

# A Challenging Game of Books and the Free Interplay of Cultural Transfer

Jola Škulj

ZRC SAZU, Institute of Slovenian Literature and Literary Studies, Ljubljana, Slovenia  
jsk@zrc-sazu.si

*Discussing the book and its cultural economy, this paper opens up key issues of the culture of writing and of textual transactions. Literature as written words is “orphaned language” (Caruth) that results in the fact that readings keep the first-person consciousness alert and involve the realm of the semiosphere, and thus interpolate a subjective dimension into texts, leaving inevitable consequences for cultural transfer as well.*

Keywords: book history / the culture of writing / literature / textual indeterminacy / fluidity / semiosphere / reading / semiotic translation / cultural transfer / the world literary system

Why should we address the event of books? Why should we call attention to the challenging *game* implicated in reading and the circulation of books and—even closer to the inquiring minds of comparative literature scholars—to the circulation of literature? Why should we find in cultural or literary transfer a core concept when bearing in mind literatures and their material bearers as ways and means of dissemination? Why do comparative literature scholars consider the book to be an economy of cultural spaces? The response can be rather brief and deceptively simple; it can even sound plain: for semiotics the books are *living* factors, and as such *living* factors they play an undeniable, *real* role in remodeling the literary institution and its ever-new point of departure. The concept of books as living factors is borrowed from Yuri Lotman, who explains his views on the idea of the semiosphere by saying that “in the history of art ... works which come down to us from remote cultural periods continue to play a part in cultural development as *living* factors” (Lotman 127; my emphasis). Lotman highlights culture as “living matter” and finds the semiosphere “the result and the condition for the development of culture ... the totality and the organic whole of *living* matter [culture] and also the condition for the continuation of [cultural] *life*” (125; my emphasis). According to him, both the individual human intellect and the book as

the work of thinking represent a semiotic system and are essential for the continuation of life.

As repositories of human consciousness throughout their historical being that convey to us tales of Mnemosyne, writings hand over traces and semiotic facts of our cultural past. Books are privileged to generate cultural traffic (Hoesel-Uhlig 39);<sup>1</sup> they can involve us in an “international conversation” (see Strich); in fact, in a “cosmopolitan gathering of the literatures of the world” (Prendergast, “World” 2). As genuine receptacles of the ever-accumulating past, they store vast knowledge supplies for future use. As potential openings of barriers, books challenge us to cross the threshold of a stimulating game, of the adaptation of foreign examples, or of reworking the inspiration emanating from them. Books are phenomena of cultural mobility and intercultural exchange. In any reading instance, the transferred semiotic data are transformed. Its readers are involved in various discursive manifestations of transfer because construing the full import of words in texts is a highly complex process involved in a dynamic network of a multiplicity of suggestions. Books make us part of an entirely serious and sophisticated cultural game that is semiotically and socially transmitted through an accumulation of various past writings, poetological traces, and matrixes. In any reading process, significations are scanned through our own being there that make us participate in building up the imminent stories of poiesis. Any book is a constantly re-read entity; in fact, a reworked actuality. It has its actual existence at any time. As living factors, books provide access to the semiotic or social effects of previous shifting cultural realities and are pertinent to shape the synchronic understanding of literature.

Books testify how the world republic of letters is built up within the history of human thought and, from outside, through the process of cultural transfer; that is, through an on-going transnational traffic of communicated ideas. By examining cultural transfer closely, the trajectories of transcultural processes can be mapped and discussed in detail. Books embody an imaginary library of cultural routes, acting as lever, a sort of switch, of cultural memory and as a mechanism by which the symbolic order of significations is transmitted. Discursive worlds preserved in the cultural memory of literary archives are retrieved each time to speak to the needs of the present. Reading as retrieving cultural memory, as an act of dialogical encounter with former human self-understanding inscribed in texts, entails constructing a new image (Gr. *eidolon*, from *eidos* [form], an unsubstantial or unreal image, an emanation considered by atomic philosophers to constitute the visible image of an object, or *quasi reality* in Ingarden’s wording) from semiotic elements involved in the given uni-

verse of the mind. Cultural memory is conceived “less as a storage or archive, and more as a *dynamic* operation that reappropriates the past in the interest of communal identities,” writes Kelber (57), restating the views thoroughly elaborated by Jan and Aleida Assmann.

Reading inevitably resonates with certain core humanist values. It is a kind of mining, revealing *eidolon* from a complex and rather elusive act of signification in literature. Reading as *untying the text*—to evoke the book title of Robert R. C. Young’s poststructuralist reader—is a sort of endless wandering through the uncertainty of words and the universe of the mind, of which Edgar Allan Poe says in *Dream-Land* (1844):

By a route obscure and lonely,  
 Haunted by ill angels only,  
 Where an *Eidolon*, named *Night*,  
 On a black throne reigns upright,  
 I have reached these lands but newly  
 From an ultimate dim Thule —  
 From a wild weird clime, that lieth, *sublime*,  
 Out of *Space* — out of *Time*. (Poe; my emphases)

As the agency of cultural memory, the book brings to light ever new textualizations of human cognitive positions and experiences. That is why in any in-depth discussion of the book one should have in mind a true understanding of the fluid facticity of literature and the inherent “creativity” of cultural transfer.

Reading has to do with a complex linkage of literary clues allocated in our memory. Residues of previously read books, cultural memory resources left over in the traces of semiotic data and literary codes, call up a dynamic memory allocation that Lotman terms “the semiosphere,” or “the single channel structure” (Lotman 124), which, however, is realized in a plurality of options; Lotman sees in the semiosphere “a single mechanism” and argues “that all elements of the semiosphere are in dynamic, not static, correlations whose terms are constantly changing” (127). The semiosphere is a system of interconnections with literary traces, and in any reading act its intervention embodies a minimal working semiotic background of the decoding process. Any reading event is implicated in the agency of “the semiosphere, that synchronic semiotic space which fills the borders of culture, without which separate semiotic systems cannot function or come into being” (3). In reading processes, the mechanism of the generation of meaning is deeply immersed in an open structure that gives shape and support to it; that is, the cultural frame of semiotic remnants from previously read texts and the transmitted thinking structures.

Readers activate the semiosphere, the immense complexity of various elements inscribed in a system of culture, and numerous forms of relationships among the literary elements that they encounter in the course of the highly complex cognitive activity of understanding. Books that have already been read institute a dormant semiotic network of literary ties, a repository of discursive interactions and of potential textual interpenetrations. The traces or imprints of interrelated imaginary worlds constitute a *virtual discursive system*, the semiosphere, which controls any effective reading of literature. Such a network of semiotic traces is ever floating, transient, hypothetical in its being, even though it is an outcome of the factual life texts. Hence, we can speak of the challenging game of books and the free interplay of cultural transfer.

The complexity of semiosphere arises from a number of relational regimes of writings, and through them an archive of texts read in the past remains alive and actively inscribes itself in the process of new readings. The semiosphere—implying an entire packed history of cultural texts—represents a holistic model of the world behind actual cultural processes and real routes of books and their practices of decoding, and also an unceasingly re-defined network of cultural traces shaped through on-going dialogism; that is, a complex system inscribing in itself a facet of memory.

Books remain in existence through the latent and ever-changing semiosphere. Lotman corroborates his groundbreaking thought on literary works (and also on books themselves) as living factors by saying: “What ‘works’ is not the most recent temporal section, but the *whole packed history of cultural texts*... [i]n fact, everything contained in the actual memory of culture is directly or indirectly part of that culture’s synchrony” (Lotman 127; my emphasis).

Acts in which artworks are read can be considered participatory activities, and the semiosphere actively intervenes as a sort of filter and supplementary stimulus. Reading negotiations pass through a sum of responses, a penetrating net of clues and signals resulting in interference,<sup>2</sup> the combination of two or more waveforms to form a resultant wave in which the reading displacement occurs.

Books deserve closer consideration as a prerequisite to executing readings, a starting point for grasping the substance of texts (as facts of history in encoded forms) in reading negotiations; books enable a long process of shifting reading responses, of reading displacements, resulting over time, say, in literary consecrations and later even in erasures from the canon. Through books, literary transactions as symbolic goods are set in motion and literary phenomena can start working within their own literary field and inscribe themselves in an economy in the sense of the orderly

interplay between the parts of a cultural system and its complex but highly structured processes. In the case of literature and its material bearers, economy<sup>3</sup> refers to the management of the resources of a community or a cultural terrain, especially with a view to its output, production, or *poiesis* (Gk. *poiein* ‘to make’) in the original Greek meaning of ‘making, fabrication, formation’. Culturally more inclusive approaches to the life of books are well aware of the fact that throughout human history texts have been participating in the self-motivated “economy” of cultural capital and that through cultural transfer the “gay science” of writings enters a much broader *agora*, an open space in which different cultural deposits encounter and interpenetrate each other and put forth the machinery of literary institution. The “battle of the books,” to evoke the title of Swift’s satire, was not at all lighthearted, but surely a much more substantial “war” of expansion. Swift was very aware of “ink [as] the great missive weapon in all battles of the learned” (Swift, *A Tale* 206). He found writings “conveyed through a sort of engine called a quill ... as if it were an engagement of porcupines” (ibid.).

Michel de Certeau, who perceives reading as poaching and views readers as travelers, asserts that

writing accumulates, stocks up, resists time by establishment of a place and multiplies its production through the expansionism of reproduction. Reading takes no measures against the erosion of time (one forgets oneself *and* also forgets), it does not keep what it acquires, or it does so poorly, and each of the places through which it passes is a repetition of the lost paradise. (174)

Texts are “spaces of games and tricks,” as the activity of reading is called by de Certeau (ibid.). By poetic ruses—a quaintly playful and whimsical production of textual meaning in the course of reading—the reader is entangled in an intricate labyrinth of signification. Readers “move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write,” writes de Certeau (ibid.). Discussing uses of language in part four of his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau elaborates his views on the *economy* of writing; that is, on the very transaction of written words and their *scripted* meanings. Any reading process inevitably embodies a singular encounter with the readers’ experiences, their self-knowledge, and their own semiospheres. In reading, the very involvement of *self* plays an unexpected and uncanny role. This is because, as Cathy Caruth claims, writing is orphaned language<sup>4</sup> and as such it retains its nomadic feature, “the uncertainty of *an endless wandering* among false interpretation, interested manipulations” (240; my emphasis). According to de Certeau,

the text has a meaning only through its readers; it changes along with them; it is ordered in accordance with codes of perception that it does not control. It becomes a text only in its relation to the exteriority of the reader, by an interplay of implication and ruses between two sorts of “expectation” in combination: the expectation that organizes a *readable space* (a literality), and one that organizes a procedure necessary for the *actualization* of the work (a reading). (de Certeau 170–71)

Cybersemiotician Søren Brier sees the first person phenomenological approach of human experiential consciousness as the basis for meaning production. De Certeau (xxi) and later Roger Chartier identify the activity of reading as a “silent production” (Chartier, “Laborers” 59; *Forms* 90). Chartier even argues that “reading is not already inscribed in the text” (“Laborers” 50), but “scattered into an *infinity of singular acts*” (ibid.; my emphasis). For Chartier, readings are “always on the order of the ephemeral” (ibid.). Similar remarks on “the reading-writing duo” (“Laborers” 50) are given even in Plato’s *Phaedrus*:

[O]nce a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn’t know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong. And as it is ill-treated and unfairly abused it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend or help itself. (Plato, “Phaedrus” 521; also cited in Caruth 239)

Books represent “the ‘readable space’ (the texts in their material and discursive forms)” (“Laborers” 50). Chartier is rather precise about the triangle “defined by the intricate relation between text, book, and reader” (“Laborers” 54). According to him, “a text does not exist except for a reader who gives it signification” (“Laborers” 50). He insists that “there is no text outside the material structure in which it is given to be read or heard. Thus there is no comprehension of writing, whatever it may be, which does not depend in part upon the forms in which it comes to its reader” (“Laborers” 53). Readings are only “concrete practices and interpretive procedures” (“Laborers” 50), or, as Ingarden’s literary phenomenology elucidates, they are both actualizations and concretizations of texts. Chartier even reminds us of a more radical view on the book as proposed by Roger Stoddart: “Books are not written at all” by authors: “they are manufactured by scribes and other artisans, by mechanics and other engineers, and by printing processes and other machines” (Stoddart 4; cited in Chartier, “Laborers” 53). In any case, writings and readings represent “a disquieting challenge for any history” because the event of printed books considerably “transformed the modes of social interaction” (“Laborers” 50). Long before Chartier, Swift was aware of the potential

effect of books that could “create broils wherever they came” (Swift, *The Battle*). Pointing to “a restless spirit [that] haunts over every book”, Swift writes: “In ... books is wonderfully instilled and preserved the spirit of each warrior while he is alive; and after his death his soul transmigrates thither to inform them” (ibid.).

Any reading challenges the first person embodied consciousness; it is a shifting activity enacted in a sort of performative operation. Decoding textual material of the literary work as fixed in writing is an intricate and challenging process involved in an ever-changing universe of the mind of the reader’s immersion. To enter a book is thus to step into a fluid situation of reading, a testing job, each time a response to an immediacy; because they are conveyed by signs, meanings are merely implied by this immediacy, and are somehow liquid. Hence any access to texts, any decoding of meaning, is unstable and likely to change repeatedly. The complexity and fluidity of reading is actually a result of a sort of constant translation. Performing reading, the first-person embodied consciousness affects an understanding by means of which the reader performs a particular act of grasping the sense and meaning given in a book. Because attempts to encompass information, cognition, signification, and communication have a natural-technical and a social scientific aspect as well as a humanistic linguistic aspect, reading as a hermeneutical act is part of biosemiotics (see Brier).

Chartier is quite aware that “the same texts could be diversely apprehended, handled, and understood” (“Laborers” 53). He sees in reading “a practice embodied in gestures, spaces, and habits” (51), and argues that it is “not only an abstract operation of the intellect: it puts the body into play and is inscribed within a particular space, in a relation to the self or to others” (53). As an embodied practice of communication, information, cognition, and signification, the life of books essentially assumes renditions. Views on the culture of writing, reading, and communication are also thoroughly elaborated in Lotman’s *Universe of the Mind* (1990), a historical semiotics of culture that brings us closer to the more basic comparative issues of books; namely, their role in cultural transfer.

The event of codices or books is closely interrelated with the culture of writing. The emergence of the culture of writing resulted from changing historical circumstances as oral (non-literate) culture became destabilized because of trade and military contacts, which created a society in which “the need for semiotic translations [was] felt” (Lotman 253; my emphasis).<sup>5</sup> The culture of writing is interconnected with “the scene of frequent migrations and semiotic and cultural conflicts,” writes Lotman (ibid.), who also reminds us that the cultural shift into writing is possible only in a society

in which the “idea of choice” already exists. The very consequences of the idea of choice are far-reaching in cultural terms: “the idea of choice has a semantic association with the *violation of the established order*” (249; my emphasis). In fact, the indeterminacy inherent to writing emulates the unpredictable and dynamic world of the culture to which it belongs. The culture of writing irrefutably includes an element of transgressiveness and promotes a fundamental shift in human thinking. From a practical perspective, culture in written form holds considerable real-world advantages and results in the dissemination and transmission of knowledge.<sup>6</sup> The emergence of codices or books was a groundbreaking event that helped record cultural memory and transmit cultural life from one place or person to another in an apparently fixed form. Written cultural memory actually breaks ground for the effects of cultural transfer and challenges the very game of books and their free interplay; it represents the main incentive for the growth of literatures. It definitely initiates literary contests, later echoing in the two metaphors of the Ancients vs. Moderns, the dwarf/giant, and the reflecting/emanative light highlighted in Swift’s satire *The Battle of the Books*.

Cultural transfer potentials play an extensive role in the resilient lives of literatures, their complex cross-cultural interactions, and the history<sup>7</sup> of human thought. Codices and books hand over stories and memories, readers’ self-understanding, and their relationship to their territories; they circulate the semiotic realities of cultural landscapes. Cultural transfer materializes as *a sort of translation*; it relocates written materials, textual meanings, and cultural reminiscences, and helps readers take over ideas, literary schemes, poetical matrixes, discursive modes, and so on. Cultural transfer has the power of a buoyant economy of cultural spaces. Lotman, who sees in “the *problem of translation* ... a universal [even] scientific task” (269), addresses “understanding as *a translation* from one language to another” (271) as “an endless number of dialogues” (273).

An understanding of literature is immersed in language and in its inherent “memory [which] is the deep-seated ground of the actual process of consciousness” (272); to be exact, it is immersed in “a vast intellectual mechanism” (273) endlessly “open to the intrusion of new texts from outside” (272). The complex interplay inherent to cultural transfer as a sort of permanent translation unconditionally sets in motion the culture of writing and the life of books, both deeply involved in the seminal game of literary changes and its dissemination. Cultural transfer meets the essential human need for literary imagination and fulfils the insatiable desire for knowledge, the fundamental interest of the very universe of the mind and its “potentiality for new interpretations” (272). Cultural relocations and rearrangements assist literature in the augmentation of human intel-



ligence through an ever-new dialogue of equal partners. Thus, through the free interplay of cultural transfer and ongoing dialogism, literatures exist as legitimate segments of the world literary system.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Hoesel-Uhlig uses this notion in his discussion on Goethe's idea of world literature (see Hoesel-Uhlig).

<sup>2</sup> In communication (e.g., telecommunication and electronics), interference means anything that alters, modifies, or disrupts a message as it travels along a channel between a source and a receiver.

<sup>3</sup> Lat. *oeconomia* < Gk. *oikonomia* 'household management' < *oiko(s)* 'house' + *nomia* 'law'.

<sup>4</sup> Explaining her idea of orphaned language, Caruth (240) argues that "writing loses the security of the paternal authority of authentic speech, and thus exposes language to the uncertainty of an endless wandering among false interpretation, interested manipulations, and, potentially, a final loss of the very capacity for communication for which speech originally came into the world." Discussing differences between oral culture and the culture of writing, Lotman (249) points to the paradoxical fact "that the emergence of writing, far from complicating the semiotic structure of culture, in fact simplified it."

<sup>5</sup> "For writing to become necessary, historical conditions had to be destabilized, circumstances had to become unpredictable and dynamic, and there had to be frequent and prolonged contacts with other ethnic groups in order for the need for semiotic translations to be felt" (Lotman 253).

<sup>6</sup> Lotman also points to an opposite view in which "Plato's Socrates associates writing not with cultural progress but with the loss of the high level achieved in non-literate society" (252).

<sup>7</sup> Discussing the culture of writing and its emergence, Lotman tentatively suggests that "history is one of the by-products of the emergence of writing" (246).

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## Kompleksna igra knjig in vzajemno delovanje kulturnega transferja

Ključne besede: zgodovina knjige / pisna kultura / literatura / besedilna nedoločnost / fluidnost / semiosfera / branje / semiotsko prevajanje / kulturni transfer / svetovni literarni sistem

Razpravljanje o knjigi, o kompleksni in negotovi igri, implicirani v branju in obtoku literature, nas neogibno sooči s fluidno dejanskostjo literarnih besedil in s problemom kulturnega transferja, s tem pa z vprašanji logike, ki obvladuje ekonomijo kulturnih prostorov. S stališča semiotike je mogoče knjige razumeti kot *žive* dejavnike, ki živo materijo kulture opazno preoblikujejo in so tudi »pogoj za nadaljevanje življenja« (Lotman). Knjige omogočajo *kulturni promet, kozmopolitsko druženje literatur sveta, mednarodni pogovor*, prek njih obstajajo literarna besedila kot pojavi kulturne mobilnosti in medkulturne menjave ter se pojavljajo kot del svetovnega literarnega sistema. Vendar se v vsaki bralni instanci semiotski podatki transformirajo, saj je branje izjemno kompleksen proces, ujet v labirint pomenjanja, v dinamično mrežo mnoštva sugestij in semiotskih usedlin. Knjige se zapletajo v resno in sofisticirano igro kulture, semiotsko in družbeno posredovano skozi nabor raznoterih preteklih pisanj, poetoloških sledi in diskurzivnih matric. V bralnih dejanjih je vsako upomenjanje prelomljeno skozi naše lastno *bivanje v svetu* in nas vključuje v izgrajevanje neposrednih zgodb *poiesis*. Branja izzovejo *prvoosebno utelešeno zavest* (Brier) in so spremenljive aktivnosti, ki se dogodijo kot vrsta performativne operacije, zato so knjige vedno na novo prebrane entitete. Kompleksnost in fluidnost bralnih operacij se pravzaprav udejanja kot vrsta neukinljivega *prevoda*. To seveda ne preseneča, saj je sama pisna kultura pojav, ki je možen šele s pojavom družb, v katerih je bila prepoznana *ideja izbire*, ki ima sama v sebi »semantične vezi s kršitvijo ali prelamljanjem ustoličenega reda« (Lotman), tj. s pojavom družb, ki so zahtevale semiotsko prevajanje.

April 2012