The Hermeneutic Advantage of a Comparative-and-Interdisciplinary Approach to the African Novel[1]

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"Hermeneutics" implies an enquiry about the meaning of literary works: "what does a literary work mean, and how does it mean?" are its main queries (Sutherland, 2010: 12). Like many other fundamental literary concepts, the word is complex as much as it is crucial; it "is not a word that falls easily from the mouths of most ordinary readers of literature," to put it in John Sutherland's terms (Sutherland, 2010: 12). Nonetheless, hermeneutics being concerned with matters such as "the extraction of meaning from words on the page," "how exactly the meaning is communicated" and "how, once communicated, we on our side 'make sense' of it," I thought it crucial and relevant enough to the subject matter of these study days to place it in my title in spite of its slippery character (Sutherland, 2010: 12).

Like all other reading approaches, a comparative-and-interdisciplinary approach to a literary text would have its downsides. Perhaps the main challenge that would face a reader with such an approach is that it calls for greatly varied, demanding and subtle operations. This is what Julia Kristeva's definition of "intertextuality," a term which encapsulates the modern view of the text, and which she is thought to have coined in the 1960s, implies. As she draws attention to the fact that intertextuality is "the condition of any text whatsoever," considering that "any text is a new tissue of past citations," Kristeva seems indeed pessimistic when it comes to the feasibility of an efficient disclosure of "the intertext": "the intertext," she argues, "is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks" (Kristeva, 2006). While Roland Barthes would also recommend a comparative-and-interdisciplinary approach to the literary text, he is no more enthusiastic as to the possibility of deciphering it. His definition of "the oeuvre" in *Degré zéro de l'écriture* suggests it clearly:

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> L' œuvre est essentiellement paradoxale (…) Elles est à la fois signe d'une histoire, et résistance à cette histoire (…) Tout le monde sent bien que l'œuvre échappe; qu'elle est autre chose que son histoire même, la somme de ses sources, de ses influences ou de ses modèles: un noyau dur, irréductible, dans la masse indécise des événements, des conditions, des mentalités collectives (Barthes, 1963: 139).

However, post-Barthesian theorists of intertextuality such as Michael Riffaterre, Jonathan Culler and Harold Boom are more optimistic and propose methods of reading the literary text that are much more practical in comparison with Barthes and Kristeva's models. Thus, the intertext may be explored rewardingly through Michael Riffaterre's "two stage reading process" or Harold Bloom's "six ratios" for example (Riffaterre, 1991: 25; Bloom, 1997). And if carried out properly through one such methods, or apposite adaptations or combinations of them, a comparative-and-interdisciplinary approach to literary works would certainly have an immense advantage over the other, non-comparative and self-contained, approaches; it would have a *hermeneutic* advantage.

Though scholars propose different alternatives as to how exactly to "extract meaning" from "words on the page" through comparison, they largely agree that comparison is *the* proper way to do it. Throughout history, they have tended to see creative writing as an exercise of imitation rather than one of creation *ex nihilo*, suggesting thus that a literary work's significance can only be known by means of comparison. Plato and Aristotle agree about that. In *The Republic*, Plato argues that what creative writers do essentially is to imitate (nature). Describing "literary fabrication" in *The Poetics*, Aristotle refers to the phenomenon as "*mimesis*." The word may be "fiendishly slippery;" it may be "preferable to the English translation 'imitation,' which carries with it a pejorative overtone of 'mere copy;'" it can also carry "more weight" than the word "representation'" as Sutherland points out (Sutherland, 2010: 4). But it is quite clear that *mimesis* which, according to Sutherland still, best translates as "holding a mirror up to nature" borders very closely on the idea of imitation (Sutherland, 2010: 4).

In one of an interesting series of lectures on literary theory, Paul Fry provides a good summary of how the concept (*mimesis*) developed since Aristotle without that development altering the nature and scholarly view of literary creation as an operation of imitation in essence (Fry, 2010). Fry's point is that *mimesis* – a "world based" idea of imitation – becomes "*imitatio*" – a "word based" idea of it, meaning "imitation of literary models" (rather than nature) – with the emergence of writers like Virgil and "rhetorical critics" such as Cicero and Antiquarian in the golden and silver ages of ancient Rome (Fry, 2010). Fry points out that *imitatio* is the view of the basic process of literary creation which scholars from Alexander Pope to Harold Bloom, through T. S. Eliot, have typically maintained (Fry, 2010). And no contemporary literary theorist, not even a very exacting one like Harold Bloom, claims that any writer, be s/he "strong" or "weak," can be absolutely creative – not even Shakespeare whom Bloom almost literally deifies otherwise. Let alone the advocates of Dialogism, Intertextuality, Hybridity, Subalternity and *Créolité,* none of whom claims the existence of any form of literary creation that is not a process of recycling of previous literature and language: "all is already read," to summarise their views of the text in Barthes's famous aphorism. Thus, "the meaning of a poem can only be another poem" as Bloom puts it (Bloom, 1997: the preface), and Ezra Pound is accordingly justified as he claims:

> The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one 'slide' or specimen with another (Pound, 1934:17; emphases in the source).

Furthermore, a literary work's significance is not likely to be uncovered if the work is severed from the broader area, the whole so-called extra-poetic context, where it grows and operates. It is particularly so as regards the novel, which is arguably the most pluridisciplinary and polyvalent of the literary genres. A novel's significance would be dramatically telescoped if the field in which it grows and operates is reduced to any of the domains in which the self-contained theories of literature and intertextuality strive to present as literature's exclusive areas of existence. As Paul Fry points out, literary production cannot reasonably be restricted to any of its "logogenetic," "psychogenetic" or "sociogenetic" components; i.e., respectively, "the production of literature by language," "the production of literature by the human psyche," and "the production of literature by social, economic, political and historical factors" (Fry, 2010).

Indeed even if a literary work's significance can have to do with language as much as logo-centric theorists such as Kristeva, Barthes and Jacques Derrida claim, the literary phenomenon seems to be beyond a linguistic one. Language is certainly not all that matters in the process of literary creation: it is only one among other *tools* by which writers create their works, although it has the particularity of being the medium through which writers can communicate, and readers can receive those works and make sense of them. Suffice it to demonstrate this to note that the very fact of Barthes's focus on the reader (in "The Death of the Author" for instance) implies, more than the relevance, the centrality of the discipline of psychoanalysis to literature. Similarly, Derrida's postulate, in *Of Grammatology*, that a "science of writing" can possibly be established on the basis of a science of grammar is an intervention in philosophy more than in literature in a strictly intra-poetic sense (Derrida, 1997). Kristeva, Barthes and Derrida's analyses of the literary phenomenon actually show the force of the links between literature and other disciplines such as linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and history.

Thus, Harold Bloom is justified, on the one hand, when he claims that a poem is not self-contained, that its significance is not merely what is there on the page, because reducing the domain of literary creation to just that means its limitation to only one of the elements in which, and by which, it proceeds. For, on balance, isn't it more reasonable to see language itself as something beyond what is said and transcribed? Furthermore, isn’t one of the most conceivable reasons for the very existence of literature attempt to give expression to more than what (‘ordinary’) language can allow expressing, by making the most of language and often by changing it? Isn’t it preferable to think of literature as an autonomous but characteristically polyvalent discipline, one that relies (and only partly) on language to represent things that lie deep beneath and wide around language? The very fact of our failure to answers such questions with certainty is enough to show that a literary critic’s domain of competence and intervention should not be reduced to language, or, worse, to mere description of linguistic performances and structures.

But it seems equally obvious, on the other hand, that literary creation does not depend on the author’s “misreading” of, and other intertextual relationships with, precursor texts exclusively as Bloom argues in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*, particularly when it comes to fiction. Why then, if not for subjective reasons, reduce literary creation to a matter of relationships between authors (and texts), to a “story of intra-poetic relations” in the Bloomian sense? Isn’t literature’s field of existence and action apparently much larger than just that as well? Isn’t it more realistic and more pertinent to the study of literature to consider the “sociogenetic” aspect of literature as internal to it (in addition to its “logogenetic” and “psychogenetic” aspects)?

As Jay Clayton argues, such limitations contradict many writers’ conception of their profession. For instance, Eliot and Hardy are “conscious of drawing elements of their fiction from their own life and family background" (Clayton, 1991: 53). This pertains to other poets, like Wordsworth (whom Bloom yet holds to be one of the “greatest” literary figures of all times). Clayton ironically observes in this regard that "despite the numerous literary sources, the actual composition of "The Thorn" [one of Wordsworth's most representative poems]" is simply "prompted by the sight of a stunted thorn encountered on a walk with Dorothy on March 19, 1798" (Clayton, 1991: 59). Indeed Wordsworth himself had to note that his poem “arose out of [his] observing on the ridge of Quantock Hill, on a stormy day, a thorn which [he] had often passed in calm and bright weather without noticing it." He further explains: "I said to myself, 'cannot I by some invention do as much to make this Thorn prominently an impressive object as the storm has made it to my eyes at this moment?'" (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1965: 290).

It thus seems clear that literature's domain of existence and action cannot be limited to any of its linguistic, structural, psychoanalytic, philosophical, historical or social constituents. The sources which supply the literary text seem as varied and wide ranging as those constituents are. Literature clearly does not depend on any of these disciplines exclusively; it seems far more reasonable to assume that it depends on *all* of these disciplines, which, in all cases, are interlocking and inseparable. Therefore, a comparative-and-multidisciplinary approach to literature seems the fittest to do justice to it from a hermeneutic standpoint.

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If only in view of its quality of a product of more than one culture, the African novel is even more characteristically intertextual. Accordingly, the comparative method seems especially recommendable with reference to it. Examples that can justify this include the works of icons of African fiction such as Mouloud Feraoun, Kateb Yacine, Camara Laye, Amos Tutuola, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ayi Kwei Armah, Kofi Awoonor, Ben Okri, Peter Abrahams and, last but not least, Ngugi wa Thiong'o. The cases of Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are particularly illustrative. Notwithstanding the disagreements about whether the Western "intertexts" of these works affect their authenticity, it is undeniable that they dialogise with Western literatures. Thus, one should normally have the Bible in mind when reading *The Palm Wine Drinkard,* for instance. Sunday Anozie "imputes the conflicts and supernatural events in Tutuola's *Palm-Wine Drinkard*" to biblical influence (Chinweizu *et al*, 1985: 288). Likewise, *Things Fall Apart* is not likely to be understood properly if its famous links with William Butler Yeats's poem "The Second Coming," Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and H. Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, – perhaps even with "*Beowulf*" – are ignored, even if "Afro-centric" critics, such as the Chinweizu group in *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature*, deny these relationships (Chinweizu *et al*, 1985: 288). The essays in David I. Ker's *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* show that the bonds between the works of Chinua Achebe, Kofi Awoonor, Ayi Kwei Armah, Gabriel Okara and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and those of Western writers such as Henry James, James Joyce, William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad are too critical to be ignored by a responsible reader (Ker, 2000).

Moreover, African novels have intertextual relationships with other African works. The influence of the work of Chinua Achebe, for instance, on the whole body of Anglophone African literature is tremendous. It has been too decisive in shaping Anglophone African fiction as a unit to be disregarded in reading such fiction. What is more, African novels have "African palimpsests," traditional African cultural and linguistic backgrounds and sources, whose disregard would lead to very serious hermeneutic errors (Zabus, 1991). Chantal Zabus's *The African Palimpsest* demonstrates this, and gives a good idea on the importance of considering such palimpsests when reading the African novel. These facts make it quite clear that comparison is *the* proper method for reading the African novel in particular for hermeneutic considerations still.

About its pluridisciplinary character, the African novel is indeed characterised by what Claude Wauthier calls an "interpenetration of literature and the human sciences," including history, anthropology, psychology, theology and politics (Wauthier, 1964: 17-18). For instance, a modest familiarity with the works of Achebe, Ngugi and Armah allows noticing that these writers conceive of their creative undertakings in part as a work of memory. True, Achebe's creative work should be seen primarily as art, and to interpret his work "as mere explanation of the Nigerian scene (...) is to mistake his intention and his achievement," as G. D. Killam points out (Killam, 1969: 1). But a reader should be aware of the functional, or "applied," character of Achebe's art as well if s/he is to understand Achebe's achievement (Achebe, 1988: 30). It would be simply inaccurate to read *Things Fall Apart* or *Arrow of God* for instance without paying attention to the anthropological element in these works, and to the historical sub-plots and levels of narration that permeate them. Ditto with Armah's *The Healers* and *Two Thousand Seasons,* and Ngugi's fiction as a whole.

Besides history and anthropology, novelists like Achebe and Ngugi also use psychoanalysis profusely and quite directly. For example, Achebe draws on Freud's psychosexual postulates to build the personalities of his characters in *Things Fall Apart* in order to make them appear true to life, to highlight the humanness of the African person. He does it to point up human diversity as a natural fact in pre-colonial Africa, as part of his 'creative response' to Joseph Conrad. Inspired by Achebe, Ngugi refers to the same discipline, in much the same way, and for the same purposes. Furthermore, from *A Grain of Wheat* onwards, Ngugi applies Frantz Fanon's postulates in psychoanalysis and psychiatry in constructing the aspects of his characters that relate to the specific colonial, colonial-war and "neo-colonial" contexts of his narratives. As to politics, the African novel is a "direct result" of a political act, colonialism; as a result, it is, by definition, involved with politics as George Douglas Killam and Ruth Rue argue (Killam and Rowe, 2000: 224). In brief, the African novel is inherently intertextual and multidisciplinary, and so a suitable interpretation of it normally requires a comparative-and-interdisciplinary approach.

The example of Ngugi verifies these premises with particular force. Products of the colonial situation, Ngugi's novels have indeed a pointed intertextual character. Ngugi writes very much like D. H. Lawrence, for instance. Many of the situations and elements of his narratives are adaptation, echoes and allusions to Lawrence's works. For example, like Lawrence's characters, Ngugi's characters often undergo states of estrangement and have a discrete spiritual dimension. A comparative reading of the two novelists reveals that this feature of Ngugi's characterisation is a consequence of Lawrence's impact on him. Ngugi, who says he is impressed by the way Lawrence "enters into the spirits of things," strives to make his characters look alive, like Lawrence's, trying to endow them with souls, not just with psychological profiles (Duerden and Pieters, 1972: 122 - 124). In some in instances, Ngugi has borrowed Lawrentian elements directly. For example, the "grain of wheat" in Ngugi's title, and the metaphor of rebirth in *A Grain of Wheat* are neat echoes of the following passage from Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover:*

> She [Connie] wanted to forget, to forget the world, and all the dreadful, carrion-bodied people. `Ye must be born again! I believe in the resurrection of the body! Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it shall by no means bring forth. When the crocus cometh forth I too will emerge and see the sun!' (*Lawrence,* 1928: Chapter 8).

More broadly, the use of myth, symbol and nature, as well as interest in sexuality which are essential aspects of Ngugi's novels cannot be grasped without considering Ngugi's relationship with Lawrence very closely.

Ngugi also writes in close dialogism with Chinua Achebe. His concern with history for instance owes its origin to his reading of Achebe among other writers. Also, Ngugi's dialectic relationship with colonialist literature, mostly Conrad's works, is not an effect of the influence of Conrad alone, but of the double influence of Achebe and Conrad. For example, Ngugi's D. O. Thompson and other colonial stereotypes are not direct replicas of Conrad's Kurtz as is often said, but of Achebe's Mr Smith and Mr Brow as a reading of Ngugi in comparison with Achebe reveals. Like Mr Smith, John Thompson is a subtly oppositional and ironic replica – a parody – of Mr Kurtz, not a direct copy of the latter. Like Chinua Achebe as well, Ngugi's work shows a tendency to problematise the question of colonialism, dramatising it in all its complexity and ambiguity. And, not unlike Achebe, he refers to the psychoanalytic theory, politics, religion and philosophy profusely and for very much the same aesthetic and semantic aims as Achebe, so much so that any self-contained interpretation of Ngugi's work might result in genuine hermeneutic aberrations.

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