

5 - Now, Where Have I Seen Her Before?

ONE OF THE GREAT THINGS about being a professor of English is that you get to keep meeting old friends. For beginning readers, though, every story may seem new, and the resulting experience of reading is highly disjointed. Think of reading, on one level, as one of those papers from elementary school where you connect the dots. I could never see the picture in a connect-the-dot drawing until I'd put in virtually every line. Other kids could look at a page full of dots and say, "Oh, that's an elephant," "That's a locomotive." Me, I saw dots. I think it's partly predisposition – some people handle two-dimensional visualization better than others – but largely a matter of practice: the more connect-the-dot drawings you do, the more likely you are to recognize the design early on. Same with literature. Part of pattern recognition is talent, but a whole lot of it is practice: if you read enough and give what you read enough thought, you begin to see patterns, archetypes, recurrences. And as with those pictures among the dots, it's a matter of learning to look. Not just to look but where to look, and how to look. Literature, as the great Canadian critic Northrop Frye observed, grows out of other literature; we should not be surprised to find, then, that it also looks like other literature. As you read, it may pay to remember this: there's no such thing as a wholly original work of literature. Once you know that, you can go looking for old friends and asking the attendant question: "now where have I seen her before?"

One of my favorite novels is Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978). Lay readers and students generally like it, too, which explains why it has become a perennial strong seller. Although the violence of the Vietnam War scenes may turn some readers off, many find themselves totally engrossed by something they initially figured would just be gross. What readers sometimes don't notice in their involvement with the story (and it is a great story) is that virtually everything in there is cribbed from somewhere else. Lest you conclude with dismay that the novel is somehow plagiarized or less than original, let me add that I find the book wildly original, that everything O'Brien borrows makes perfect sense in the context of the story he's telling, even more so once we understand that he has repurposed materials from older sources to accomplish his own ends. The novel divides into three interwoven parts: one, the actual story of the war experience of the main character, Paul Berlin, up to the point where his fellow soldier Cacciato runs away from the war; two, the imagined trip on which the squad follows Cacciato to Paris; and three, the long night watch on a tower near the South China Sea where Berlin manages these two very impressive mental feats of memory on the one hand and invention on the other. The actual war, because it really happened, he can't do much about. Oh, he gets some facts wrong and some events out of order, but mostly, reality has imposed a certain structure on memory. The trip to Paris, though, is another story. Actually, it's all stories, or all those Paul has read in his young lifetime. He creates events and people out of the novels, stories, histories he knows, his own included, all of which is quite unwitting on his part, the pieces just appearing out of his memory. O'Brien provides us with a wonderful glimpse into the creative process, a view of how stories get written, and a big part of that process is that you can't create stories in a vacuum. Instead the mind flashes bits and pieces of childhood experiences, past reading, every movie the writer/creator has ever seen, last week's argument with a phone solicitor – in short, everything that lurks in the recesses of the mind. Some of this may be unconscious, as it is in the case of O'Brien's protagonist. Generally, though, writers use prior texts quite consciously and purposefully, as O'Brien himself does; unlike Paul Berlin, he is aware that he's drawing from Lewis Carroll or Ernest Hemingway. O'Brien signals the difference between novelist and character in the structuring of the two narrative frames.

About halfway through the novel, O'Brien has his characters fall through a hole in the road. Not only that, one of the characters subsequently says that the way to get out is to fall back up. When it's stated this baldly, you automatically think of Lewis Carroll. Falling through a hole is like Alice in Wonderland

(1865). Bingo. It's all we need. And the world the squad discovers below the road, the network of Vietcong tunnels (although nothing like the real ones), complete with an officer condemned to stay there for his crimes, is every bit as much an alternative world as the one Alice encounters in her adventure. Once you've established that a book - a man's book at that, a war book - is borrowing a situation from Lewis Carroll's Alice books, anything is possible. So with that in mind, readers must reconsider characters, situations, events in the novel. This one looks like it's from Hemingway, that one like "Hansel and Gretel," these two from things that happened during Paul Berlin's "real" war, and so on down the line. Once you've played around with these elements for a while, a kind of Trivial Pursuit of source material, go for the big one: what about Sarkin Aung Wan?

Sarkin Aung Wan is Paul Berlin's love interest, his fantasy girl. She is Vietnamese and knows about tunnels but is not Vietcong. She's old enough to be attractive, yet not old enough to make sexual demands on the virginal young soldier. She's not a "real" character, since she comes in after the start of Berlin's fantasy. Careful readers will find her "real" model in a young girl with the same hoop earrings when the soldiers frisk villagers in one remembered war scene. Fair enough, but that's just the physical person, not her character. Then who is she? Where does she come from? Think generically. Lose the personal details, consider her as a type, and try to think where you've seen that type before: a brown-skinned young woman guiding a group of white men (mostly white, anyway), speaking the language they don't know, knowing where to go, where to find food. Taking them west. Right.

No, not Pocahontas. She never led anyone anywhere, whatever the popular culture may suggest. Somehow Pocahontas has received better PR, but we want the other one.

Sacajawea. If I need to be guided across hostile territory, she's the one I want, and she's the one Paul Berlin wants, too. He wants, he needs, a figure who will be sympathetic, understanding, strong in the ways he's not, and most of all successful in bringing him safely to his goal of getting to Paris. O'Brien plays here with the reader's established knowledge of history, culture, and literature. He's hoping that your mind will associate Sarkin Aung Wan consciously or unconsciously with Sacajawea, thereby not only creating her personality and impact but also establishing the nature and depth of Paul Berlin's need. If you require a Sacajawea, you're really lost.

The point isn't really which native woman figures in O'Brien's novel, it's that there is a literary or historical model that found her way into his fiction to give it shape and purpose. He could have used Tolkien rather than Carroll, and while the surface features would have been different, the principle would have remained the same. Although the story would go in different directions with a change of literary model, in either case it gains a kind of resonance from these different levels of narrative that begin to emerge; the story is no longer all on the surface but begins to have depth. What we're trying to do is learn to read this sort of thing like a wily old professor, to learn to spot those familiar images, like being able to see the elephant before we connect the dots.

You say stories grow out of other stories. But Sacajawea was real.

As a matter of fact, she was, but from our point of view, it doesn't really matter. History is story, too. You don't encounter her directly, you've only heard of her through narrative of one sort or another. She is a literary as well as a historical character, as much a piece of the American myth as Huck Finn or Jay Gatsby, and very nearly as unreal. And what all this is about, finally, is myth. Which brings us to the big secret.

Here it is: there's only one story. There, I said it and I can't very well take it back. There is only one story. Ever. One. It's always been going on and it's everywhere around us and every story you've ever read or heard or watched is part of it. The Thousand and One Nights. Beloved. "Jack and the Beanstalk." The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Story of O. The Simpsons.

T. S. Eliot said that when a new work is created, it is set among the monuments, adding to and altering the order. That always sounds to me a bit too much like a graveyard. To me, literature is something much more alive. More like a barrel of eels. When a writer creates a new eel, it wriggles its way into the barrel, muscles a path into the great teeming mass from which it came in the first place. It's a new eel, but it shares its eelness with all those other eels that are in the barrel or have ever been in the barrel. Now, if that simile doesn't put you off reading entirely, you know you're serious.

But the point is this: stories grow out of other stories, poems out of other poems. And they don't have to stick to genre. Poems can learn from plays, songs from novels. Sometimes influence is direct and obvious, as when the twentieth-century American writer T. Coraghessan Boyle writes "The Overcoat II," a postmodern reworking of the nineteenth-century Russian writer Nikolai Gogol's classic story "The Overcoat," or when William Trevor updates James Joyce's "Two Gallants" with "Two More Gallants," or when John Gardner reworks the medieval Beowulf into his little postmodern masterpiece Grendel. Other times, it's less direct and more subtle. It may be vague, the shape of a novel generally reminding readers of some earlier novel, or a modern-day miser recalling Scrooge. And of course there's the Bible: among its many other functions, it too is part of the one big story. A female character may remind us of Scarlett O'Hara or Ophelia or even, say, Pocahontas. These similarities - and they may be straight or ironic or comic or tragic - begin to reveal themselves to readers after much practice of reading.

All this resembling other literature is all well and good, but what does it mean for our reading?

Excellent question. If we don't see the reference, it means nothing, right? So the worst thing that occurs is that we're still reading the same story as if the literary precursors weren't there. From there, anything that happens is a bonus. A small part of what transpires is what I call the aha! factor, the delight we feel at recognizing a familiar component from earlier experience. That moment of pleasure, wonderful as it is, is not enough, so that awareness of similarity leads us forward. What typically takes place is that we recognize elements from some prior text and begin drawing comparisons and parallels that may be fantastic, parodic, tragic, anything. Once that happens, our reading of the text changes from the reading governed by what's overtly on the page. Let's go back to Cacciato for a moment. When the squad falls through the hole in the road in language that recalls Alice in Wonderland, we quite reasonably expect that the place they fall into will be a wonderland in its own way. Indeed, right from the beginning, this is true. The oxcart and Sarkin Aung Wan's aunties fall faster than she and the soldiers despite the law of gravity, which decrees that falling bodies all move at thirty-two feet per second squared. The episode allows Paul Berlin to see a Vietcong tunnel, which his inherent terror will never allow him to do in real life, and this fantastic tunnel proves both more elaborate and more harrowing than the real ones. The enemy officer who is condemned to spend the remainder of the war down there accepts his sentence with a weird illogic that would do Lewis Carroll proud. The tunnel even has a periscope through which Berlin can look back at a scene from the real war, his past. Obviously the episode could have these features without invoking Carroll, but the wonderland analogy enriches our understanding of what Berlin has created, furthering our sense of the outlandishness of this portion of his fantasy.

This dialogue between old texts and new is always going on at one level or another. Critics speak of this dialogue as intertextuality, the ongoing interaction between poems or stories. This intertextual dialogue deepens and enriches the reading experience, bringing multiple layers of meaning to the text, some of which readers may not even consciously notice. The more we become aware of the possibility that our text is speaking to other texts, the more similarities and correspondences we begin to notice, and the more alive the text becomes. We'll come back to this discussion later, but for now we'll simply note that newer works are having a dialogue with older ones, and they often indicate the presence of this conversation by invoking the older texts with anything from oblique references to extensive quotations.

Once writers know that we know how this game is played, the rules can get very tricky. The late Angela Carter, in her novel *Wise Children* (1992), gives us a theatrical family whose fame rests on Shakespearean performance. We more or less expect the appearance of elements from Shakespeare's plays, so we're not surprised when a jilted young woman, Tiffany, walks onto a television show set distraught, muttering, bedraggled – in a word, mad – and then disappears shortly after departing, evidently having drowned. Her performance is every bit as heartbreakingly like that of Ophelia, Prince Hamlet's love interest who goes mad and drowns in the most famous play in English. Carter's novel is about magic as well as Shakespeare, though, and the apparent drowning is a classic bit of misdirection. The apparently dead Tiffany shows up later, to the discomfort of her faithless lover. Shrewdly, Carter counts on our registering "Tiffany=Ophelia" so that she can use her instead as a different Shakespearean character, Hero, who in *Much Ado About Nothing* allows her friends to stage her death and funeral in order to teach her fiancé a lesson. Carter employs not only materials from earlier texts but also her knowledge of our responses to them in order to double-cross us, to set us up for a certain kind of thinking so that she can play a larger trick in the narrative. No knowledge of Shakespeare is required to believe Tiffany has died or to be astonished at her return, but the more we know of his plays, the more solidly our responses are locked in. Carter's sleight of narrative challenges our expectations and keeps us on our feet, but it also takes what could seem merely a tawdry incident and reminds us, through its Shakespearean parallels, that there is nothing new in young men mistreating the women who love them, and that those without power in relationships have always had to be creative in finding ways to exert some control of their own. Her new novel is telling a very old story, which in turn is part of the one big story.

But what do we do if we don't see all these correspondences?

First of all, don't worry. If a story is no good, being based on Hamlet won't save it. The characters have to work as characters, as themselves. Sarkin Aung Wan needs to be a great character, which she is, before we need to worry about her resemblance to a famous character of our acquaintance. If the story is good and the characters work but you don't catch allusions and references and parallels, then you've done nothing worse than read a good story with memorable characters. If you begin to pick up on some of these other elements, these parallels and analogies, however, you'll find your understanding of the novel deepens and becomes more meaningful, more complex.

But we haven't read everything.

Neither have I. Nor has anyone, not even Harold Bloom. Beginning readers, of course, are at a slight disadvantage, which is why professors are useful in providing a broader context. But you definitely can get there on your own. When I was a kid, I used to go mushroom hunting with my father. I would never see them, but he'd say, "There's a yellow sponge," or "There are a couple of black spikes." And because I knew they were there, my looking would become more focused and less vague. In a few

moments I would begin seeing them myself, not all of them, but some. And once you begin seeing morels, you can't stop. What a literature professor does is very similar: he tells you when you get near mushrooms. Once you know that, though (and you generally are near them), you can hunt for mushrooms on your own.