

Intertextuality *sans frontières*? Cultural Memory after Postmodernism

As with “interactivity,” so with “intertextuality”: Is intertextuality the new genre? Why not myth, as another panelist would suggest? How about post-1960 “realism,” as David Shumway might ask us tomorrow. “Platform” maybe? Or perhaps not the genre of classical poetics but genre as medium, venue, or “tool,” digital or otherwise? At any rate, I have 15 minutes to raise my own questions, so let me get right to it by clarifying two things.

First, the case I will be making rests essentially on an argument about the contemporary as a historical stage for the emergence or, better still, for the global expansion of *intertextuality* as a kind of genre characteristic of our time’s world literature. By the way, I define the contemporary not as the post-World War II but as the post-1989 period, with events such as 9/11 part of this period’s “symptomatology.” Because this interval has witnessed accelerated and unprecedented globalization, it should come as little surprise that the rise of intertextuality as a genre or generic formation of sorts has a planetary dimension to it.

And second, I will proceed inductively. That is, I will be working from an example, a “marginal” one, I suppose—from Europe’s margins.

“The world is one; and it is more interesting than Budapest,” Hungarian activist and author György Konrád declares in his 1984 book *Antipolitics*. Around the same time, a few hundred miles East of Budapest, Romanian writer Mircea Cărtărescu—a perennial Nobel Prize nominee these days—had similar insights. With a difference: the world is one, but this oneness, this affiliation to the world text of its local chapters and footnotes, can be experienced in and *as* Bucharest. Here, the “fine print” of the culture encodes—without revealing—the one-world; the

“sense of place” gives as critic Ursula Heise might put it, but does not advertise a “sense of planet.” And so the place’s worldly inscription calls for the kind of “thick description”—for the intertextually minded criticism or *geocriticism*—where the planet, other places and people show their faces. If the regime sought to remove Romania’s capital from the world’s cultural and political arena and make it into what the dissidents of the 1980s referred to as “internal exile,” Cărtărescu fights off the twin incarceration of the city and of himself in it by opening Bucharest out onto what his 1985 poetry volume calls the “All” (*Totul*).

Drawing from this and other earlier works, his 1993 novel *Nostalgia*, now available in English, lays out this holistic vision with shocking neorealism. Forlorn and dilapidated, plagued by shortages and blackouts, late Cold-War Bucharest is, literally and allegorically, written by the book back into the wider world and thus rendered “interesting” as a site of and argument for worldly belonging. In Cărtărescu’s work the city and its people reclaim, obliquely, their seat in the bigger world: they are, we gather, part and parcel of the planet’s living body while the latter, in all its irreducible strangeness and complexity, is here, with them: not in the open, not immediately noticeable, certainly deterred, deterritorialized by official politics and policies, and yet here. From beneath the defaced surface of Ceaușescu’s “golden-age” Bucharest, the writer summons strange faces and the very face of worldly strangeness: the face of the planet, the figure of that oneness, of the planetary *Mitsein* fractured by the Berlin Wall and, more broadly, by the disjunctive geopolitics of the Cold War.

Thus, from within the maze of the concrete housing projects, the author conjures up cosmic panoramas by bridging physical and metaphysical gaps. In dialogue with E. T. A. Hoffmann, Franz Kafka, Gabriel García Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Thomas Pynchon, and other classics of the fantastic, the absurd, and magical realism, Cărtărescu unearths a maimed

metropolis whose heart throbs in the world's wider body and whose idiosyncratic mix of squalor and "Paris of the Balkans" charm he flips over to display unsuspected depths, passageways, and ramifications into the hidden, the elsewhere, and the otherwise—into the world's larger assemblage. Where the Western mindset relegates his city to an alien and cloistered geography overrun by strays and ruled by vampiric dictators razing entire cities to make room for their sepulchral headquarters, Cărtărescu unfolds a borderless dreamland.

The oneiric politics of *Nostalgia*'s urban imaginary was lost on Cărtărescu's readers neither when the book first came out in spring 1989, under the title *Visul* (The Dream) and butchered by censorship, nor a few years later, when it was reissued in unabridged form. Its staggeringly holistic vision went against officially upheld "tradition," an exceptionalist-solipsistic notion derived from early 20th-century, agrarian-Orthodox and nationalist doctrines, on which the Communist Party was falling back in the late 1980s to ward off perestroika. The novel symbolically liberates the city's body politic by linking it up with other urban bodies and bodies of work, with other places and contexts, with their texts and styles. An *other* to the city and its "official" corporeality thus coalesces beyond the closed-off self, community, and place; an other into whose capaciously agglutinating fabric *Nostalgia*'s main first-person narrator weaves himself and his kin.

The spider web is Cărtărescu's master trope. A motif *in* the story, it also designates, metafictionally, the novel's multiply intertextual fabric and, inside it, the net of Kabbalah-like copulas between stages and layers of existence where the individual brain is plugged into other brains and their projections into other worlds and the worlds behind those, *ad infinitum*. As in one of the novel's sections, our narrator, the writer-in-the-novel, plays the spider sliding up and down the threads of plots and characters. He gets in and out of his *dramatis personae*'s minds,

morphing into them while telling us about their own changes into others. At the same time, he shows how the phylogeny of these individual metamorphoses, a Cărtărescu trademark, rehearses cosmic ontogeny by recapping a whole cosmology—an entire *cosmallogy*, so to say (or to spell, rather—with an “a” and two “l’s”). For what he ultimately puts up is the spectacle of a sui-generis planetary show of the All and those without whom this whole’s wholeness would fall short, a performance of self and—and necessarily with—others (*álloi* in Ancient Greek).

People’s bodies; Bucharest’s crumbling body; the nation’s body; and, at last, the world’s: these are *Nostalgia*’s concentric circles, the Kabbalistic web in which what happens on one level occurs or can occur on the rest as a drama of All-ness, of quasi-mystical participation in the life of the All. The All’s structure is inherently non-*allergic*, consists of *álloi* and in that is *cosmallogic*. Like the nation yet unlike how it has been usually pictured, this structure features others and calls upon the self to acknowledge them both outside and inside itself. Further, if the All is indeed the Alpha and Omega of “little” existential forms and, further, if these forms mirror the whole’s own form, then they are its microcosm. Further, because the levels of this ontology interface and overlap, the microcosm is not only analogical and juxtaposed to the macrocosm but also a portal to it, an *Aleph*.

In calling the small, the local, the isolated, the cloistral, the incarcerated, the city, and its bodies Alephs, the Romanian writer also calls out to Borges, interpellates and interpolates the Argentine writer’s famous “Aleph.” Another homology obtains here via Cărtărescu’s engagement with Borges’s holistic model of universal intertextuality. This is the Babel Library, in which literature and place are endless in number and extent and so coextensive, one. Therefore, the universal library and the universe overlap too. In “The Library of Babel,” “The Book of Sand,” “The Total Library,” and other Borgesian *ficciones*, the library, the book, and the textual

foreground the universe qualitatively, best capture its fabric, its “textile” makeup. Conversely, they also hint that, if the cosmos is like a book, all books are infinite. That means that every book holds the rest of the library holdings, is an Aleph, “one of the points in space that contains all points.” What de-fines book-ness is in-finitude as well as inter-textuality, cosmic boundlessness *and* boundedness. Underlying the latter is, fundamentally, planetary otherness, the world’s others and their books’ presence in a particular book.

Make no mistake: this book does not only “put up” with a “parasitic” other to it within itself; the book simply cannot have a self, an identity, cannot be “original,” in short, cannot be what and where it is without that “alien” presence and space inside it, without having its roots somewhere else, in another text. It follows, then, that the Aleph is not just unlimited and intertextual—and intertextual because transgressive, liable to cross over to the other side—but also “alterial.” It is a repository of alterity. It is being that *is* while also being what it is not, its other, much as the Aleph includes its “counterpart,” the Zahir, and everything else between the A (alpha) and Z (omega) of existential, cultural, and political “alternatives.”

In this sense, Borges’s “Aleph,” to which *Nostalgia* alludes repeatedly, is not only the novel’s primary intertextual ingredient, the closest literary connection. The Aleph also designates the cosmological trope and cultural stratagem through which Cărtărescu reveals his cosmology as *cosmallogy* and Bucharest as an Aleph, a site of astonishing authenticity *and* otherness, a strange and vast place locked *inside* the nation-state’s body. This vastness is a historical polis made into world by the writer’s dissenting cosmoimaginary. Describing LA as “world-city” and utmost sample of postmodern urban geography, Edward Soja notices that the metropolis is also a cosmopolis because it “reproduc[es] *in situ* the customary colours and confrontations of a hundred different homelands.” A microcosm of the limitless and itself without limit, bursting

with “fulsome” heterogeneity, Soja’s LA is, in his own formulation, a Borgesian “LA-leph,” at once “everywhere” and “the only place on earth where all places are.” And they are here because, as the critic implies apropos, again, of Borges’s Aleph, this is a “radical[ly] open,” “all-inclusive simultaneity” harboring a whole panoply of otherness, the “global in the fullest sense of the word.” In the Californian Aleph, the illimitable is unconcealed and needs not be excavated in an LA that conspicuously is the world; in Cărtărescu’s all-too-limited Bucharest, much as in so many other places kept in place by the Cold War politics of nations and national blocs, the Aleph must be released from underneath the drabness of the visible and from behind the nation-state’s aggressively policed boundaries. No Paris of the Balkans, Bucharest still has to become their LA—another place on earth where the planet, the world as world, shows its face.

“The face of the earth”: have you ever wondered about the idiom? I have, apropos of Cărtărescu’s Bucharest, where this face has been all but effaced by geopolitics, and apropos of other places, more and more of them over the past twenty years of fiction, where this face shows itself to us—the world’s face and the geocultural interface, the intertextuality of places and texts, of *topoi*, this face comprises.

Take Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul, for example, from his 2002 novel *Snow*. Here, people, houses, and neighborhoods are tiny, overlapping wrinkles on the planet’s complexion, all of them rendered visible by a mix of zoom-in and zoom-out narrative episodes, some of which feature aborted military coups transparently restaging Brecht and Pirandello. Or consider Joseph O’Neill’s New York City, from *Netherland* (2008), in which, via Google Maps—from God’s viewpoint, as Michel Houellebecq might quip—the protagonist, Hans van der Broeck, has both Brook-lyn and “the physical planet” in his “sights” (252), and so intertwines them as he retells *The Great Gatsby* for post-9/11 America. Another case in point is Gish Jen’s New England in

her 2010 novel *World and Town*, where a backyard pit dug out by Cambodian immigrants provides an apt synecdoche for Pol Pot's killing fields. Or Houellebecq's neo-traditionalist France, from *La carte et le territoire* (The Map and the Territory, 2010), where the country's cuisine, landscape, architecture, and identity generally have been de-modernized and re-encoded as "old-fashioned" France by Russian and Chinese fantasies of Frenchness. What about Don DeLillo's 2003 *Cosmopolis*, then, where the protagonist's stretch limo, stuck in Manhattan traffic as it is, takes in the whole world to boil it down to a stock exchange chart. Or Dubravka Ugrešić's Amsterdam in her 2005 book *The Ministry of Pain*. Here, a classroom of asylum-seeking students from the former Yugoslavia becomes the place where, as their teacher notes, a "new, completely different tribe will arise from the post-Communist underbrush" (234), the "web people" (235), and, with them, a "new humanism" (236); and countless other places in Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Chang-rae Lee, Aleksandar Hemon, Gary Shteyngart, Colum McCann, Junot Díaz, Teju Cole, and so on.

What an author like Cărtărescu suggests *allegorically*, against the cross-paradigmatic, political-epistemological pull of the nation-state around the end of the Cold War, and what such authors *spell out narratively* in the Cold War's globalizing aftermath is this:

first, the face of the earth, of the worlded, one-becoming planet, is becoming increasingly readable in what earlier I called cultures' *fine print*;

second, this presence is indexed, and foregrounded, by the participation of other places and texts in the topo-textual fabric, in the arabesque of "small things" and their godly and human handlers, locales, styles, and places;

third, this onto-aesthetic involvement of the elsewhere and the outside in the makeup of Being—of a place, a group, their literature—is, as Agamben explains in *The Coming Community*,

not an addition, a supplement, but that which actually affords culture, ensures that it can take and has its own place, unique, singular;

forth, this singularity, thus understood, stems from the existence of something I would call not the world bank of literature of literary data—or the world bank literature, if you have seen the book by this title—but, perhaps a tad more encouragingly, the *intertextual commons*;

fifth, because literatures all over the world draw more and more from this commons and expand it as they do so, intertextuality has become or is about to become, beyond the postmodern West, a worldwide shared protocol of poiesis, or genre, if you will;

sixth, this being the case, such literature-making implicitly enables a meaning-making procedure geared toward foregrounding the cross-cultural multiplicity from which cultures, their homogeneous self-representations notwithstanding, are springing, today more than ever;

and seventh, if indeed, at long last, our planet is swimming into our methodological ken, if the earth's face is coming into view in its full material dispensations and cultural-intellectual affordances no matter how contradictory, uneven, or plainly objectionable some of these may be, if the planet's culture, archives, and repertoires have become, for better or worse, more available, accessible, and shareable, by so many, than ever before, this means that critics and humanists generally need to recognize intertextuality in its world play; to allow that representation and, more largely, cultural memory inside a certain tradition may well entail, after postmodernism, representing and recollecting something that said tradition may have never imagined or experienced. This means to read—whatever we do read—with the planet.