

The Colour of Intertextuality: Indigo

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New novels are frequently old ones in disguise, especially when authors linger too much in the shadow of their predecessors. At the same time, the dialogue established between the most various texts implies a challenging process of rejuvenation, which conserves the monuments of the past by subtly and subversively interrogating them. It is not surprising then that postmodern writers have discovered and enjoyed the confrontation inherent in the paradoxical nature of intertextuality. On the one hand, they have explored its positive implications, the fact that it links all literary productions in a common network, annihilating the limits of the individual creations and including them within a larger transpersonal text; on the other hand, authors have been challenged to contradict the idea that, since everything has already been written, they can never be original and, accordingly, are always liable for plagiarism.

Marina Warner's novel *Indigo* (1992) and Peter Greenaway's film *Prospero's Books* (1991) are recent illustrations of a famous intertextual series, starting with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and containing an impressive list of fictional and nonfictional works.¹ In both Warner's novel and Greenaway's film, colour and water symbolism favour a holistic interpretation of intertextuality. Instead of emphasizing the process of fragmentation, the boundary crossings between texts, and the contamination of texts by other texts, these works highlight the complementary process of intertextual reorganization, attempted with the help of new units offered to the reader.

¹ The list contains among other titles Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1960), Gonzalo Lamming's *The Pleasure of Exile* (1958) and *Water with Berries* (1972), Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969; tr. 1985), Roberto F. Retamar's *Caliban* (1980), Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1984), Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1989), Rachel Ingalls *Mrs Caliban* (1983), and Tad Williams' *Caliban's Hour* (1993).

In writing *Indigo*, Marina Warner started from some autobiographical details and from two major texts, one verbal (Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) and one visual (Turner's painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying. Typhoon Coming On*). The two sources establish a double form of intertextuality: verbal-verbal and verbal-nonverbal (pictorial). Literature, theatre, and painting are semiotically bridged to create a syncretic intertext of remarkable complexity. This represents a higher degree of intertextuality than the one discussed so far by critics, who noticed the verbal echoes, the parallel characters and situations, the quotations, the play-within-the-play, and all the other elements which encourage us to include *Indigo* within the intertextual series of *The Tempest* (Williams-Wanquet 2005: 274).

Marina Warner's novel was inspired by her father's side of the family. The history of the Warners goes as far back as 1622, when Thomas Warner settled on St Kitts. Warner's great-grandfather is represented in the novel as Christopher Everard, the British conqueror who colonizes the island of Liamuiga and fights for supremacy with Sycorax, a healer, magician, and producer of indigo-dye. The latter, a profound character, of unexpected complexity, represents both the female voice and the voice of the colonized that are absent from Shakespeare's play. Unlike Shakespeare's character, Sycorax adopts Ariel, an Arawak girl, and saves Caliban, named Dulé, from the womb of his drowned mother, one of the slaves who in Turner's painting are thrown overboard to bring their owners the desired insurance money.

The story of *Indigo* has two distinct temporal layers. The 16th and 17th-century line of action is linked to the 20th-century one through Everard's descendants: Anthony Everard, his son Kit, his daughter Xanthe by a second wife, and his granddaughter Miranda. Anthony was born and brought up in the Caribbean islands conquered by his ancestor, but moves to England after the death of his first wife, the creole mother of Kit. The connection between the natural wilderness of the Caribbean islands and the social wilderness of London is established by the coloured nurse of Miranda and Xanthe, Serafine, who represents a modern replica of Sycorax.

The constant references to Shakespeare's play are meant to underline the major differences between *The Tempest* and *Indigo* while highlighting numerous intertextual connections. Such statements as

Miranda's that she is aware of not living inside one of Shakespeare's plays as well as a lot of ruptures and disconnections make it clear that Warner's novel wants to deal with the numerous things left unsaid in *The Tempest*. One of them is the absence of the female voices, noticed by Warner as a fault which has to be corrected. That is why she places the weight of her novel on two women, Sycorax and Miranda, the former standing for the colonized inhabitants of the island, the past, wilderness, magic, and craftsmanship, the latter for the present, the colonizers, civilization, and art. Warner's main target is to undertake a feminist critique of a play in which the female presence had been cancelled from what she calls 'the general music of the island' (Warner 1994: 5). Another intention is to approach the life and civilisation of the islanders in the Caribbean territories before the colonisation of the British, and depict the 'disappearance' evoked by Turner's painting, the 'swallowing' of peoples, with its huge 'historical as well as an emotional dimension' (6-7). Warner wants to 'reverse the viewpoint and see such an episode through the eyes of people on the receiving end, not through the eyes of slavers but through the eyes of the drowned and of the people whose lives are going to be irrevocably changed by the effects of the slave trade and the arrival of the people who run it'. Her intention is to 're-vision' familiar features, 'shaking them out and looking at them from another angle in order to recapture them in a different light', so that 'a new story can emerge which speaks more urgently to the needs of the present' (5). This intention must be correlated with the detail mentioned by Warner that John Ruskin, the art critic, bought Turner's painting because he was impressed by the purple and blue colours, shaping 'the lurid shadows of the hollow breakers' cast upon 'the mist of night, which gathers cold and low, advancing like the shadow of death upon the guilty ship as it labours amidst the lightning of the sea' (1).

In a similar way, Warner's Liamuiga is pictured in the novel as 'an island of emeralds and purples' (89), dominated by the colour indigo. That is the reason why the title of the novel and of its second part is *Indigo*. The other parts of the novel are associated with lilac/pink, orange/red, gold/white, green/khaki, and maroon/black. Gilbert feels that this combination of colours represents the main deviation from the source, the novel, in her opinion, echoing the play like a cave in which sounds get fractured into colours (Gilbert 1992: 191). In fact, *Indigo* turns out to be both a wonderfully intricate amalgam of colours as well

as a maze of narratives, arguments, and themes, where nothing is perfectly black or white. The natives are called ‘musty, métis, quadroon, octaroon’ according to the blood combination of their ancestors, and the slavers use ‘charts like stockbreeders and tabulated blood degrees to the thirty-second drop’ (68). Dulé/Caliban is ‘mottled purplish’ (85), and, when Sycorax, repudiated by her husband, returns with her son to her native place, the villagers believe that she mated with one of the animals she had tamed, blurring the distinction between man and beast, domestic and wild. Ariel’s child by Kit is also a mongrel, reminding of Ariel’s strangeness, while Kit himself is called ‘Nigger Everard’ (67) by his schoolmates.

The transgressive bodies and the hybridity of colours suggest a departure from the tradition of the stage, from what the canon has imposed as white or coloured in Renaissance civilization. Even noises are changed by Warner into colours, an uninterrupted source of delight for Serafine. Metamorphosis is not only the engine which drives history and nations forward, but also, as Warner herself confesses, the key to the practice of rewriting. It is within this context that water can be related to what Warner calls ‘the body of stories that we have in some strange ways inherited’, the ‘ocean of stories’ into which she longs to dive and to resurrect through transformation (Williams-Wanquet 2005: 281). This desire is echoed by Serafine, in whose stories everything changes shapes, so as to bring about the bettering of a world whose history is too often based on crimes, tortures, and sufferings. The change of noises into waters, colours, and stories forms the basic dynamism of life. It represents both the conclusion reached by Serafine and the end of the novel:

There are many noises in her head these befuddled days of her old age; they whisper news to her of this island and that, of people scattered here and there, from the past and from the present. Some are on the run still; but some have settled, they have ceased wandering, their maroon state is changing sound and shape. She’s often too tired nowadays to unscramble the noises, but she’s happy hearing them, to change into stories another time. (402)

Colour and water symbolism are developed in Warner’s novel under the more or less conscious influence of Turner’s painting. *The Tempest* itself is rather colour poor. Black, brown, red, white, yellow, and golden are mentioned only once in the play. If we compare *The Tempest* to A

A Midsummer Night's Dream, where black is mentioned 6 times, green 9 times, and yellow 4 times, we realize the coloristic poverty of a play in which sounds are more important than colours. The only colour that is mentioned repeatedly in *The Tempest* is green, four times with reference to grass and land (in II, 1 and IV, 1) and twice with reference to the sea (in V.1.). In Warner's novel, green is replaced by indigo. Indigo is a dye obtained by Sycorax from the plant *indigofera tinctoria*, after a complicated process of transformations, 'starting with the seething leaves of the plant and finishing with the moment when the dye turned blue in contact with the air' (147). In Warner's novel, indigo is also the colour of the water: the sweet water Sycorax uses for her dye, the rain water, the forest dew, and the sea. Although all waters are blue, there are differences in how they are perceived. For Sycorax, sweet water is a source of life, while the sea represents a constant menace she cannot quite decipher. She associates it with the dead bodies on the beach, obvious signs of chaos and disorder. When looking at the corpses, Sycorax foresees her own death, the death of her people as well as the end of their civilization. In his turn, Caliban/ Dulé associates water with life. Because he was delivered from the sea, he prefers to 'learn the streams', to 'develop skills on the water' (93), experimenting with fish traps, diving into the ocean, and travelling through the blue waterways in search of news, information, and other people's stories.

Indigo is also perceived as the colour of time, of a past rolling into the present as if it were an ocean 'swelling and falling back, then returning again' (95). Both Sycorax and Caliban/Dulé see time and space as 'a churn or a bowl, in which substances and essences were tumbled and mixed, always returning, now emerging into personal form, now submerged into the mass in the continuous present tense of existence, as one of the vats in which Sycorax brewed the indigo' (122). Reliving the past means to preserve continuity, to repeat one's life over and over in a continuous cycle. Contrariwise, the Europeans see themselves poised on 'a journey towards triumph, perhaps, or extinction' (121), a linear and rather simplistic journey, in which indigo is reduced to the mere colour of a plant. Therefore, when cultivating indigo for the first time, Kit Everard finds the plant 'tricky' and 'demanding' (163), failing to understand its alchemy and the profound symbolism of its colour. He needs Ariel's help. Thus the traditional Eurocentric perspective, which according to Geraldo De Sousa (2002: 182) turns the native cultures into

caricatures, is inverted in Warner's novel. The fight between the British and the natives finishes with the victory of Sycorax, Ariel, and Serafine.

After many years of dyeing, indigo stains Sycorax' skin. First her hands, then her whole body is coloured blue, the witch being transformed into an indigo creature, different from all the other inhabitants of the island. Sycorax' body is more than a material envelope for the soul, a primitive, inferior flesh of the devalued Other. It becomes the unusual physique of an angelic creature, totally opposed to what Shakespeare had in mind when referring to Sycorax as a 'foul', 'damn'd witch' (I.2.391: 397). Warner's Sycorax knows that 'some people have their eyes turned inward, others are always scanning the horizon' (95) and that she, undoubtedly, belongs to the first kind. Her spiritually elevated attitude as well as the fact that indigo comes from Asia, mainly from India, makes us arrive at what is so familiar in Eastern philosophy, the colour indigo of the Third Eye Chakra. Located between the eyes, this chakra deals with psychic powers, and, accordingly, its indigo colour comes to symbolize a mystical borderland of wisdom, self-mastery, and spiritual realization. For the Indians, indigo represents the color of dignity and high aspirations, of inner visions, intuition, clairvoyance, perception, imagination, concentration, peace of mind, and projection of will. Like indigo gemstones, it speeds the vibration of energy toward a spiritual realm, and has a transformative quality that stimulates an increase in communication skills, intuition, creativity, and inspiration.

A similarly powerful water and colour symbolism as the one developed by Warner in *Indigo* can be noticed in Greenaway's film, *Prospero's Books*. From the very first images, an interesting shift is suggested: water turns into a book. Greenaway may have taken for granted Stephano's invitation addressed to Trinculo: 'Here kiss the book!' (II. 2. 131). Stephano means the Bible, but shows Trinculo a bottle with liquor. For Greenaway, the book is like drinks, strong enough to give power, courage, and the necessary determination to rebel against canons. He himself has rebelled against American filmmakers, dissatisfied that 'they're extremely good at making straightforward, linear narrative movies, which entertain superbly. But they very rarely do anything else' (Pagan 1995: 43). He prefers, therefore, the postmodern techniques related to narrative intransitivity (gaps, interruptions, and digressions as contrasted to clear causal development of the story line) and Brechtian estrangement (an alienation effect rather than the

traditional viewer identification with characters). Water and its indigo colour, a perfect symbol of these postmodern narrative effects, changes into a magic book, the book which Prospero announces he is to drown at the end of Shakespeare's play.

This symbolic shift provokes a larger meditation on allegorical significances, on communication through books, stages and films, words and images, iconic and symbolic signs. *The Book of Water*, the first of the twenty-four books of the film, has been perceived by Tweedie (2000: 104) as 'a space of instability and heterogeneity', due to the larger intertextual approach, but also to the water metaphor, fundamental for the entire film. Water, fluidity, the dripping in the early images of the film, and the final drowning of the book (turning thus back to water) imply a deep conflict between Shakespeare's classic text and its filmic adaptation, the 'clash between the first Folio and the new technologies of representation' (105-106), between the logocentric period of the Gutenberg era and the imagocentric world of the 21st century. The book also stands for political power, for Prospero's force of keeping the native inhabitants in submission as well as for the 'visualization of the spoken and the written word' (107). The film is an allegory of the adaptation of canonical literature to cinema, with *The Tempest's* colonial concerns refigured as a confrontation between a masterful original and an unfaithful follower. Moreover, the reading experience itself is for Greenaway a watery process, as is intertextuality too. Water creates an intensified, dense, and varied background, being constantly made visible and audible in the film, used for puns and frequently referred to by Prospero, when he mentions storms, waves, waterfalls, shells, brushes, sponges, and basins. Their destructive force is suggested by an indigo colour. 'Water is fantastically photogenic', Greenaway declares in an interview that 'the world is four-fifth water, we are all born in amniotic fluid, water is a big cleansing medium whether it's literal or metaphorical. On another, pragmatic level, water provides almost a legitimate opportunity for people to be seen nude /.../, but it literally is the oil of life, it is the blood of life, which splashes, dribbles, washes, roars – it's a great friend and a terrifying enemy, it has all those significances. And there is a way in which somehow water is the unguent, the balm, the cooling agent of a lot of the dramas of all the films' (Rodgers 1991-1992: 15).

Although it is water-proof, *The Book of Water* is finally destroyed by the indigo rains and waves. They are provoked by Prospero-the-creator, author of *The Tempest* and a divinity who writes. Prospero gradually turns into Shakespeare himself, as so many postmodern characters do when transcending fictional frames and becoming the author of the work in which they themselves play the main part. As a playwright, Prospero uses an indigo ink, the liquid of creation and power, the symbol of a benevolent tempest of the mind and hand. We see the words ‘boatswain’ and ‘bestir’ written over and over again, dripping like the initial drops of water, implying the idea of expansion – from a single drop to a whole ocean, from a simple word to a whole communicational system, from a mere text to an entire intertextual line, and, of course, from a plain image to an entire imagocentric civilization. The orthography of these words, spelt in various ways, shows that language is gradually deconstructed by those who use it. *The Book of Water* ultimately generates a text with immaterial signs, with words hardly able to communicate.

That liquids establish a deep semantic relationship with indigo can be explained by Greenaway’s fascination for nuances and shades. He has acknowledged that he favours painterly considerations over dramatic ones and that he has tried ‘to mark the site of the struggle of the emergence of something new’ (Pagan 1995: 52) in the world-projecting potential of language and images. He has therefore resorted to a complex technology, including computer generated shapes and figures, animation of images, violation of boundaries, transgression of spaces and their transformation into indistinguishable surfaces of writing. *Prospero’s Books* inaugurates a paradoxical correlation of superimposed images, witnessing the merging of different visual arts such as photography, film, video into what Yvonne Spielman called ‘intermedia’ (Spielman 2001: 57). But since the traditional syntax is avoided, it is the water isotopy that makes the text coherent.

In conclusion, we can say that the modern departures from the Shakespearean text create a form of intertextuality that has become larger and larger with every new item produced in literature or any other art. Its expansion cannot be stopped. Greenaway’s rewriting of *The Tempest* as a film forces us to broaden what we normally consider an intertext: we have to add the filmic discourse, with its coloured images and all its specific techniques, rhythms, tones, and syntactic devices. It establishes a

rich dialogue between two distinct communicative systems, which would have otherwise remained separated.

The water and colour symbolism of both Greenaway's film and Warner's novel show how verbal intertextuality and intermedia can establish a lively conversation between arts, mixing into a larger intertextuality and including all texts related directly or indirectly to Shakespeare's play. It also convinces us that if such 'print-oriented bastards' (Barth 1975: 27) as Marina Warner relate to such image- and colour-oriented bastards as Turner and Greenaway, they undoubtedly can give new life to such canon-creating bastards as William Shakespeare himself.

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