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INTERLITERARY RELATIONS IN THE CARIBBEAN: A MAJOR ISSUE?

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Abstract:

Current discourses on the Caribbean emphasize either the homogeneity or the heterogeneity of the area, often ignoring the continuous renegotiation and restatement of types and degrees of interliterary and intercultural relations. What is missing here, is, on the one hand, a set of working hypotheses about the nature and contents of both types of relations, and on the other hand, a well-balanced interdisciplinary method to carry out their study. As a consequence, the very assumption of the Caribbean as a cultural system in its own becomes a debatable issue. The discussion will highlight one hypothesis, based on a systemic approach that distinguishes between interliterary and interdiscursive relations taking place within the Francophone subsystem and relations taking place between the latter and other subsystems of the area as well as with non-Caribbean systems, such as the European and French literary systems.

1. Conflicting Viewpoints

In a recent interview (F. Torchi 2004), the Martinician novelist Raphael Confiant recalls to what extent literary relations within the Caribbean are controlled by European, and particularly French, institutional and discursive channels:

> Nous Antillais, nous sommes complètement isolés par rapport à la littérature des pays qui nous entourent. Nous sommes complètement tournés vers l'Europe, et je connais mieux Sciascia, Tabucchi, Gadda ou Eco – pour citer des auteurs italiens – que les auteurs mexicains ou colombiens. […] Nous n'avons même pas de contacts directs avec nos amis les écrivains de la Caraïbe. Pensez que nous ne sommes pas traduits en espagnol ou en portugais […]. Cela dépend selon moi des maisons d'édition, qui s'occupent de la promotion du livre au niveau de la traduction. (2004: 123-124)

Accordingly, it would seem that, at least for the contemporary French Caribbean, direct contacts (between authors, critics, readers), as well as indirect contacts with surrounding literatures and cultures (through translation and other modes of intertextual transfer) are far from being a common practice. Yet, this state of affairs would by no means seem exceptional from a European viewpoint: the opportunities offered by spatial vicinity never prevented European literatures from elaborating privileged or unilateral relations with more remote cultures: for often longer periods, non Francophone literatures like the Portuguese, Italian or even Russian literatures elaborated stronger institutional and literary contacts with France than with their closer neighbours. Why, then, would literature nowadays behave differently in the Caribbean area?

We all know, though, that such parallels are rarely drawn in critical discourse on the Caribbean. On the contrary, the latter tends to emphasize the weight of dynamic contacts, shared poetics and world visions, as may be exemplified by numerous statements by Alejo Carpentier, Édouard Glissant, Roman de la Campa, Silvio Torres-Saillant, Antonio Benitez-Rojo and many others. Of course, critical discourse does not have a solely descriptive function with regard to literary works of art and interliterary relations. It possesses its own dynamics with corresponding aesthetic and ideological functions. In addition, even when encompassing interliterary relations, the views expressed by critics often cover a larger number of cultural phenomena. Benitez-Rojo, for instance, in his *La isla que se repite* (1989), finds common ground in social features

(plantation societies), cultural features (histories) and discursive or behavioral features (such as 'rhythm'). The same holds to a certain extent for the advocates of creolisation as a major tool of blending cultures and literatures.

As a consequence, how should one deal with conflicting viewpoints that neither share the same attitude towards relationality (low vs high), nor refer necessarily to the same objects (literature vs culture)? This question has been raised in a symposium recently organised at Leuven university on interfaces between Caribbean literatures (www.kulak.ac.be/cic). The answers were quite variegated and in some cases even conflicting. Why? Is it because literatures are too complex cultural practices to allow for a systematic comparison or for generalizing approaches? Is it because *literary* 'Caribbeanness' is less visible or weaker than other forms of Caribbean identity, that would offer sufficient ground for a truly interdisciplinary approach (music, social geography, gender and social relations, to name but a few)?

The coexistence of conflicting viewpoints, including all possible intermediary levels, may tempt us to split up the area in ways that resemble familiar or more traditional scholarship, with their focus on separate languages, genres, themes, authors, critics, texts, etc. But such a procedure would imply a dismissal of the relations that actually occur, and is for that reason not a valid option. All in all, what we need is a theoretical frame that might help us to understand the complex network of relations, such as relations between literatures as well as relations between literary and critical discourses. In what follows, a short outline will be given of one possible candidate for such a frame. Subsequently, although in a sketchy manner, I will dwell on possible extensions towards intercultural relations, and more specifically on spatial relations as mediated in literary texts.

2. Research procedures

Yet, before coming to this outline, let me revisit an epistemological postulate: there is no unbiased supracultural or transcultural viewpoint to approach literary relations in

general, or literary relations in the Caribbean, or, by the same token, in whatever region in the world. Every viewpoint, be it authorial, critical or theoretical, is historically rooted in specific cognitive structures and in given types of discourse. What is crucially lacking in this respect is a metareflection on the ways we try to understand the Caribbean. But time is too short to go into more detail on this subject. How could we proceed, then, if we want to develop a frame for practical research? I, for one, would suggest two connected procedures.

The first one I would call a historiographical procedure. Applied to our object, i.e. interliterary relations in the Caribbean, this would mean we replace an 'either/either' approach by a 'when' approach. We do not start from *a priori* assumptions about either homogeneity of the Caribbean space and high relationality or heterogeneity and low relationality but from a viewpoint that aims to reconstruct types, contents and degrees of relations on a diachronical axis: when, under which historical circumstances, did the idea of Caribbean literary relations emerge, how did the latter manifest themselves in different literatures and critical traditions, how did they change, due to which constraints? Such a viewpoint will need to make explicit a number of research criteria, such as: (1) *heuristics of data*, i.e. selection of information (written and oral, published and manuscript, primary and secondary sources, languages involved, types of discourse); (2) *periodization of data* along internal categories (literary schools, aesthetic or discursive categories, institutional structures) and/or external ones (historical, political); (3) *structure of data* in a chronological or thematic order; (4) *modes of analysis and presentation of data* (narrative, comparative).

The second procedure offers a model for understanding reality. It may be labelled relational thinking and is based on systems theory as developed mainly in literary studies and in translation studies. To quote Itamar Even-Zohar, the founding father of so-called 'polysystem theory':

> […] the positivistic collection of data, taken bona fide on empiricist grounds and analyzed on the basis of their material substance, has been replaced by a functional approach based on the analysis of relations. Viewing them as systems, i.e., as networks of relations that can be hypothesized for a certain set

of assumed observables ('occurrences'/'phenomena'), made it possible to hypothesize how the various socio-semiotic aggregates operate. (Even-Zohar 2005: 40).

Applied to complex systems like the Caribbean, such a perspective may remind us of what fractal theory[1] has been able to demonstrate in a number of disciplines, i.e. that a finite number of processes may generate quite multifaceted results.

Let us have a closer look at the second procedure. The first property of a system is the tension between its constituent strata. Each system has a number of central and peripheral strata, 'strata' being general labels for repertoires of different shape and type (genres, macrostructural and microstructural devices):

> It is the permanent tension between the various strata which constitutes the (dynamic) synchronic state of the system. It is the prevalence of one set of systemic options over another which constitutes the change on the diachronic axis. In this centrifugal vs. centripetal motion, systemic options may be driven from a central position to a marginal one while others may be pushed into the center and prevail. (2005: 44)

The causes of tensions, and of ensuing changes in positions for the different strata, are frequently due to problems of unequal status and legitimity of these strata. Dominant groups tend to canonize specific strata, and thus to push other ones towards the margins of the system. On the other hand, if the former resist renewal or change, they may in the longer run lose their position in favour of different, often lower, strata supported by other groups.

The second property of systems is a direct outcome of the first one, i.e. relationality. Tensions between strata imply relations between them. In historical terms, the current type of relation depends on the current type of system. For instance, as long as the concept of a unified literary system prevails, tied up by a number of parameters, such as center-periphery tensions, common literary models (literary language, genres, writing techniques), the dominant relations between the strata of the system may be called 'intrasystemic relations', i.e. relations that belong to one single literature. More often than not, both the concept of system as the ensuing relations are in such cases

supported by political and/or institutional factors, which may also link the literary system with other cultural systems that are part of the same community.

During the 19th and part of the 20th century, Francophone Caribbean literature and culture were predominantly conceived as parts or 'provinces' of French culture. Even nowadays, as testified by Confiant's quote, French literary institutions continue to control the literary traffic coming from the Caribbean. Only a limited number of authors gain access to the major publishing houses, are being reviewed in literary journals, receive prices and other rewards (no Caribbean author has so far been elected in the French Academy, unlike writers from other areas, such as the Algerian Assia Djebar). Only partially creolized literary language or hybridized literary forms are considered tokens of a specific Francophone niche within the French literary system.

On the other hand, when the type of system changes, i.e. when the principles that make up the system become less rigid, then relations with other systems may very likely expand. We call these relations 'intersystemic relations'. Their function is quite similar with intrasystemic relations, especially when, like peripheral strata within a single system, exogenous systems try challenge the dominant strata in view of a change or replacement of the repertoires of the latter, or try to challenge the position of the system itself within a larger framework called polysystem or macrosystem. Literature, photography, art, music, architecture and other practices are variably interrelated cultural systems of a single community, which means they may, under specific circumstances, exchange parts of their repertoires, up to the extent that their borders weaken and their respective positions change. In addition, all these practices may interrelate with their counterparts belonging to different communities, such as other political and/or linguistic communities of the Caribbean. Here again, the same principle may be hypothesized.

Literature in contemporary French Caribbean can be seen as an example of the latter evolution: it has become part of a larger network of interfering systems that do not belong to a single community (either 'French' or 'Francophone'). This holds for example for the literary borrowings by genres like autobiography and autofiction from historical discourses (memories, testimonies and the like). This holds also for the

relations between literature and other cultural practices like urbanization (as exemplified in Chamoiseau's *Texaco*, 1992), or the relations between literature and cultural anthropology in several novels of Édouard Glissant (a.o. *Tout-Monde*, 1995), in some cases creating an ambivalent or hybrid space between genres that belong to different systems. The growing interaction supersedes the intrasystemic relations of the former type, i.e. the relations that were limited to the model of a unified system. And yet, interliterary relations with surrounding hispanophone and anglophone literatures may very well be less developed than intermusical, intergeocultural or intersocial ones. Which may also imply that within the concept of a strongly interconnecting Caribbean area, literature may have become a less central system in comparison with other cultural practices.

All in all, the basic assumption seems to be that repertoires *are* interconnected at all levels, intrasystemic as well as intersystemic, and that an understanding of contents and functions of repertoires goes hand in hand with the understanding of the processes that underpin these relations.

3. Epilogue

Where should all this lead to? If we assume that the complex balance between intrasystemic and intersystemic relations is a major issue in Caribbean literatures and cultures, how should we develop relational thinking in an analytical sense, i.e. how should we describe the ways in which relations change the contents of repertoires?

Let us consider briefly just one aspect of intersystemic relations, i.e. intercultural relations between literature and space: how do these affect the evolution of the literary repertoire[2]? I already mentioned the growing interaction between different cultural practices within the modern Caribbean. It has, among other changes, led to a questioning of the center-periphery relations that were prevalent, as we have seen, in the concept of a unified literature. According to such a concept, regionalist and naturalistic models of narrative were largely borrowed from metropolitan literature and

ensuingly adapted to Caribbean rural and urban settings, for instance in the works of the Martinician novelist Joseph Zobel (a.o. Zobel, 1950).

In comparison, the types of narrative in the works of later Martinician writers such as Chamoiseau and Confiant abandoned to a considerable extent the direct use of French repertoires. This shift has probably been facilitated by the emergence of intersystemic contacts with cultural practices such as discourse on architecture and cultural geography. As a consequence, new models of narrative have been moulded in which space becomes a major principle of composition, a binding factor connecting languages, characters, plots.

The new urban spaces (marketplaces, bidonvilles, popular quarters, etc.), for instance, become the very locus where the new Caribbean identity is capable of settling, whereas the old centres (the 'En Ville') are gradually marginalized. These spaces become the tokens of cultural hybridity as manifested by several literary features, such as language (French/creole), characters (encounters between ethnic and social groups) and narrative techniques (the model of the police novel creating spatial mobility into all the 'new' spots), etc.

Let us round up. The main question is not anymore, it seems, *whether* we should study relations in the Caribbean, but *how* we should study them in a diachronical perspective. Facing such a considerable task, I, for one, would make a plea for small-scale interdisciplinary projects with limited but precise goals. This seems to me the better way to overcome the shortcomings, not only of well-known intradisciplinary approaches, but also of rather casual parallels between different cultural domains and practices.

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Notes

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[1] A fractal is a geometric figure in which a single motif is repeated at a continuously decreasing scale ('self-similarity'). A classic on fractal theory is B. Mandelbrot 1982.
[2] The following is based on L. D'hulst & L. De Bleeker 2005.

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