Review

Intertextuality in James Reeves' verses for children

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This article seeks to consider the relation between intertextuality and poetry through James Reeves' verses for children. By examining all his poems intended to children, this study demonstrates that Reeves constitutes with his readers a peculiar as well as an interactive relationship, which may be detected mainly in the light of the dynamic model of intertextuality as it has been refined by certain reader-response theorists. What becomes apparent then is that the way Reeves employs intertextual associations in his verses is symptomatic of his attitude towards the literary experience. The child-reader who comes across Reeves' poetry not only activates the relevant texts via a process of experiencing the very essence of poetry itself, but additionally stimulates his/her own response. Reeves tries to develop the ability of his reader to extend his/her imagination and to widen the day-to-day feelings through the way he invites his child-reader into the literary experience. By transforming his material into unusual arrangements, he demands his/her reader to discover unknown or incomprehensible associations, in order to develop the meaning of the poetic text, to decode textual consequence, and, finally, to experience textuality in the perspective of intertextuality.

Key words: James Reeves, poetry for children, verses, intertextuality, reader-response theory.

INTRODUCTION

The main aim of this article is to detect intertextual associations and to examine their function in James Reeves' verses intended to children. Since Reeves' poetry style – expressed usually with some technical skills, such as the intertextual demands he makes on his readers and which are rather uncondescend to children – constitutes a peculiar and interactive reading relationship, it will be examined efficiently in the light of the dynamic model of intertextuality as it has been refined mainly by many reader-response theorists, such as M. Riffaterre, W. Iser, and L. M. Rosenblatt. In many cases, Reeves' verses will be also examined in virtue of the remarks he made on them.

James Reeves (1909 to 1978), a well-known British poet for children placed alongside Walter de la Mare, has been regarded as one of the most notable poets for children in the twentieth century (Boyle, 1968). Although he published several works of tales, fiction, criticism, anthologies and poetry for adults, his reputation stems mainly from his verses for children, these include: The Wandering Moon (1950), The Blackbird in the Lilac (1952), Prefabulous Animiles (1957), The Ragged Robin (1961), The Story of Jackie Thimble (1965), and More Prefabulous Animiles (1975) [1].

James Reeves' poetics and intertextuality

Reeves usually re-codifies reality, defamiliarizes the usual and take his readers in the "myth-making" of a poem, in order to activate their past reading experiences with the intertextual accomplishments he projects. Such procedures take on great importance during the evocation of a poem, since they make the literary experience intricate and force the reader to deal with textual signs mainly through their intertextual associations. In other words, a reader experiences textuality, meaning the very sense of the textual sequence and its force of signification in Barthes' terms, and realizes his/her participation during the reading

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[1] Apart from the last collection of poems, all the rest were included in a volume entitled *Complete Poems for Children*, published by Heinemann in 1973. The same volume under a new title, *The Wandering Moon, and Other Poems*, reprinted by Puffin Books in 1987.

process, by seeking guidance in the text and by responding to the clues offered by it. One kind of clue to which readers respond emerges from instances in which the text is dependent upon other texts. It is then that the textual demands made on the reader invite him/her to make some intertextual associations and experience a "circular memory of reading" (Barthes, 1975), in order to complete an account of the particular text. Although the intertextual interpolation may not always be a "severance of connection with context", the reader nevertheless has to "seek significance other than referential by close scrutiny of the text" (Widdowson, 1992) and to move in and out of the text, as the reading process becomes "centripetal" and "centrifugal" at the same time (Wilkie-Stibbs, 1999).

Intertextuality is a term created by Kristeva (1969), when she referred to the interdependence of literary texts and to the interdependence of textual meanings, but as a theory it has been refined or extended by many other theorists. Among them Riffaterre (1978) defines the notion of "intertextuality" to the functions of textual signs, which regulate in fact the potential relationship between text and intertext. He claims that "everything the text says must be fitted back in to the initial code" (p. 11), the "hypogram" or "intertext", meaning the 'producer' of the current text a reader confronts (p. 42). Furthermore, Riffaterre argues that as soon as the reader recognizes an intertext, he/she is being influenced, hence, to adjust his/her hermeneutic process, according to the nature of the signs he/she deals with (p. 95), or to overcome the "ungrammaticalities", specifically, the contradictions between what a word or image may presuppose and entail (p. 5).

Other theorists such as Wolfgang Iser and Louise M. Rosenblatt, in their reflections on the reading process, widen the concept of intertextuality to consider the cognitive activities aroused in the literary communication between text and reader.

Iser (1978), claims that the elements of the literary repertoire "may be in the forms of references to earlier works, or to social and historical norms, or to the whole culture from which the text has emerged" (p. 69). Therefore, he mentions the "recodification" of these elements in the new text, which may enable the readers not only to "see in the ordinary process of day-to-day living", but also "to grasp a reality that was never their own" (p. 74).

Rosenblatt (1978), making comments on the reciprocal relationship between text and reader, points out that the reader "must bring a whole body of cultural assumptions, practical knowledge, awareness of literary conventions, and readiness to think and feel" (p. 88). Consequently, the reader "drawing on the reservoir of his own past life and reading, has lived through the experience himself ..." (p. 141). Although such procedures make the literary experience intricate, they also elucidate the components of the "intertextual interplay" in Children's Literature: text - child reader - intertext.

LOOKING FOR INTERTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

The thematic material James Reeves employs for his poetry for children includes not only simple or reshaped scenes and elements of childish day-to-day experiences, but also elements of the literary tradition. Both these elements accomplish sometimes a role of defamiliarization. We quote here the first stanza of "The Wandering Moon":

Age after age and all alone,
    She turns through endless space,
Showing the watchers on the earth
    Her round and rocky face.
Enchantment comes upon all hearts
    That feels her lonely grace. (p. 2) [2]

As Reeves (1971) remarks, this poem "is based on beliefs about the moon traditional before the development of inductive science" (p. 4). Thus it would be by recalling those beliefs that the reader would be able to actualize the metonymic images of the moon as "she" or "her" (Rosenblatt, 1978). Additionally, being a very usual theme in poetry, the "moon" may be regarded as a familiar norm even for a child-reader. Especially since the mystery derived from its metamorphoses may guide the reader to associate all the images of the moon he/she happens to know.

Although one cannot relate this particular poem to a specific or a well-known intertext, we have to say that this poem may remind one of Walter de la Mare's *Songs of Childhood* (1902), where "children and the fairies come out at nightfall when the moon is shining to look at them" (Clark, 1960). As Reeves confesses, in the poem "M / Moths and Moonshine":

Moths and moonshine mean to me
Magic - madness - mystery". (p. 161)

Such a magic atmosphere is also detected in other poems as well. The "Queer Things", from which we quote below the first two stanzas, is a good example:

Very, very queer things have been happening to me
    in some of the places where I've been.
I went to the pillar-box this morning with a letter
    And a hand came out and took it in.

When I got home again, I thought I'd have
    A glass of spirits to steady myself;
And I take my bible oath, but that bottle and glass
    Came a-hopping down off the shelf. (p. 37)

Regarding this poem, Reeves (1971) reveals that he borrows from Greek myths this "supernatural sense" and

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this kind of "pantheistic attitude to nature" (pp. 40-1) [3]. It is almost the same attitude one may locate in Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* (1863) modified, however, for poetic composition. Nevertheless, this perspective is very usual in children's making sense of their world, and Reeves comes to identify this outlook with the Greeks' confrontation of reality (Reeves, 1971).

In the poem "Pluto and Proserpine", the well-known Greek myth is reshaped in a poetic composition:

Said Pluto the King
  To Princess Proserpine,
'I will give you a marriage ring
  If you will be my Queen.'

Said she, 'What flowers spring
  Underneath your sun?'
Said he, 'Where I am King
  Flowers there are none.' (p. 106)

The title of this poem stands as a "textual interpretant", in Riffaterre's terms, and guides the reader to pay attention to the myth as intertext as well as to the way it is transformed into poetic discourse (Riffaterre, 1978; Riffaterre, 1991). Although such a transformation implies that the original text has been modified and the apparent mythological intertext in the poem may provide a transition to the fantastic and supernatural, the reader is likely to apprehend the substance of Proserpine's sad story, since the essential elements of the myth's plot, along with a tendency for dialogical forms, are maintained in the poem. Except for Reeves' affinity and admiration for the Greek literary tradition, most of his poems refer to the past ages of Britain as well as to the Anglo-Saxon literary tradition.

In the poem 'Ragged Robin", which stands as a title for the poems following, Reeves (1971) delineates the "semi-legendary figure of Robin Hood" (p. 53). Here is the first stanza:

Robin was a king of men,
  A king of far renown,
But then he fell on evil days
  And lost his royal crown.
Ragged Robin he was called;
  He lived in ragged times,
And so to earn his livelihood
  He took to making rhymes. (p. 144)

The transformation of the story into the poetic discourse seems to modify the well-known narrative and the meaning - in virtue of verbal sequences such as "Robin was a king" or "He lived in ragged times" - is easily comprehensible by the child readers who are fond of

Robin Hood's stories. Moreover, the historical contradiction constituted by the last two lines of the poem lends the whole poem a humorous sense, which indicates explicitly the existence of an intertext (Riffaterre, 1978), namely the well known story of Robin Hood. In this poem, however, as in the poem "Pluto and Proserpine" quoted earlier, the whole imagery evokes though humoursly the theme of loss, which may add another level of intricacy to the reader's cognitive interaction with the verses. The child-reader has not only to deal with the fictional worlds of literary texts and to recall literary norms, but also to experience their distorted versions and "to grasp a reality" that was never his/her own" (Iser, 1978).

In another poem from "Ragged Robin", the "F/Flowers and Frost", Reeves reshapes and extends the nursery myth of "Jack Frost", causing also a humorous sense:

Flowers are yellow
And flowers are red;
Frost is white
As an old man's head.
Daffodil, foxglove,
Rose, sweet pea -
Flowers and frost
Can never agree.
Flowers will wither
And summer's lost
When over the mountain
Comes King Frost. (p. 12)

This sense of humor is also underscored in many other poems, especially those which depict adult persons such as "Zachary Zed" or "Dr. John Hearty":

Zachary Zed was the last man,
The last man left on earth.
For everyone else had died but him
And no more come to earth.

In former times young Zachary
Had asked a maid to wed.
'I loes thee, dea', he told her true.
'Will thou be Missis Zed? (p. 173)

Dr John Hearty,
Though old as a follisl,
Could dance like a fairy
And sing like a throstle.

He had not a tooth left
To ache and decay,
And his hair, white as snow,
Had melted away. (p. 35)

In these poems the text "evidences a humorous constant inseparable from intertextuality (Riffaterre, 1978), which must be located in children's day-to-day experiences and

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[3] In *How to Write Poems for Children*, Reeves, speaking on the magic in the Greek myths, defines this "pantheistic attitude" as the process in which the familiar surroundings take an anthropomorphic view (p. 41).

life. Needless to say, these texts project the real by removing such actualities from their original shape, and tend to reshape them, to some extent, in order for the reader to make new connections based on the new ones (Iser, 1978). Similarly, the nonsensical atmosphere aroused in the poem "The Three Unlucky Men" indicates the existence of an intertext:

Near Wookey Hole in days gone by
    Lived three unlucky me.
The first fell down a Treacle Mine
    And never stirred again

The second had no better fate
    And he too is no more.
He fell into a Custard Lake
    And could not get to shore. (p. 66)

According to Reeves' account, this poem is based on a local folklore, in Buckinghamshire, referring to a "treacle mine" (Reeves, 1971). The ballad rhythm along with the theme which is common in many other folklores throughout England, as Reeves (p. 51) remarks, seem to be familiar for a child-reader who usually invents such verses exploring the borders of his/her imagination and the possibilities of language. This sort of verse, reminiscent of the style of nursery rhymes[4], can be considered to be, "In the common stock of linguistic and literary conventions and procedures that are ... in place and constitute the discourses into which we are born" (Abrams, 1985).

Some poems seem to come directly from the English literary tradition and are akin to the popular limericks[5] not in terms of their exact formation - despite the phrase "There was ..." at the beginning which indicates the limerick style - as of the tone they evoke:

Uriconium

There was a man of Uriconium
Who played a primitive harmonium,
Inventing, to relieve his tedium,
Molodies high, low and medium,
And standing on his Roman cranium
Amidst a bed of wild geranium,
Better known as pelargonium,
Since with odium his harmonium
Was received in Uriconium. (p. 99)

The Magic Seeds

There was an old woman who sowed a corn seed,
And from it there sprouted a tall yellow weed.
She planted the seeds of the tall yellow flower,
And up sprang a blue one in less than an hour. (p. 106)

The lightness, the energy and the quick rhythm of these poems are close to the style established by the limericks during the 19th century. However, such verses with their light meanings and the happy overtones they possess have always been delightful for children of all ages.

The poem "Uriconium" may remind one of childish riddles, while the plot in "The old Wife and Ghost", which is a "mock ballad" (Reeves, 1971), is a usual plot of many folktales and songs. Here is the first stanza from it:

The Old Wife and the Ghost

There was an old wife and she lived all alone
    In a cottage not far from Hitchin:
And one bright night, by the full moon light,
    Comes a ghost right into her kitchen. (p. 63)

"The Blether" is "a parody of border ballads" (Reeves, 1971, p. 61):
    Up, up, my sons, my daughter dear -
Go forth this day together!
    To horse, to horse! take hound and horn
And hunt the baneful Blether.

'Last night I felt his baneful breath
    Upon my forehead chill.
These spots so red upon my head
    I fear may work me ill.'(p. 139)

In this poem Reeves parodies the conventions of the ballad form[6]. Parody is betrayed not only in the structure of the poem, but also in the characteristics of its style; it indicates the characteristics of the traditional work and actually reexamines literary tradition. Reeves remarks "In true ballad style the poem opens with a direct command". The speaker and the circumstances are revealed [in "The Blether"] only in the third stanza" (Reeves, 1971). However, "literary parody" as Ruthrof (1981) claims, should be viewed "as a mode which is present, overtly or covertly in all literature. As such, parody is part of the study of intertextual relations; and beyond intertextuality, is part of ideological mutations" (p. 140).

Nevertheless, most of the poems in the "Prefabulous Animiles" and *More Prefabulous Animiles* (1975) do not indicate their interdependence upon other texts. The intertext here may be considered to be the images of the animals a child-reader is likely to know, while the

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[4] Apart from the special study of folk ballads and rhymes Reeves has made, he has also edited many anthologies with poetry for children. One of them, *One's None. Old Rhymes for New Tongues* (1968), is of particular importance showing his interest in the field of rhymes for children.

[5] The verse form of limerick, "first popularized by Edward Lear in the nineteenth century, is the most traditional structured nonsense verse" (Lucens, 1990, p. 184). The rhyme pattern of limericks is usually a-a-b-b-a, while "they almost always present the theme of an eccentric or unhappy individual in conflict with, or exiled from, normal life and society" (Darton, 1982, p. 72).

[6] The function of parody is also associated with metafiction as Linda Hutcheon [in *Narcissistic Narrative…* (1991)] and Patricia Waugh [in *Metafiction…* (1993)] have shown.

grotesque appearance of most of them in Reeves' poems indicate the exaggeration, or even the distortion, of these images.

Coming back to the riddles, what clearly resembles childish inventions of this sort are some poems which Reeves relates to Anglo-Saxon riddles, in which the reader assisted by a vivid imagery, is required to guess what the riddle is about.

Fire

Hard and black is my home,
Hard as a rock and black as night.
Scarlet and gold am I,
Delicate, warm and bright. (p. 20)

The Intruder

Two-boots in the forest walks,
Pushing through the bracken stalks.
Vanishing like a puff of smoke,
Nimble tail flies up the oak. (p. 72)

The concept of "intertextuality" in forms of existing norms in these poems refers not so much to the meanings they transfer as to the code of communication and the idea of playing with the words the poems expose. Reeves in these poems foregrounds an old linguistic experience, a thought system, and manages to lend it a new insight by reproducing it "in such a way that the reader himself is to find the motives underlying the questions, and in doing so he participates in producing the meaning" (Iser, 1978). However, Reeves' use of traditional stylistic devices as well as that of folklore, myth and history evokes an idea of a mythic pastoral past, which is connected with the pastoral simplicity of lost childhood and lingers as a wistful echo of an adult.

CONCLUSION

Studying James Reeves' verses for children in the light of the basic aspects of the notion of intertextuality as it has been refined mainly by M. Riffaterre, W. Iser, and L.M. Rosenblatt, and by virtue of Reeves' accounts for many verses, it was not this article's intention to interpret Reeves' poetry for children, but to detect the intertextual associations that could call forth their various possible impacts on potential readers. Ultimately, Reeves expresses that the way he employs his material as well as the extent to which he makes intertextual associations in his verses for children, are symptomatic of his attitude towards the literary experience. The child-reader who comes across James Reeves' poetry not only activates the relevant texts via a process of experiencing the very

essence of poetry itself, but additionally stimulates his/her own response, so crucial in literary communication. Reeves tries to develop the ability of his reader to extend the borders of his/her imagination and to widen the day-to-day experiences through the way he invites his child-reader into the literary experience. By transforming his material into unusual arrangements, he demands that this reader may discover unknown or difficult comprehensible associations. Finally, the reader's main task is not just and to develop the meaning, but also to decode textual consequence, in order to complete the account of the poetic text, and to experience textuality in the perspective of intertextuality.

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