosis from a more or less material entity, i.e. manuscripts or printed matter which a textual critic can edit, to a semantic property claiming autonomy and aspiring to the conditions of ontology, a system of coded structures, and finally to some kind of enunciative

and discursive productivity (Kristeva) or semiotic *mis-en-abîme* (Derrida). The same critical history has also seen the exchange of textuality and intertextuality, as well as the latter's ultimate triumph over the former.

It is not my intention here to go over the history of this conceptual evolution, to expose and, if possible, to dispel some of the myths involved with intertextuality. Much has already been done in this regard.[1] I shall, instead, appropriate two usages. The first usage is suggested by Kristeva as *a remedy* to the confusion of influence with intertextuality, which she refers to the "transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another" (1974: 59–60). The second usage belongs to Michael Riffaterre in his untiring attempts over the past thirty years to reinstate materiality by truncating the abstract *intertextuality* to a more reified *intertext* (1990: 56).[2] Whether or not intertexts can be identified through specific signposts, as Riffaterre suggests, is not an issue here. My attempt is to articulate the transposition of sign systems as manifested in the two classical Chinese texts, the Confucian philosophical writing *Changes* and Liu Xie's *Dragons*, the latter generally regarded as the first systematic book of literary theory and criticism.

I. Text and Architext

Let me begin by briefly defining, indeed rehearsing, *text*. *Text* is the product of signification, i.e. the positioning and functioning of signs with "coded structures" as tacitly agreed upon, or used without awareness, by members of a discursive community. These signs and their components are variously distributed and integrated into a hierarchy of relations. It is possible that a text is made up by different kinds of encoded signs, such as verbal and nonverbal signs. In such cases, these codes necessarily enter into complex *intratextual* relationships. Now when the same or a similar structural relationship is applied to two or several or, theoretically, an infinite number of texts, one is dealing with the phenomenon of intertextuality. The transcoding relationship exists on both the expression and the content levels, or syntactic and semantic levels. I shall demonstrate by analyzing the heterogeneous text of *Changes*

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