

Monomedial Hybridization in Contemporary Poetry

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Abstract: In his article "Monomedial Hybridization in Contemporary Poetry" Jan Baetens argues that the debate on hybridization tends to overemphasize the blurring of boundaries between signs and sign types in all possible forms: combination of types within a given work (multimodal "image-texts," comics and photo-novels, sound poetry, etc.), adaptation and remediation of one sign type by another one (filmic adaptations of novels or novelizations of films, for instance), and, more generally, the simultaneous elaboration of works in various media (the phenomenon that Jenkins called "convergence" or trans-media storytelling). While all these hybridizations have become mainstream today, if we take into account Mitchell's thesis that "there are no visual media" by which he means that "there are no 'pure' media," it becomes possible to draw attention to a more traditional, but perhaps more challenging and disturbing practice of sign usage: the crossing of borders between literary genres and text types, which may involve also the mixture of styles, modes, traditions, audiences and introduce new forms of genre hybridization.

Jan BAETENS

Monomedial Hybridization in Contemporary Poetry

In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson delivered one of his best-known speeches — "The American Scholar" — to faculty and students of Harvard University at Commencement Day. He opened with the words that "Our age is bewailed as the age of introversion. Must that needs be evil?" (46). But were Emerson invited to deliver a new speech to a similar audience today, one can be sure that he would have opened it by saying "Our age is bewailed as the age of hybridization. Must that needs be evil?" It is difficult indeed to deny the overpowering presence of hybrid forms and practices in contemporary art and writing as it is difficult to make up our minds on the exact significance of their spread. Combination of sign types within a given work (multimodal "image-texts," comics and photo-novels, sound poetry, etc.), adaptation and remediation of one medium by another (filmic adaptations of novels or, the other way round, novelizations of films, some of which are already adapted from previous books, etc.), and, more generally, the simultaneous elaboration of works in various media (the phenomenon that Henry Jenkins has called "convergence" or trans-media culture) — all these practices are just some examples of the countless hybridizations which have become so mainstream today that they have ceased to be mere hype and have shaped a new hegemony. Hybridity is, in all possible meanings of the word, a must.

A good case in point is the relationship between literature and photography. Nearly two decades ago, the 1995 anthology by Jane Rabb disclosed the many encounters and mutual influences — Rabb used the neutral term "interactions" — of writers and photographers. Recent developments confirm the breadth and depth of her observations (for a good overview in French literature, see Nachtergaele). Cutting-edge research goes even further demonstrating that the influence of photography is equally visible (pun intended) in those forms of writing which do not display any direct reference to picture making or picture taking. Hence the notion of "invisible revolution" coined by Philippe Ortel in his 2002 *La Littérature à l'ère de la photographie*, or even more radically, the decision by François Brunet to call his 2009 book on this topic not *Literature and Photography* — which used to be the default option for these kinds of studies — but *Photography and Literature* in order to highlight the paradigm shift that makes us now see literature from the point of view of photographers rather than that of literary scholars. More generally speaking, one might say that hybridity has become so dominant a way of thinking that it affects not only most domains of literary theory and criticism, as demonstrated for instance in modern genre theory, which is now almost by definition genre hybridization theory (see Nünning and Rupp), but also our idea of the text itself, whose "purity" has nowadays become almost unthinkable as I demonstrate here, but do not make a plea for a return to non-hybridity.

Any hegemony, however, produces counter-hegemonic voices because it needs them in order to impose its own arguments. An unexpected and therefore exemplary case is that of Lev Manovich's work who in his 2000 *The Language of New Media* does not open with the clichéd statement that the computer is the super medium into which all existing media are supposed to converge, but with a claim in favor of medium-specificity: "Today, as more artists are turning to new media, few are willing to undertake systematic, laboratory-like research into its elements and basic compositional, expressive, and generative strategies. Yet this is exactly the kind of research undertaken by Russian and German avant-garde artists of the 1920s in places like Vkhutemas and Bauhaus, as they explored the new media of their time: photography, film, new print technologies, telephony. Today, those few who are able to resist the immediate temptation to create 'an interactive CD-ROM,' or make a feature-length 'digital film,' and instead focus on determining the new-media equivalent of a shot, sentence, word, or even letter, are rewarded with amazing findings" (15). This medium-specificity, however, should not be confused with monomediality or, more technically speaking, with an essentialist approach to mediality. As argued in 2005 by W.J.T. Mitchell in a reflection on another aspect of today's hegemonic thinking, namely the belief in a universal visual turn, "There Are No Visual Media." Mitchell emphasis on the interconnection between sensory experiences on the one hand and the impossibility to isolate purely visual signs and experiences on the other, is, however, not to be read as a declaration against medium-specificity: it should be interpreted instead as a defense of more complex forms of medium-specificity.

In this regard, it may be useful to recall the example of Dziga Vertov's 1927 film *The Man with the Movie Camera*, since Vertov's experiments are at the heart of Manovich's theoretical framing of digital culture as montage. *The Man With the Movie Camera* opens with a manifesto-like sequence of intertitles foregrounding the specificity of cinema, as well as its intended rupture with the two media which had inspired many filmmakers of the first decades of the new medium: literature and theater. Contrary to those who link film with either print or stage, Vertov proclaims: "ATTENTION VIEWERS // This film is an experiment // Without the help of intertitles // Without the help of a story // Without the help of theatre // This experimental works aims at creating a truly international language // of cinema based on its absolute separation // from the language of theatre and literature" (<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iey9YIbra2U>>). This lesson, however, is "impure" in at least two regards. First, because it needs verbal language to make itself clear (even if the filmic text is deprived of inserted text frames, the presence of these text frames is overwhelming at the threshold of the text, that is, in its paratext, which we no longer consider alien to the work itself). Second, because the movie involves from the very start a dialogue with sound: both the sound shown on screen and the sound produced by the live orchestra during the silent era or the sound-track in later periods.

Scrutinized in light of Mitchell's thesis, Manovich's claim and Vertov's example suggest that challenging the doxa of contemporary hybridization is not an easy endeavor. As a matter of fact, all attempts to distinguish non-hybridized forms seem so easy to criticize or deconstruct: all "pure" forms eventually become "impure" mixed with other sign forms and types and their modality (i.e., the way in which the encoded information refers to the world it represents) becomes multimodal combining various sign systems to make statements on the world, be it the real world or, as often in literature, a fictional one (on this, see, e.g., Kress and Van Leeuwen). For this reason and also following ideas proposed by Marina Grishakova in "Complexity, Hybridity, and Comparative Literature" (<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss7/5>>), I adopt a different stance drawing attention to a more traditional, but perhaps more rewarding and yet also disturbing practice, no longer at the level of the form of sign types, but with regard to their uses. Such an approach could be called "indirect": the idea, then, is not to reject hybridity, but to reframe it and to show that the current insistence on multimodality or multimediality (the former term focuses more on the signs as such, the latter term refers also to the relationship between medium and representation) may dissimulate other practices of hybridity, more intriguing and perhaps more far-reaching, although less noticeable and perhaps not even recognized or labeled as such. I posit that it should be possible to shift to a new vision of hybridity no longer restricted to multimedial forms, but open to monomedial ones as well. It should also be stressed that the focus on reading is typically modern in the broad sense of the word. In modern literature, the reader has been allowed to contemplate and eventually to put into practice a certain control over the text against the (perceived or imagined) intention of the author. In this sense modern ideas of literature are breeding new forms of hybridity.

From a strictly semiotic point of view, poetry can be defined as a conventionalized form of language that uses oral and/or written signs in a particular way (and, one should add, that is read/listened to by particular audiences in particular contexts). Semiotics can describe these conventions, yet the assessment of their cultural value, as well as the evaluation of their more or less successful application is, of course, an aesthetic and political problem. However, such a broad and general definition helps sketch an overview of possible medial structures stretched between the two extreme possibilities of "pure" or extreme monomediality (either mere sound, i.e., verbal signs which are not primarily meant to be written down or mere graphical presence, i.e., verbal signs which are not primarily meant to be pronounced), on the one hand, and intermediality (which combines or juxtaposes the mixed forms with one or more other sign type[s]) and multimodality (which combines more than one other sign type), covering also intermediary solutions such as "impure mediality" (oral poetry in print or print poetry read aloud, for instance), on the other. I propose the following schematic categorization:

	Sound	Words
"pure" monomediality	example: sound poetry	example: lettrism
"impure" monomediality	example: oral poetry in print	example: print poetry read aloud

Intermediality	example: oral poetry + visual illustration(s)	example: print poetry + musical accompaniment
Multimediality	example: oral poetry performed on stage	example: poetry in print with images & musical accompaniment (e.g., in digital poetry)

It will not come as a surprise that the most interesting category in above is the mixed or "impure" in-between or contact zone, namely the position between extreme monomediality on the one hand and inter- and multimediality on the other. This zone is normally not labeled as hybrid, but this is precisely my point and I open this "impure" monomedial zone to discussion and reinterpretation and suggest that there is room for other kinds of hybridity than those we usually associate with this concept. I do so by discussing certain tendencies in contemporary literature where long-term debates on the status of literature, mainly poetry and its relationships with non-literary and anti-literary forms of writing will help clear the ground for new readings of hybridity.

In the history of modern poetry since more or less the second half of the nineteenth century, it is possible to distinguish two major types of such monomedial hybridization and I borrow several examples from this particular field (for good examples see also, e.g., Grigorian, Baldwin, Rigaud-Drayton). The first type is what has been defined by and since Mallarmé as the *crise de vers*, that is, the fading of the formal distinctions between poetry and prose: in the rhetorical system the distinction between them was dependent on the presence or absence of a number of constraints, mainly those linked with meter, prosody, and rhyme. The gradual erosion of this system in all Western literatures produced not only free verse or prose poetry, but also a radical difficulty in delineating poetry *tout court*. Eventually some authors turned to the last possible remaining constraint, that of the line as a more or less independent unit (see, e.g., Roubaud and his polemical study of the exhaustion of the French poetic system), while others attempted to foreground the idea of a "poeticized" language (see Thomas and Winspur in their study of avant-garde poetry). Whatever the answer to all these questions may be, it cannot be denied that the combination or conflict of both regimes — the formally recognizable poetic writing on the one hand and the formally non-recognizable poetic writing on the other — has been a driving force in the transformations of poetry during the entire twentieth century, which can thus be described as a long battle between poetic and non-poetic utterances, as well as a progressive intrusion and spread of a kind of monomedial formal hybridization. Although mainly monomedial (i.e., made of only words), poetry becomes hybrid (i.e., torn between formally poetic and unpoetic ways of writing). In comparison with this general shift, the practice of inter- and multimedial hybridization is no more than a detail. An important one, but definitely less decisive than one may think at first sight. It should not be forgotten that some of the most radical modern or avant-garde movements such as French Surrealism have proven indifferent to discussions of this kind: Breton and his friends did not continue Apollinaire's experiments in the field of calligraphic writing and neither can they be seen as followers of Dada's sound poetry performances (on Surrealism's diffidence towards inter- and multimedial poetry, see, e.g., Murat 125-32).

A second type of "impure" monomedial hybridization has to do with an even greater watershed change, that of the contestation of literary language itself, be it poetry or prose. Here again, the traditional rhetorical system was based upon the belief in the existence of a specific literary language, separated from "ordinary" language. The fact that it was not easy — and in practice even impossible — to grasp or fix such a language did not mean that writers and readers were also reluctant to believe in the validity of such an idea, as shown by Gilles Philippe and Julien Piat in their 2009 *La Langue littéraire* study on French literary prose since the modern, mid-nineteenth-century period. According to Philippe and Piat — who also recognize the role played by the erosion of generic stability — literary language, regardless of style and genre, used to be seen as essentially different from ordinary language and the gradual erosion of this gap has played a key role in the unfolding of modern poetry as well. As literary historians of this long process have laid bare, French poetry — and prose would not be radically different — has been characterized by the emergence and eventually the dominating position of a wide range of "anti-literary" attitudes, that is, of ways of writing which reject all purportedly literary uses of language. In French-language literature, this anti-literary position has been identified with the notion of "literary terrorism" (see, e.g., Paulhan) and it is summarized by the

title of Laurent Nunez's 2006 genealogy of this debate, *Les Ecrivains contre l'écriture*. In the case of poetry, this anti-literary attitude involved, first, the shift from poetry to poeticized language as mentioned above and second, the embrace of forms of poetry which disobey any form of socially accepted and recognizable poeticization to the extent that even the very notion of poetry became unacceptable to some, as suggested in Denis Roche's 1995 *La Poésie est inadmissible*. What is called today in France the *poésie du dispositif* is a collage of decidedly non-literary, real-life textual fragments such as advertisements, journalism, company reports, official documents, etc., which are presented as a kind of installation, often with strong political overtones (see, e.g., Hanna; the literal translation of the syntagm, "presentation poetry," is probably not as illuminating as it should be, but even in French its meaning is far from self-evident). Craig Dworkin's and Kenneth Goldsmith's 2011 *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* points towards similar directions partially, although the examples gathered in the volume demonstrate a more ecumenical and less politicized way of doing poetry.

Whatever the aesthetic, theoretical, social, ideological, etc., assessment of this anti-literary stance may be, one cannot doubt the importance of its influence on new forms of hybridization, in this case between poetic and anti-poetic language, a form of monomedial hybridization that goes further than the clash between literary and non-literary ways of writing. It may suffice here to think of the work by Francis Ponge, eager to replace old rhetoric with newer forms which eventually blurred the boundaries between draft and *imprimatur*. Ponge's quest for more appropriate forms of representation went beyond the dream of emptying literature of its old-fashioned literariness: it also proved an attempt, which would eventually take more absolute forms in the work by younger authors to supersede the difference between literature and anti-literature (for a recent anthology see Broqua and Poucel). In this sense, one would of course be allowed to consider Ponge's work as "classical," more keen to bring together antagonistic positions than to deepen their differences.

The phenomena described above are not absolutely new in poetry. It is well known that poetry has a strong tradition of polysemy, which exists also in other texts or genres or at least in their reading as, for instance, in the medieval theory of polysemy, according to which there are various layers of meaning (literal, allegorical, tropological, anagogical, as in the case of the Bible). For example, Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia or dialogism may be another case in point. However, the twentieth century goes further than these examples, given its stronger emphasis on formal heterogeneity and the pressure it puts on the stability of generic boundaries. It is now time to move to a crucial dimension of my reading of hybridity, which has to do with the difference between hybridity and hybridization. All examples, techniques, and styles mentioned above have been presented in a perspective that is strongly production or writing oriented. The types of hybridity which were detected can be characterized or indeed singled out by cracks and conflicts between types of writing: first literary versus non-literary, second both literary and non-literary versus anti-literary. It is possible, however, also to stress the readerly dimension of this process and to examine how the reader experiences the progressive disappearance of textual, linguistic, rhetorical, stylistic, discursive frontiers during the act of reading. In this perspective, it is not (or not only) the text that is hybrid, but the reader who hybridizes the text in an ongoing dialogue with the monomedial materials he/she is reading. Of course, a more complete reader-oriented approach of hybridity would also have to focus on the fact that for readers hybridity-reduction is as important a phenomenon as that of the creation of hybridity is for writers. Many readers, when confronted with a complex literary text, do not focus in the first place on how to increase the work's hybridity but, on the contrary, on how to handle it, that is, on how to reduce it.

Although the forms and possibilities of such hybridizations can be diverse, here I focus on two readerly experiences representative of what happens in contemporary poetry. The first experience is that of the reader who, slowly or suddenly, becomes aware of the fact that a shift in writing style has taken place, yet without knowing exactly at what moment the text has crossed the border between "poetry" (in one of the meanings sketched above) and "something else" (whatever that "something else" may be). The second experience — counterpart of the first one — is that of the reader who is responsive to the fact that he/she has entered a different textual zone or style, but without any precise idea when (and if) this new mode will come to an end.

In contemporary French avant-garde writing, this uncertainty principle is a key issue and one of the driving forces of the text in action. Various books by Nathalie Quintane, for instance, whose whole oeuvre deserves to be analyzed in light of readerly hybridization, provide us with interesting examples of this double mechanism. Quintane's 2010 book *Tomates* — which one can start reading as a variation on Ponge's constraint of "one rhetoric per object" (533) — turns frequently into different types of writing (e.g., political activism, diary, essay, aphorism), but not in such a way that the reader can easily spot or identify either the initial transition from one textual zone to another or the moment when the text returns to its previous form of narration. All the reader experiences is the fact that the changes in tone, register, subject matter, vocabulary, rhythm, etc., appear as examples of hybridity. On the website of the publisher (P.O.L), the book is presented in the following way:

When one has been writing for quite a while, people often make you all kinds of suggestions. You should write a book on public reading; or: Don't you want to write a book on love? or: You should write on what you just told me; or even: You should write on what is happening now. Well, I am always writing on what is happening now. The problem, however, is that it changes all the time, and since I really want to write on what is happening now, although it changes all the time, well, I don't see how I could stick to one subject, and even less how I could manage a subject" (unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine)

Quand on écrit depuis pas mal d'années, souvent, on vous fait des suggestions: Tiens, tu devrais faire un livre sur les lectures publiques; ou bien: Tu voudrais pas écrire un livre sur l'amour? ou bien: Vous devriez écrire ce que vous me dites; ou encore: Vous devriez écrire sur ce qui se passe en ce moment. Bon. J'écris toujours sur ce qui se passe en ce moment; le problème, c'est que ça change tout le temps, et comme je tiens à continuer à écrire sur ce qui se passe en ce moment — bien que ça change tout le temps —, eh bien je ne me vois pas tenant un sujet; encore moins tenant mon sujet. [*Tomates* <<http://www.pol-editeur.com/index.php?spec=livre&ISBN=978-2-8180-0622-1>>)

This hybridization has at least a twofold impact on the reader and both mechanisms, separate and inseparable at the same time, have been well documented in studies of the poetics of reading, for instance by Pierre Bayard in his 2006 *Le Hors-sujet. Proust et la digression* on the digressive style of Marcel Proust (it should be noted that Quintane's style has often and appropriately been labeled as "digressive"). The first impact is to produce a hybridizing impression of foreground versus background in the textual material. The reader will try to judge what would the main thread be in the narrative and what serves as backdrop. Very soon, however, and Bayard has no problem in driving this point home, the distinction "primary" versus "secondary" evaporates during the act of reading. Not only in the sense that both positions can change places: after all, what do many readers know of *Remembrance of Things Past* except *Swann's Way*, which is nothing but a giant digression within Proust's novel? But also, and perhaps more interestingly, in the sense that the very ground for deciding what is "primary" and what "secondary" appears also to be missing to the extent that the reader is confronted constantly with the urge to decide what really matters and what does not (or what matters less), without ever having the certainty that he/she is doing the right thing.

The second hybridizing impact on the readerly experience is to create a differentiation of reading pace. Speed, as we know, is a slippery notion always hard to objectify (on this, see, e.g., Baetens and Hume), but whose role in the experience of hybridization cannot be overestimated. Changes in style or tone will indeed translate into different paces of readings. Elements or zones perceived as secondary may provoke a decrease of interest and attention, if not even boredom, and therefore, as in a kind of psychological compensation, tend to speed up the rhythm of reading — and in certain cases even persuade the reader that it is preferable to skip certain passages. Yet here again nothing will happen automatically: for some readers, boredom can work as a kind of warning system that hints at the fact that they may be missing the point and these readers may decide to read more slowly or even to reread. And one should not forget that mechanisms of boredom and decrease of interest also have a performative dimension: the impression of boredom may induce the impression that what one is reading is secondary, whereas exciting passages will suggest that they represent a core message of the text.

An avant-garde author such as Olivier Cadiot — known also for his editorial collaboration with Pierre Alferi in the publication of the *Revue de littérature générale* — elaborated on ways of writing which put an emphasis on the speed of reading, yet always in a spirit of problematizing the notion as well. His 2002 *Retour définitif et durable de l'être aimé* is an example of a book that one can read as

either poetry or prose, with all that such undecidability implies for speed management during the reading process and for the permanent exposure of the reader to hybridizing clashes between speeding up and slowing down (see Gauthier). On the website of the publisher, the book is presented as a kind of flow coming from "nothing more than an autodidactic brain which tries to find a way out with the help of just some inappropriate ideas and a couple of badly understood books" ("juste un cerveau autodidacte qui essaie de s'en sortir au mieux avec pour seul bagage des idées inadéquates et des livres mal compris" (*Retour* <<http://www.pol-editeur.com/index.php?spec=livre&ISBN=2-86744-728-3>>). Cadiot's book makes thus clear what is meant by the shift from form to use in the approach of hybridity.

A similar shift in emphasis will inevitably draw our attention to the possible tension between "encoding" and "decoding" and lead us to the following question: what should we conclude from these readerly experiences of hybridization and their dramatic impact on the composition, as well as on the interpretation of a text? My point of departure in the study at hand was the dissatisfaction with today's approach to the hybrid, too easily (or too tautologically) framed in terms of multimodality and/or multimodality on the one hand and sign structures on the other, as if texts combining sign types and semiotic modalities could not be homogeneous or, to put it in a paradoxical way, utterly de-hybridized. Most of the time the scholarly reflection on hybridity and multimodality is saying exactly that, namely that the various signs which are combined in a given work are not simply juxtaposed, piled up, or opposed, but that together they shape a new sign. The banalized notion of iconotext, for instance, has been characterized as a genre in which the opposition of word and image — or, even worse from an aesthetic and ideological point of view, the ancillary relationship between a text and its visual illustration — is superseded by a new way of writing and thinking based first on the impossibility to separate the two fields and second on their mutual reinforcement in view of the production of a new meaning (on this, see, e.g., Wagner). Of course, it would be absurd to deny that the arrangement of multimedial signs, for instance in iconotexts, is a form of hybridity. But the recent success of the term "hybridity" — hence my use of notions such as *doxa* and mainstream — should not prevent us from seeing and reading different forms and types of hybridity and thus my defense of hybridization as a readerly process that discloses gaps and ruptures even within supposedly monomedial practices.

This new reading, however, is never a mere copy or replica of writing itself. Reading has definitely something to do with writing. It is a process that may engender in many ways new forms of writing. Yet it would be dangerous to indulge in the contemporary myth of interactivity (see Manovich 55-61) and to think that the particular form of writing as expansion or continuation of reading would be of the same nature as writing in general even if we remain aware of the fact that all writing is to a large extent based upon previous readings. Reading is also (partially) independent from writing, that is to say from the techniques, modes, and strategies employed by the writer of the initial text: encoding and decoding can, but do not necessarily match (see Hall).

In literary-theoretical terms it is necessary to remind ourselves here of the distinction between "essentialist" and "conditionalist" modes of reading and evaluating proposed by Gérard Genette in *Fiction and Diction*: "Taking the literariness of certain texts for granted," Genette posits that the essentialist way of reading tries to answer the question as to "Which texts are works of art?" (4), while the conditionalist way asks instead as to "Under what conditions, or under what circumstances, can a text, with no *internal* modifications, become a work of art?" (4; emphasis in the original). In the essentialist approach, non-literary genres or works can only be read in a non-literary mode (they can be well written, instructive, emotionally involving, intelligent, etc., but never "literary"). In the conditionalist approach, on the contrary, it is possible to make a non-literary reading of a literary text (which will then be read as a historical document, for instance, as a symptom of the mental illness of its author, etc.) or vice versa (a legal document can become a poem, a historical memoir, a novel, an interview, a drama, etc.). Hybridization can illustrate either way of reading: if it is seen as the readerly deciphering of an encoded hybridity, it is compatible with an essentialist way of thinking, but in that case it will be difficult to escape the classic way of theorizing hybridity in multimedial terms. If it is seen, however, as a readerly strategy to tackle issues of foregrounding/backgrounding and acceleration/deceleration among other aspects of textual differentiation, it will become a performative way of showing the possibility of the reader to decide that there may be hybridity even when the text

does seem homogeneous and in that case it is wholly possible to rethink monomediality in terms of hybridization.

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