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*From Moby-Dick
to Finnegans Wake*

Essays in Close Reading

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Editor's preface

*[O]ne doesn't want to read badly
any more than live badly.*

(Bloom 2001: 27)

This volume is a posthumous revised edition of selected papers by Andrzej Kopcewicz on a number of diverse nineteenth- and twentieth-century works of American and Irish fiction.¹ Professor Kopcewicz (1934-2007) earned his academic distinctions on the strength of his main publications in the field of Anglo-American modernist poetry and the history of U.S. literature. However, his special fascination and scholarly pursuit – basically its own reward – was fictional intertextuality. It was first sparked in his student days by James Joyce's *magnum opus*. As a work at once formidable, exciting and enlightening, it was to continue stimulating this fascination for years. Indeed, Joyce is present in this volume from the first essay to the last. Essentially a self-evolving project, an Emersonian series of ever larger circles², *From Moby-Dick to Finnegans wake* is a transcription of some of the ideas the author had been developing towards a full-fledged study of intertextuality. In this sense the collection is a general indication and possibly an outline of what might have been.

Nobody needs convincing that the notion of intertextuality/intertextualities is an axiom of contemporary cultural and literary theory and practice. "Originally conceived and used by a critical avant-garde as a form of protest against established cultural and social values, it today serves even conservative literary scholars" (Heinrich Plett quoted in Klooss 1998: 3). However, Andrzej Kopcewicz was never really part of that discourse. His interest – *sine ira et studio* [without anger or partisanship] – was always informed by a truly humanistic motivation, including erotics of intellectual curiosity, and above all a genuine passion for reading. And when he eventually admitted to being a 'paranoid intertextualist', he would offer it in good humour, characteristically tongue-in-cheek.

Professor Kopcewicz was not only superbly cognizant and empathic of the multiplicity of texts but was uniquely sympathetic and open to a variety of criti-

1 A shorter version of this book appeared in 2009 under the title *Intertextual transactions in American and Irish fictions*; see Ambroży-Lis (2010).

2 "The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire is ... to draw a new circle" (Emerson [1841] 1983a: 414).

cal approaches and tools. Most importantly from the vantage point of the present book, he entertained in a very profound sense the fundamental appreciation of the literary text as *text*: from poetry to short story to encyclopedic narrative. According to Joseph Kuhn (2009: 303), he was able to “intuit the arabesque curve and the strange, migratory behaviour of the literary sign with a rare penetration” – “[his] affinities were for the great masters of the *grammē*: Joyce, Barthelme, Pynchon, Melville, and Riffaterre”. On account of Kopcewicz’s “sharp imagistic focus, wit, distinctive turn of phrase and lucidity of argumentation”, Paulina Ambroży-Lis (2010: 115, 110) recognizes her erstwhile teacher as a “master of close reading”. Indeed, as Agnieszka Salska (2011: 281) notes in a broader sense and context, “Kopcewicz’s patience and kindness as a reader ... were legendary”.

The notion of close reading is typically associated with the phenomenon of New Criticism, as it developed its ideology, perfected its methods and finessed its way through the first half of the twentieth century. As DuBois (2003: 2) points out, while New Criticism has left a rich historical and theoretical legacy, it is the actual critical practice that finally marks it out most distinctively and in fact most successfully from other modes of literary investigation, interpretation and appreciation. To this day, the chief virtue of close (*lectio tacita*) textual analysis is to make it possible to ‘slow down’ the action within the text and to create thereby a space and stance (room, stanza) for critical rumination, convergence, integration, condensation and clarification of meaning. Most simply put, close reading puts the text in the spotlight, as the focus of intellectual and aesthetic circumspection and elucidation.

In more sense than one this volume can be perceived in its entirety not only as a series of widening but also palimpsestic circles, arranged *mutis mutandis* by their original chronology. The actual historical range of the texts discussed here extends from the early seventeenth century (Robert Burton) to the still (post-) contemporary (Paul Auster). The book opens with two introductory sketches: a semi-theoretical one on intertextuality and a semi-historical one on the interaction of high and low literary forms. Accompanied by a theoretical commentary throughout, the gist of the book is at times very detailed scrutiny of the intricacies, interrelatedness, overlappings, entanglements and reciprocities of some of the best-known works by Herman Melville and Thomas Pynchon – Henry Adams, Frank R. Stockton and Thomas Pynchon – Paul Auster and Herman Melville – Donald Barthelme and James Joyce – James Joyce, Flann O’Brien and Gilbert Sorrentino. There obtains with each of these essays a self-apparent belongingness rather than waywardness, tardiness or belatedness. At the same time – to borrow from the front matter of Gilbert Sorrentino’s intertextual chowder *Mulligan stew* (1979) – each one keeps its essential “selfness”. The quasi-chapters they constitute lend themselves to being read in any order, selec-

tively, and in different combinations. Given a literal perspective by incongruity, the semiotic-mythic Peircean-Joycean premise of the book is that a commodius vicus of recirculation (type by tope, letter from litter, word at ward) may bring the reader in any case (back) to the beginning. And even if, in a rough-guide manner, it should turn out that in “the buginning is the woid” (Joyce [1939] 1964: 378), we have here on hand *Finnegans wake*'s transcriptive and transatlantic postmodern rehearsal *The Dead Father* to remind us that “repetition is reality” (Barthelme 1975: 87).

Informed by a rare combination of poetic sensibility and disciplined as well as erudite mind, Andrzej Kopcewicz's essays demonstrate that the agenda and methods of (the more traditional) close reading and (the more contemporary) intertextuality need not be exclusive of each other. Ultimately, to pastiche a line of particular resonance from Paul de Man's *The resistance to theory*, the present publication is dedicated to the by no means self-evident necessity and – indisputably – intellectual pleasure of reading.

To stress the by no means self-evident necessity of reading implies at least two things. First of all, it implies that literature is not a transparent message in which it can be taken for granted that the distinction between the message and the means of communication is clearly established. Second, ... it implies that the grammatical decoding of a text leaves a residue of indeterminateness that has to be, but cannot be, resolved by grammatical means, however extensively conceived.

(de Man 1986: 15)

More practically, it is hoped that *From Moby-Dick to Finnegans wake* can offer in terms of both the why and the how a journey towards the appreciation and possible realization of Robert Scholes's dictum (2001) that one of the surest ways to make oneself crafty is through the cultivation of the craft of reading.

Janusz Semrau

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