

ON THE NOTION OF
INTERTEXTUALITY: THE EXAMPLE
OF THE LIBERTINE NOVEL

Iouri Lotman, taking as a starting point the idea that the rapport with the sign determines all the codes of a given culture and their systems of classification, proposes a *typology of cultures*. His research has been received with little interest in France, to the extent that some important articles in which it is described have not yet been translated.¹ This is surprising considering the interest in Lotman's hypotheses, which give a boost and a broader outlook to semiotics which it had lost in certain scholarly minutiae. It may also be held that this indifference is normal for those whose profession is to reflect on the sign, unwilling to consider their object as a relative entity subject to the contingencies of history and culture, but also refusing to recognize the

Translated by Michael Crawcour.

¹ I am thinking especially of the text entitled "Le problème du signe et du système sémiotique dans la culture russe avant le XXe siècle," which I read, for my part, in Italian in *Ricerche semiotiche. Nuove tendenze delle scienze umane nell'URSS*, a cura di I. Lotman e B. Uspenski, Turin, Einaudi, 1973, pp. 40-63. In *Analysis of the poetic text*, Ann Arbor, 1976, a bibliography of the works of Lotman edited by Lazar Fleishman can be found.

On the Notion of Intertextuality

sign as a concrete force in Man's life, capable of directing his knowledge and his exchanges.

If this is what the typology of cultures entails it becomes evident that semiotics must confront the archaeological exploration of knowledge led by Michel Foucault,² and with it sustain a productive exchange of ideas. Combining a calculation of the possibilities offered by the different aspects of the sign with the empirical verification of precise cultural processes, Lotman proposes, as an example, a classification of Russian culture which presents some striking affinities with *epistemes* defined by Foucault (resemblance, representation, effectuation), while showing nuances in their characteristics and their moments of realization.³

One may go a step further, once the *types* have been defined, in establishing the relations of agreement or conflict existing between them: in other words, in examining how two cultures communicate with each other, how that which follows accepts or rejects what has preceded it, or how, within an apparently homogeneous point of time, different semiotic models compete for the dominant position. In this way one arrives at a game of cultural history as an organizable complexity of intertextual relations.

ONE TYPE OF INTERTEXT: SEDUCTION

I have outlined in a recent work,⁴ a typology determined by three essential relationships of meaning:

- symbolization, in which the symbolizing and the symbolized are bound together.
- designation, which unites a sign and a thing.
- signification, the unification of the signifying and the signified.

² *Les mots et les choses. Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Gallimard, 1966.

³ *Op. cit.* Lotman distinguishes essentially three types of cultures:
—medieval culture, of the paradigmatic type, characterized by a high degree of semioticity, where the sign is substituted for something bigger than it is itself;
—classical culture, of a mixed type, at once paradigmatic and syntagmatic;
—modern culture, of the syntagmatic type, in which the sign *forms a part of* something bigger than itself.

⁴ *La Diabolie. La séduction, la renardie, l'écriture*, Minuit, 1979.

These three types correspond to three cultural realizations and three different semiologies: the Middle Ages (the Augustinian concept of the sign), the classical era (the “Pascalian” concept) and the modern era (the Saussurian concept). It goes without saying that they are put into a concrete form each time in a more or less massive and more or less conflictual manner. Furthermore, these three types may be defined by envisaging certain hierarchical ties or reciprocal ties between the *relata* (just as the Middle Ages placed the thing symbolized in an absolutely dominant position, so the Renaissance instituted an equivalence between the two terms of symbolization).

Having established a structurally stable antagonism in the functioning of each of these models, I would formulate the hypothesis that a culture, obeying this or that semiotics, regularly gives rise to an opposite semiotics, which is destined to oppose the dominant model and eventually take its place. This antagonism arises from an intertextual relation, as it always concerns reproducing a model by deviating it. This second text (called diabolic) contains the terms of the previous text but not the value attached to these terms. It denounces these values as being themselves a product of a deviation. One may call this movement, of recovery and retrospective deciphering, a *double inclusion*, by analogy with the logical relationships established between the two wholes.⁵

I would like here to demonstrate that the libertine novel, an attribute of the eighteenth century and therefore revealing a specific cultural situation, is the product of a diabolic intertextuality, and more exactly of one of its variants, *seduction*, which imitates the law of *designation* subverting its constraining character. It recuperates, in fact, the love novel of the preceding century by changing it; it interprets the novel as a hypocritical or stupid aberration of the language of desire. According to the two axes drawn up by Julia Kristeva,⁶ it thus superimposes a

⁵ These relationships (inclusion, exclusion, intersection) could form a picture, itself a summary of the classification of types of intertext.

⁶ See “Le mot, le dialogue et le roman,” in Σημειωτική. *Recherches pour une sèmanalyse*, 1969, pp. 143-173. Let us remember that it is this study which introduces the term *intertext* in the reflection about literature, if not the notion itself, of which the discovery must be attributed to Bakhtine. Julia Kristeva seems to me to have put forward, in this article commenting on the

On the Notion of Intertextuality

vertical dialogue with past literature on the horizontal communication with those whom it addresses. Furthermore, realizing an indispensable condition for speaking about the intertext, the diachronic dimension of the dialogue is transformed into an internal synchronic conflict: the libertine narrative bases the essentials of its effects and its progression on this “implicit polemic”⁷ which it maintains with an ideality that it revokes at the same time as it awakens the memory of it in its reader.

I will examine this double discourse on the libertine novel on three planes: that of the character through his behaviour, verbal or not; that of the narrative; and that of the poetics of libertine texts. In other words, the question of intertextuality will invite us to pose the problem of the ties which anthropology, the narrative and aesthetics maintain with a semiotic modality and, inversely, the relationship of semiotics as a science with different objects and levels of analysis.

THE CHARACTER

In order to observe the function of seduction in a libertine character, let us take as an example a moment from the intrigue which Valmont creates around Madame de Tourvel in *Liaisons dangereuses*.

Wishing to allay the distrust of Madame de Tourvel, Valmont organizes a stratagem: by his generosity he saves a peasant family from ruin in a village near the chateau. He knows that *la Présidente* is having him followed and that she will be informed of this action; this therefore is not an act of benevolence but a calculated staging, destined to tone down the image of virtue in the prudish beauty. As often happens in the novels of

intuitions of Bakhtine, all the necessary principles for a good functioning of the intertextual instrument.

Among the publications which have raised this problem, let us take note of *Poétique 27, Intertextualités*, Seuil, 1976.

S. Todorov has just published a very useful work on the thought of Bakhtine (*M. Bakhtine, le principe dialogique*, Seuil, 1981). I have unfortunately not been able to consider it in this article.

⁷ M. Bakhtine, *Problèmes de la poétique de Dostoïevski*, Lausanne, L'Age d'homme, 1970.

Laclos, two letters tell of the event from two different points of view: the first (letter XXI) from Valmont to Madame de Merteuil exposes the wiles of a seducer; the other (letter XXII) from Madame de Tourvel to Madame de Volanges, presents the version of his deceived objective.

A perfect actor, the libertine thus elaborates the signs of an edifying theatre, directed towards his target and reproducing the inner comedy of the devout woman. *La Présidente* herself is eager to believe in his false beneficence, projecting her own authority onto the character of the actor, and crediting Valmont with a singleness of purpose that in fact belongs only to her. She takes the sign for reality, in the logic of a “classic” semiology characterized by the binary structure of the *designation*, in which the word and the thing refer to each other. Valmont, in staging this interpretation of the world, keeps his distance from it: his gestures are certainly signs but they only refer to a meaning rendered illusory by the fact that reality is not taken into account. Within a semiotics which he perverts, he introduces the use of signs separated from reality, leaving room for the flight of sense, in which modernity will contemplate its disillusion.

One sees in this episode an example of a non-verbal intertext, based on gesture, on the situation: pure representation. However, going further back, one finds language, since the scene of beneficence has its biblical reference. The libertine can also reproduce a whole significant physiology which he deviates (tears, tremblings, blushes...): the seducer cites the uncontrolled emotion of the other’s body, just as he borrows her discourse and mimics her behaviour. It is the essential value of the human relationship and all the ethical force of love which he subverts in imitating them. The language of the libertine is thus “turned towards the other,” but in a very different way from Bakhtin’s dialogism.

Our description would not therefore be complete if it stopped here. Valmont exposes in *la Présidente*, in her words as well as in her actions, the marks of a duplicity which he was to call a “remarkable falsehood,” a “ruse,” a “baseness.” Madame de Merteuil, for whom all *defence* is, by definition, pretence or denial, confirms this interpretation endlessly. What is more, the narrative itself throws doubt on the univocity of Madame de

On the Notion of Intertextuality

Tourvel's system, by the trick of double points of view: the false chastity, the unconfessed desires contradict virtue, confirming the reader's suspicion that libertines gain their knowledge from the "heart," that is, from their aptitude in deciphering the old story. In the passage that I have given here, for example, the reader (and he only) can see that *la Présidente* has Valmont watched because she is jealous: at the beginning of the game, at the same moment in which she is defending herself, she loves the Viscount. With her, also, the discourse is twofold; the words have meaning within the system of virtue, but their referral contradicts this meaning. The fact that this referral is love, and not simply thwarted desire, places Laclos' novel outside the field of libertinage, and thus outside the framework which we have set for ourselves here.

THE NARRATIVE

Of this brief analysis one will remember above all a voice, differing from those of the characters, which asserts itself to confirm or confute their interpretations and, consequently, itself proceeds to an orientated deciphering. This voice is that of the narrative. Perceptible essentially in the organization of the epistolary material—in the successions, ruptures, implications—it determines the information that the reader receives. Guiding the text along its own imposed lines, it thus directs the understanding of the anthropological strata of the novel, in its turn relying on a former textuality, or, more precisely, manipulating this textuality.

To illustrate the effect of this second intertextual manoeuvre, I will cite a short and admirable novel by Vivant Denon, *Point de lendemain*.⁸ As it is little known I will first summarize the plot.

The narrator, who is twenty years old at the time of the story, one night at the Opéra meets Madame de T..., whose charm and desire for propriety—even desire to pass as virtuous—he emphasizes. She takes him to a castle near Paris where her bad-tempered and sick husband, to whom she must return, awaits

⁸ One may read it in *Romanciers du XVIII^e siècle*, Vol. II Gallimard (La Pléiade), 1965, pp. 379-402.

her. Very much to the point, the husband goes to bed immediately after supper. So the woman proposes an evening stroll to the young man which was to lead them into a sequestered pavilion and then into a secret room of the castle. In these two love sanctuaries they consecrated themselves to the god who had that evening guided their steps. The next day the young man left, replaced by the official lover, who had arrived as if by chance. He discovered that he had not been anything but a part in a play of which he did not know the plot, and which Madame de T... had masterfully set up.

Throughout the story the hero remains in the most total ignorance. Having become narrator he carefully keeps the reader in the dark: the apparently unforeseeable character of the future, through contrived surprises, represents the surest guarantee of pleasure, since he subtly varies the approaches to an erotic outcome which the libertine narrative has to respect. He finds thus, by using the reader, what Crébillon calls "the endless art of gradations."

However, the walk of the characters in the park of the chateau, bound by a sentimental itinerary, measures successive discoveries for the reader: the two protagonists cross, in effect, the distances of a *Carte du Tendre* combined with *Astrée* and reinterpreted. Each place, the object of a euphoric or nostalgic wander, of a pause prelude by its pleasures or its hopes other intimacies is, at the same time, an occasion for reflection or progressive definition. The precious psychology digresses into eroticism. A Seine, sinuous and gilded by the moonlight, thus reminds us of the river of "Inclination" and the rustic Lignon. A long terrace becomes a path of confidences and mutual esteem. The walk towards the temple of pleasure is accompanied by veiled declarations and "metaphysical reasonings": "We took the high road of sentiment," writes the narrator, "and joined it so early that it was impossible to glimpse the end of the journey."⁹ This is the Platonic moment of the amorous peregrination, the compulsory passage, although absolutely artificial, of many libertine texts, and which is opposed, in *Point de lendemain*, to an Epicurean movement.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 392.

On the Notion of Intertextuality

One could continue the list of places and sentiments. What counts here is that the lovers emerge very rapidly in *Unknown Lands*, as the *Carte du Tendre* says, while the mannered novel does its utmost to *stop* its heroes reaching them. Body contact is endlessly deferred, the outcome put off through interminable volumes by means of delays which constitute the very essence of preciousness.

Point de lendemain, as many other stories but more explicitly, thus follows a narrative route, pruning it of its idealism. There as elsewhere, one can, without difficulty, find examples citing common places, characters, a vocabulary, taken from the mannered or pastoral novel and put to the service of a diametrically opposed imagery. As a last proof one may take the title of the novel, which testifies, certainly, to the philosophy typical of the eighteenth century, but also feeds the oblique argument to which the narrative succumbs in presenting as ephemeral moments in a strategy of immediate pleasure the passages of an itinerary which the earlier novel held as security for an inexhaustible future and ever-renewed tomorrows.

A reading of the old text, paradoxically revived, is thus added to the deforming reproduction. The interpretative fiction, according to the law of intertextuality to which we have referred above, effaces historical opposition in favour of the present structuration. In *Point de lendemain*, the woman who, throughout the story, also seems to be following a path she does not know, reveals herself, finally, as the instigator of the love scene. Doing honour to places by appearing to discover them and to be touched by their charm, she is placed, at the final twist, in the position of the secret stage manager. Her reticence and her modesty are presented, after the event, as so many clever wiles: incitement takes over from shyness, actions and words which apparently designated a defence and retreat, come to signify provocation.

If Vivant Denon's novel does not bring us to the denunciation of this retrospective deciphering, other libertine narratives do. One can be assured that many of the works of Crébillon the Younger, Duclos, Nerciat, and sometimes of Diderot or Marivaux are systematically only too ready to present the satisfaction of desire as a denial, that is as a double discourse, masking the ambiguity of unconfessable lust with the insistence of "Platonic"

declarations. Most stereotyped characters, created by the libertine novel, are thus the emblems of this intertextual situation: the Celadons, the naïfs, the prudes, etc...

POETICS

The libertine text proposes an interpretation of the world and of the narrative which gives it form, like *theatre*, or, in the context of the eighteenth century, like duplicity and illusion. If it appeals, in its poetics, to realism, it is preoccupied with a reality very different from that found in the mannered novel. Here it is a reality full of sentiment which claims to dictate the representation of the places and the action, according to an allegorical understanding in which the visible designates the invisible. There, on the contrary, the concrete reality of desire, asserting itself against idealism, strips it of its mystery. The bifid voice of the narrative, which demonstrates dependence while claiming superiority, thus replies to the affirmed poetics of the libertine writers. All, including the *minor* purveyors of indecent volumes, vying with one another, proclaim their wish to *teach* and to *please*. They pay lip service to the Horatian precept that classical aesthetics attempted to base on the nature of signs and things: *to teach* imposed on the writer the duty to direct his reader, starting with worldly objects, towards the universality of good and reason which gave them sense; *to please* prescribed that, in a convergent movement, he kept alive the idealistic imagination of the noble and the grandiose.

Libertine poetics, adopting the *leitmotif* of classical poetics, assigns to it completely different objectives. It loses the ancient coherence of order: its didactic function consists in opening to its reader the means of disenchanting interpretation, in which the binary structure of the allegorical text explodes to the benefit of a multitude of systems cut off from the universality of truth; it understands enjoyment as excitement through imagined pleasure, a eulogy of well-being of the body and the world, so vigorously denied by aesthetics upon which it is based.

On the Notion of Intertextuality

THE OBJECT AND ITS MANIPULATION

One can thus accept that the libertine novel of the eighteenth century is, from the point of view of semiotic analysis, the product of a seductive intertextuality whose function is found at three "levels," anthropological, narrative and aesthetic. In each case, a code is utilized to be subverted, and its legitimacy is argued. This double discourse raises a unique conflict between two semiotic models, at the same time successive and simultaneous. The libertine eighteenth century is at the same time dependent on classical semiotics, capable of criticizing it and incapable of really reaching beyond it.

The seductive intertext thus contains a first paradox: it conserves that which it claims to destroy, it gives life to that which it fights. Taking libertinage itself as the object of an intertextual manipulation, Sade escapes this paradox, but by means of a violence for which the price was imprisonment and exclusion.

The second paradox of seductive intertextuality comes from an exact functional homology of the three "levels." There exist seductive characters in narratives and poetics which are not seductive (like *Bel-Ami*, in Maupassant); there exists seductive poetics without any real characters or narrative (such is the theory of writing in Barthes). The strict homology seems to be the product of a culture of a congealed identity, of the reduction to the same, despite the conflictual semioticity which characterizes it. It is known that libertine philosophy, the offspring of antique Epicureanism, arranges all human phenomena from the sole point of view of pleasure. It also testifies to this reduction to the identical in its research into motives and objectives. It is within the logic of an anti-idealist application of the sign, that tries to unify the real in excluding all transcendence: in Lotman's terminology this practice is non-paradigmatic, as the sign cannot be substituted by anything greater than itself.

On the theoretical plane this study will have shown, I think, that intertextuality affects different realities: verbal or not, micro- or macro- structural, anthropological, narrative or aesthetic, etc... Likewise, the intertextual object may be accepted as such or ignored, attracting the attention of the reader or trying to escape it, although it always, by definition, constitutes the

object of a communication, evident or subtle. In order that intertextuality can exist, the second text must make perceptible both the exported object (behaviour, words, poetic aim) and the manipulation to which it is subjected. Thus Bakhtine's *méni-pée*, or seduction, such as I have presented, are at the same time the vehicle of an earlier text and the modifying tool for this text, festive there, falsifying here. It is necessary, furthermore, that the relationship of the second text to the first be transformed into a structural opposition at the very centre of the new text: thus no citation, no reminiscence, no "source" constitute an intertext.

If one does not want to discredit the notion of intertext by making it serve too many purposes or by treating it as a cult word, one must limit its application. But that does not mean that one must consider it a myopic instrument: on the contrary, the intertext appears to constitute an ideal field of study when it is a question of joining fine analysis to vast perspective, and disclosing, in the detail of exchanges and sentences, the lines of force of an entire culture.¹⁰

Claude Reichler
(*University of Lausanne*)

¹⁰ An abridged version of this text was presented during the second Congress of the International Association of Semiotics, Vienna, July 1979, in the framework of a working group directed by Ch. Grivel and H.G. Ruprecht.