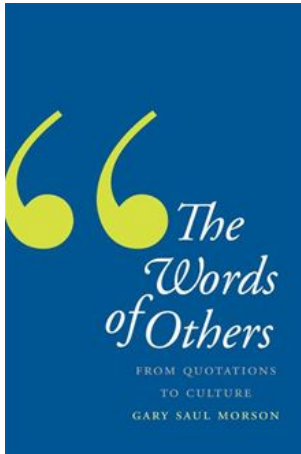


The Words of Others

Gary Saul Morson, *The Words of Others: From Quotations to Culture*, Yale University Press, 2011, 340 p.



A book about words as a shared good ensuring our humanness, Gary Saul Morson's latest work is, at the same time, an exercise in virtuosity with respect to one's personal use of words. It goes without saying that the manner of exposition serves the argument, but in this particular case it seems to us to fully deserve a special mention from the very beginning. A serene, wittily entertaining, and highly generous disposition is a universal of the discourse. Additionally, an aura of a narrative envelops both the content's presentation and the developing of a 'story' by an author who knows how to stage his audience's solidarity with himself – only to use it for the benefit of this one – as well as to turn questions and questioning into the engine for

progressing or, from the opposite perspective, unwinding. 'Along the way' and through allegedly common problematization, things become clearer and are sure to engross the reader, for following them one moves along a path that is also one's own adventure. The author's artistry turns a theory book into a multi-layered, engaging, and rewarding story. Gradation, identifiable at the level of the discourse as a whole but also in the smallest structural unit, adds value to the narrative matter (ever sparser after the prologue) or even replaces it. On the part of reception, one notices the lecture is by design a story bordering on parable, and this is made all the more interesting by the fact that it seems to correspond to at least one of the issues being dealt with in the book, namely the wandering of quotations from one genre to another. A striking parallelism is also the fact that, concerned with the literary forms that are the most memorable of all, the author writes in a highly memorable manner himself. Furthermore, this is valid for all the book's compartments, beginning with acknowledgements and reaching even to some of the notes. In other words, the book makes for fascinating reading and this only enhances the fact that it is an impressive scholarly achievement. Indeed, one may have high expectations from the American theorist and critic who also signed *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's "Diary of a Writer" and the Traditions of Literary Utopia*, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (co-authored with Caryl Emerson), *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence (Rethinking Theory)*, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (to name just a few of the titles). Yet I believe this is not a case of authority shaping opinion, but of authority being again and further acknowledged.

Morson's interest in genre theory is now concerned with the shortest literary forms, and in saying 'now' I have in view the book published in 2011. But

information on the author's interest in this field, which goes back more than fifty years, is provided both on the page containing the CIP data and in acknowledgements. The fact that by 'quotations' Morson refers to something other than (scholarly) extracts is not, I assume, self-evident in the title. This appears to suggest particularly the idea of starting as a pupil of past masters and ideally reaching the stage of 'creating' culture. Hence it comes as a surprise – one of the book's most rewarding – that the work falls into the category of genre studies, while its frame is, indeed, far larger.

Throughout the book, Morson develops and pursues his argument 'out in the open', always signalling the way – which, again, gives his speech the air of a story (Yet those who have done even the least of research into a topic can intuit the amount of work and commitment that enable such naturalness.). The table of contents is the first to testify to this quality. Between acknowledgements and conclusion, all structuring units are titled (*Prologue* Cleopatra's Nose, *Introduction* Verbal Gems and Treasuries, PART I The Market for Quotations, PART II The Nature of Quotations, PART III Quotations of Occasion, PART IV Literary Composition and Decomposition). Chapters are also numbered continuously (I What Is an Anthology?, II Quotationality and Former Quotations, III What Is a Quotation?, IV Making a Quotation, V What Is a Misquotation?, VI More Than Words Alone, VII Mis-misquotations, VIII How and Where Quotations Live, IX Famous Last Words, X Epitaphs, XI The Anthology as Literature, XII Whole and Part). All main issues are clearly stated in the introduction, after having been hinted at in the prologue, which is itself a most artful *captatio benevolentiae*. The author plays there an omniscient narrator, whose inquisitiveness perfectly complements a camera-like recording of an allegedly real-life situation. As the reader is being seduced, what is going to be at stake in the book is announced half playfully and in the interrogative. That is: what it is that differentiates between categories like quotations, allusions, sayings, clichés, aphorisms, maxims, proverbs, witticisms, etc.; whether a line can exist in more than one of these genres; if anybody, for instance a translator, is entitled to make changes in the original; whether any quotation is original; if we can do (anything at all) without the words of others.

The pylons of the demonstration are two: anthology of quotations and quotation, and Morson begins with the first, perhaps so as to meet his audience at its own place. But what seems to be a (self-)sympathetic acknowledgement of the soft spot for a dubious product, namely anthologies as means of cutting corners when it comes to education and culture, is soon and elegantly abandoned. Morson gives a highly appreciative and comprehensive description of the anthology of quotations as “a museum of utterances” (p. 34) which has the manifold advantages of taking up a small place, having no unique original, being quite easy to own, portable, and, most of the time, available for purchase. The anthology is also praised for being by tradition an important means of preserving wisdom, challenging thought, and maintaining people in a dialogue that transcends given units of time and/or space. Morson cherishes each of these attributes, and underlines the fact that we live permanently in dialogue with the words of others, either uttered or utterable at any point in the continuum of time.

Given our condition, Morson coins the term 'quotationality' to define the otherness of our utterances ('quotaholic', 'quotedness', 'quotability', 'quotographer' are further derivatives to be found in the book). And since "quotationality comes in degrees" (p. 37), its marking by means of punctuation arises as an important and complex matter. There are common cases of both usage and non-usage of markers for quotationality. "We often use quotation marks when words are borrowed or extracted – in that sense, quoted – from an unfamiliar context. [...] We put quotation marks around unfamiliar technical terms, nontechnical terms used in a technical sense, and slang that may be unfamiliar to our readers." (p. 50) By the same token, we neither put them around terms that we expect readers to know or that we have just explained, nor around what Morson calls former quotations (phrases derived from proverbs, adages, or sayings but no longer felt to be derived) – those which have maintained their foreign form included. What I consider to be a special case of non-usage is that of what the author calls quotations with a wink, namely quotations deliberately left unmarked, their quotationality being hidden for reasons of "shared superiority" and, hopefully, prevention of negative reactions manifest either outwards or inwards (see p. 42-3). Academics, at least, are sure to relish the mention that this type of quotations is especially common among themselves.

Gently but repeatedly stating the impossibility of drawing clear lines between the various shortest literary forms, Morson proceeds to describe them, and it is not little that one gets about each of them and the ways of their shifting into each other. First of all, what appears to be the supragenre of quotation is being considered generally, and here the author discerns the two conditions for quoting, respectively the criteria that allow to acknowledge a quotation as such: "formal repetition" and "re-enactment" (p. 80). At this point, we also get the key with respect to the meaning of terms as they are to be employed in the book: actions or words that meet the two aforementioned criteria will be referred to as citations, verbal citations will be called extracts, and the term 'quotations' will be reserved for the shortest literary works. As description progresses, it points out that quotations must be interesting, shared, memorable, and quotable, and that their quotability itself is the requirement for their literariness. In connection with this one, the issues discussed further on are: twinning (the case of lines being read differently in light of different genres), variation (in form and/or meaning) – in other words, the matter of versions and (their) correctness –, and quotations' wandering from one genre to another. Morson presents the workings of the adapter's range, the translator's range, the transcriber's range, and the editor's range, showing that professional work in any of the respective fields contributes to variation. He also reiterates the observation that classification and accuracy are flexible; therefore, more than one kind of each is possible. As for the mobility of quotations, I cannot resist giving these extracts from the book: "A quotation whose author is forgotten becomes a saying; a saying used too often becomes a cliché; and an idiom is a cliché taught in a grammar. Expressions may be authored, may lose an author, or may acquire an author. Witticisms have many fathers, while a proverb is an orphan. Between phrases felt to belong to some specific person and those inherently the product of a

whole people lie those that are used with the sense they *may* have an author. The phrases that «may have an author» are related to a distinct group sensed as having a specific author who is unknown: the master we call Anonymous.” (p.65; emphasis in the original), “An allusion *reminds us* of a quotation. [...] To evoke a verbal impression, the allusion may include a few well-known words of the original. Or it may sharpen the original. Or «refute» it [...]. As a result, allusion easily slides into caricature or parody, and indeed, the same words may function as either allusion or caricature depending on context. What distinguishes the two is purpose.” (p. 152-3; emphasis in the original)

Before turning to my last point in respect of the book's content, let me add that Morson draws attention to the fact that there are cases in which extratextual information (like author, occasion) is part of a quotation, much as supplying it inappropriately may be an insult to the audience. Mention should be made also of the discussion of (co)authorship, which is the frame that can best account for the complex life of quotations. The ways in which and the extent to which the aesthetic of spontaneity and separability, specific – in Morson's view – to anthologies of quotations made into literature, can and do benefit readers are included in this frame, as well as the imbuing with humanness as the effect of quotations and quoting the author commends in his Conclusion.

As I mentioned at the beginning, the thoughtful and scholarly 'report' is scattered with the author's reflections, at least as stimulating and rewarding as the ones by others which he employs, and always in dialogue with them. More interesting still, in expressing wisdom Morson cultivates the very genres with which he is concerned as a theorist. I let examples of this twinned handling speak for themselves: “No one ever lost money selling the thoughts of others.” (p. 24), “We are what we quote.” (p. 38), “An extract is a biopsy, a quotation an organism.” (p. 88), “Where there is judgement, there is variety.” (p. 107), “Correction is a royal road for the unthinking.” (p. 146), “To be proverbial is to belong to no one in particular.” (p. 164), “A man's character is his fate, and his death reveals his character.” (p. 182), “It is not quotations, but quotations quoting quotations, that disturb men.” (p. 233), “From trial and error come proverb and maxim.” (p. 260), “Add a day, add a proverb.” (p. 271), “Quotation belongs to humanness.” (p. 282) Could I as well have left them unmarked?

Other opportunities to relish are rhymes (“Explicitly or implicitly, we say , «As they say», and we live surrounded by «they».” (p. 46)), puns (“So ambushed, we all resemble George W. Bush.” (p. 106)), subheadings alluding to quotations (Quote Me Sometime playfully echoes Mae West's line “Why don't you come up and see me sometime?”, and Either This Quotation Goes or... Oscar Wilde's remark “Either this wallpaper goes, or I do”), exemplification of vicinity occasioned by anthologies' ordering principles (“In the *Macmillan Dictionary of Quotations*, author and topic are alphabetized together, so that Margaret Thatcher immediately follows Terrorism. Some anthologies alphabetize topics, while others group topics by association of ideas, so that Sex leads to Marriage and Sin to Death.” (p. 237)).

In conclusion, the book's essentially interrogative structure, the fact that it criticizes by means of benign irony, and its constant plea for non-normative

understanding add to the way it can scholarly benefit readers. I would recommend it to anyone interested particularly in the shortest literary forms and generally in the enormous treasure words are.

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