Transfictionality[1]

1 Intertextual Genesis | There is no doubt that French literary scholarship advanced the concept of intertextuality considerably in the second half of the 20th century. In 1966, in an issue of the legendary magazine *Tel Quel*, Julia Kristeva published an article entitled "Le mot, le dialogue, le roman" (Word, Dialogue, and Novel) in which readers found a statement revolutionary for its time: "tout texte se construit comme une mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte" (each text is constructed like a mosaic of quotations, each text is the absorption and transformation of another text).[2] In Kristeva's view, intertextuality encompassed all texts, and her proposal should therefore be understood in all its totality: a text is incapable of not being an intertext, as a result of which the intertextual sign remains always present. This direction in scholarship found acceptance from Roland Barthes, who defined the intertext as composed of multi-layered, perhaps even multi-dimensional production from elements of culture understood in its diachronic development.[3] At the other end of the spectrum we encounter the limiting concept of Gérard Genette, which significantly narrows the concept of intertextuality. To meet the needs of poetics as he saw them, Genette introduced the term transtextuality, and together with it, five types of intertextual relationships. In this way intertextuality becomes merely one of several such relationships and describes the mutual coexistence of at least two texts by means of quotation, allusion, or plagiarism. Modification of a text then belongs to the domain of hypertextuality, which covers the devices of parody and pastiche.[4] And hypertext, with all of its transformative potential, may in fact overlap at times with the phenomenon of transfiction.

From these roots of intertextual theory, a new practice is coming into being, in both reading and writing, called transfictionality. It was proposed by Richard Saint-Gelais in his book *Fictions transfuges. La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*. The concepts of quotation, absorption, and transformation mentioned above are key terms for some unusually personal intertextual theories. They have nothing, however, in common with transfictional processes. Hypertextual enterprises, in which we deal with imitation or transformation in the sphere of relations between texts, must needs be distinguished from transfictional ones, involving the migration of elements that constitute an integral part of a given narrative space.

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[1] This article attempts to introduce a concept developed by Richard Saint-Gelais into the Polish literary scholarly scene, using parts of his comprehensive study entitled *Fictions transfuges. La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*.

[2] J. Kristeva, «Le mot, le dialogue et le roman», *Semeiotike: recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris, Seuil, pp. 82-112.

[3] "Each text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at various levels, in more or less recognizable forms: texts of the preceding and surrounding culture; each text is a new tissue of recycled quotations." Roland Barthes, "Texte (théorie du)," Encyclopædia Universalis, 1973. Online edition. Last accessed October 2, 2015. http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/theorie-du-texte/

[4] T. Samoyault, *L'intertextualité*, Nathan 2001, pp. 18-23.

Saint-Gelais attempts to explain all of the differences between these two concepts by means of an analyses of some passages from *Pastiches et Mélanges* – a book by Marcel Proust published in 1919. In examining this example of a collection of pastiches, we can observe a certain dissonance. Proust organized these texts around a single occurrence – *l'affaire Lemoine* – relating to the fraudulent production of diamonds; he retells the same story from the perspective of, among others, Flaubert and Balzac. Here, a hypertextual reading would boil down to registering all of the formal distortions in these texts. For a transfictional reading, what is crucial is the fact that Proust uses a variety of styles to tell a single story, and thus each of these texts has elements in common – characters, locations, sequences of events – and concerns the same narrative space. In this sense, the pastiche of Balzac is exceptional – characters from *La Comédie humaine* are spliced into the Lemoine affair, thereby creating a double dimension of transfictional reading. The first dimension is external; it includes all of the pastiches devoted to the same occurrence. The second, involving only the specific pastiche of Balzac, can be defined as the internal dimension, within which there occurs a migration of elements from the work of the author being imitated.[5] The text is therefore an occurrence in two (non-cohering?) worlds, a fact which in a sense touches on a practice of transfictionality to be addressed in due course.

2 Terminological Clarifications | Our awareness of the provenance of

transfictionality in intertextuality allows us to see it as a transition to a more incisive – though naturally far from exhaustive – analysis of the same problem. Richard Saint-Gelais defines it as follows: I propose […] to add a term to the already abundant panoply in literary studies and particularly poetics. By *transfictionality* I understand the phenomenon by which two texts, of the same author or different ones, relate together to the same fiction, whether by reprising the same characters, continuation of a foregoing plot, or sharing the same fictional universe.[6]

Saint-Gelais also points to the fact that his concept of transfictionality in a certain sense undermines our basic categories of thought about the text. Intertextuality has turned out to be inadequate for dealing with works whose essence did not amount to quoting or deforming a previous text, but to renewing, continuing, or undertaking a new approach to particular fictional elements of that text, such as the further lives of certain characters or elements of the plot. How do we explain the relationships between the many stories and novels about cases solved by Sherlock Holmes, in view of the fact that Arthur Conan Doyle, Holmes's creator, is not the only author of stories about Holmes's life? Intertextuality does not appear to be the precise prism for investigating this type of problem, so that in the end, the development of the new scholarly project of transfictionality was well-nigh unavoidable.

Here, it befits us to mention that in his formulation of transfictionality, Saint-Gelais sees the text with "a broad compass, also including films, TV, comic books, etc. in its range."[7] The text

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[5] R. Saint-Gelais, *Fictions transfuges. La transfictionnalité et ses enjeux*, Éditions du Seuil 2011, pp. 11-13.

[6] Ibid., p. 7. All translations are my own. Timothy Dwight Williams.

[7] Ibid.

thus functions as a cultural (not only literary) text, but Saint-Gelais deals only with narrative texts. He also signals that these other domains have yet to be properly analyzed. Given such a wide area of interests, transfictionality seems and is an unusually capacious and fluid concept, impervious to all dogma, which is why Saint-Gelais is rather attempting "to raise a certain number of questions that arise as soon as one interrogates the nature, status and limits of this practice."[8] One of these deals with the way and extent that readers are capable of uncovering transfictional connections between texts. The act of reading is to a great extent dependent on the act of writing. Saint-Gelais also turns our attention to what may be called the transfictional potential of the fictional character. These individual characters provide the best way to orient the reader's consciousness toward the initial text. If an author places some furniture from the house of Mmlle. Vauquer inside the plot he is creating, there is little chance that the reader will construct a transfictional bridge to *Père Goriot*. Introducing the person of Rastignac, however, and making him, importantly, an active part of the narrative, does not leave any doubt as to the connection with Balzac's work.[9] A transfictional relationship comes into being when Rastignac becomes a participant in events taking place in a given narrative. Only the establishment of his presence as an element in the fictional world of that narrative space permits us to talk about the transfictionality of the text under analysis. He cannot be someone from the outside, remaining only a figment of other characters' imagination, as he would if one of them merely talked about Rastignac or, as might happen, read *Le Père Goriot*.[10] In such a case, the figure of Rastignac as a purely imaginary character within a given fiction would not suffice for establishing a transfictional connection.

The migration mentioned earlier of information between narrative spaces is tightly connected with the idea of encroaching boundaries. Saint-Gelais indicates the paradoxical aspect of transfictional connections when he reviews the semantic formation of the French verb *traverser*, which can refer not only to communication but also to cutting.[11] And it is precisely from all of those "torn" places – gaps that need to be filled – that opportunities arise for the creation of transfictional texts, gratifying the reader's curiosity and encroaching in various ways the boundaries of the book, its plot, or even its authorship.

3 Transfictional Practices | By what means can these boundaries be transgressed? In his book, Saint-Gelais analyzes numerous examples of transfictional activity, treating such well-known works of world literature as *Madame Bovary*, *Don Quijote*, and the exploits of Sherlock Holmes. The problem of authorial ownership appears to be the least complicated one. A text that produces transfictional relationships may be the work of a single

[8] Ibid., 19.

[9] Ibid., 20.

[10] Saint-Gelais refers to an example from *Madame Bovary*: "When we read in *Madame Bovary* that the young Emma is reading *Paul et Virginie*, it is clear that the characters of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre are for her, as they are for us, imaginary beings, with whom no interaction is conceivable, since they are held inside the borders of *another* text, from which they have no way of escaping." R. Saint-Gelais, *Fictions transfuges*, p. 23.

[11] "Traverser: … Couper (une voie de communication), aller d'un bord à l'autre" (*Traverser*: … to cut (a path of communication), to cross from one side to the other). *Le Nouveau Petit Robert de la langue française 2009*, Paris 2009, p. 2612.

author (for example, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) or multiple authors, employing plot elements from a previously existing corpus of work (such as all of the stories and novels about Holmes that were written after Doyle's death). This second possibility seems even more clear-cut, since the idea of transgressing a boundary is embodied at the level of authorship as well.

Saint-Gelais designates *expansion* as one of the most important (and probably one of the most popular) transfictional practices: "The simplest kind of transfictional relationship, and certainly the most frequently encountered, involves the idea of expanding a previous fiction through a transfiction that prolongs it on the temporal or, more broadly, diegetic plane."[12] This expansion concerns not only the successive addition of new extensions. A passage within a text can also constitute an expansion, by creating a narrative about what happened earlier or presenting a story in a simultaneous fashion. Interestingly, expansion does not necessarily have to intervene in the plot of the initial text, it only needs to relate to that text's fictional creation. Saint-Gelais illustrates this using the following example: "J. K. Rowling's brochure on the history of Quidditch, *Quidditch Through the Ages* (2001), is not a narrative expansion of the Harry Potter series, but an introduction to the history, rules, and subtleties of the imaginary sport."[13] A text of that type would appear to be a kind of transfictional annex or appendix. However, the practice of expansion need not always generate transfictions that meet with general approval, though continuations, for example, of novels originally containing open, deliberately indefinite endings might do so.

We should remember that transfictionality applies not only to prose; examples can easily be found in the forms of poetry and drama as well. One example here would be the work of Jacek Kaczmarski, who after all wrote not one but four versions of the song "Obława" (Wolf Hunt). The second, third, and fourth iterations may be read as expansions of the first, and the element that allows us to reconstruct the transfictional connection is the wolf, unremittingly pursued by men, whose hate and fear for his tormentors grows with every verse. The "Obława" cycle must be classified as a transfiction, being an expansion within the oeuvre of a single author. The poetry of Kaczmarski, author of *Wojna postu z karnawałem* (The War Between Lent and Carnival) is altogether uniquely dialogical and intertextual, and one can also find other transfictional relationships therein, in which Kaczmarski functions as the second author building on another's work. A fine example of this is the libretto to the opera *Kuglarze i wisielcy* (Jugglers and Hangmen), in which one finds many characters, passages, and the basic plot of Victor Hugo's *L'homme qui rit* (The Man Who Laughs). Kaczmarski sometimes turns the narration over to certain characters, and also radically changes the ending. That, however, amounts to a different kind of transfictional practice.

Richard Saint-Gelais defines that kind of practice as *versions*. That method concentrates on attempting a new presentation of and at the same time modifying a story already known to readers. This can take place through a change in perspective, when selected episodes are retold by a different character than previously. Saint-Gelais here uses the famous example from Conan Doyle of Sherlock Holmes's return to London after his apparent death. In a book called *La Vendetta de*

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[12]R. Saint-Gelais, *Fictions transfuges*, p. 71. The temporal or diegetic plane = narrative space.
[13]Ibid., p. 74.

Sherlock Holmes this episode is presented from the point of view of a certain Ugo – a character who does not figure in Conan Doyle's version – and the narration of events entrusted to him. It is from his perspective that the reader views the amazing reunion of Holmes and Watson.[14]

Two other intriguing types of operations are *croisement* and *annexions* – crossings and incorporations. They reveal transfiction's capacity to "join together two (or more) fictions which the reader had hitherto every reason to consider unrelated, and which now find themselves conjoined in a third text."[15] The reader's consciousness does not work in a mode of simultaneity while reading – especially where two authors are concerned – and the reader therefore does not ask himself hypothetical questions about various fictions. He will not be interested in a coincidence that could lead to a meeting between Emma Bovary and Stendhal's Fabrice del Dongo, nor what their relationship might look like, were they to meet.[16] Only a text that would fuse the two separate narrative spaces together could establish a transfictional connection between them and orient the reader's consciousness towards it.

The concept of transfictionality can also be applied to popular culture, in which the possibilities for discovering crossings, expansions, and new versions are practically unlimited. Transfictions also operate retroactively, and instances of advanced transfictional practices can be found in literature from previous eras, for example in the work of baroque and classical writers.

4 Comment | Transfictionality is a complex and heterogeneous term, and the transfictional practices presented in this text naturally do not exhaust the subject; they merely offer an outline, while at the same time showing the potential this concept contains. The main idea was to conduct a preliminary discussion of the most important principles, key to grasping this phenomenon, as it developed in Francophone literary scholarly circles and opened up a new field for interdisciplinary studies.

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[14]Ibid., pp. 142-143.
[15]Ibid., p. 187.
[16]Ibid., pp. 63-64.

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Keywords | Abstract | Note on the Author   ● ● ●

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KEYWORDS

expansion

Richard Saint-Gelais

intertextuality

incorporation

crossing

versions

FICTION

transfictionality

Abstrakt:

This article attempts to introduce and explain the concept of transfictionality. The scholarship in this area developed in francophone literary studies. The main reason for its formation appears to have been the need for a new concept that would develop and supplement the theory of intertextuality. In that theory's collision with certain literary phenomena (though all domains of art can be taken into consideration here) the intellectual perspective exhausted itself and its tools ceased to be effective. The text focuses on the book Fictions transfuges by Richard Saint-Gelais, and attempts to sketch out and discuss such procedures as expansion, versions, crossings and incorporations. Not only the examples provided by the Canadian theorist, but also their substance and heft, are outlined. The author of this article has initiated the active use of a new terminological constellation in Polish literary studies.

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