

LITERARY REPERTOIRE AND INTERFERENCE AMONG LITERATURES

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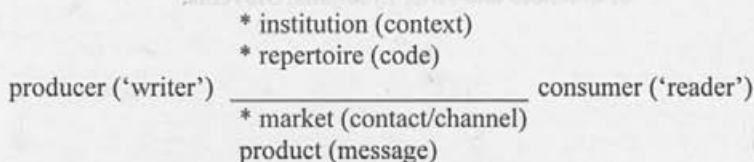
The article uses concepts of polysystem theory, especially the notion of literary repertoire, to analyse mechanisms which take place when a particular (national) literary system adopts and makes use of elements of other systems' repertoires and in this way maintains its systemic optimum. An obvious model for these processes can be observed in Slovenian literature with reference to the work of a romantic poet, France Prešeren, who introduced models and repertoires from other literary traditions in a systematic and original fashion. Later, these elements became a constitutive part of – by that time still underdeveloped and weak – the Slovenian literary repertoire.

Key words: national literature / literary canon / literary interferences / Slovene literature / Prešeren, France

Contemporary empirical and systemic approaches to literatures (as they have evolved in the last two or three decades) can offer some interesting discussion points about the spatial/ transgressive in literature. One of these is the notion of literary repertoire that I would like to present here: it could be interesting in raising 'multicultural' questions about literatures on a theoretical level – from a more geographical and cultural point of view. I will focus on one contemporary systemic approach to literature: Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory, also labeled the Tel-Aviv School, which has been developing in Israel since 1970. This theoretical enterprise is based on the achievements of Russian formalism, especially its second phase, which Even-Zohar calls dynamic functionalism, and the achievements of semiotics. Its practical grounds were actually provided by problems connected to research into translation carried out by the Tel-Aviv group.

Literary polysystem and literary repertoire

The central notion in polysystem theory is a *literary polysystem* (which has not so much in common with a "literary system" from the socio-logical systems theory). The literary polysystem is not defined as a series of texts or authors, but – as in other systemic or empirical approaches to literature – as a whole network of activities and relations connected with texts. Even-Zohar tried to visualize this network with a Jakobsonian six-part communication scheme adapted to literature:



Literary repertoire. Although it could be interesting how Even Zohar changes the 'context' into institution, which redirects our attention from the so called 'referred context' – Even-Zohar argues that Jakobson's model does not pay enough attention to the role that socio-cultural institutions have on the production and dissemination of this code – in the discussion about the spatial, the notion of *literary repertoire* is more challenging. Literary repertoire is defined as an aggregate of rules for creating and using (literary) products that need to be shared at least in one part by all (active) participants in the system – this is indispensable to the system's functioning. It is more than merely the rules, which are usually referred to as 'code' – more than just grammar – this is also 'the lexicon' of a given system. It is structured on two levels: the first is the level of individual elements, repertories; the second is the level of more general models – complexes of pre-knowledge which are the basis for all our understanding (this sounds similar to Bourdieu's notion of habitus – individual schemes acquired in the course of time). Repertoire is one of the key elements of a literary polysystem that enables its ongoing processes and evolution. Even-Zohar's analyses show how a national literary system takes up foreign patterns and models when it needs them to maintain its 'systemic optimum' (Even-Zohar 1990).

The role of the repertoire in the system can be shown through the problems of literary translation, which is one of the favorite polysystem topics. Even-Zohar claims that the question of translated literature and its place and functioning inside a given culture has not been sufficiently investigated. It is often excluded from historical explanations of national literatures (also for ideological reasons). We always deal with two systems: the *source system* (SS) and the *target system* (TS). The translated corpus from a source system SS functions actually as an (important) subsystem of the target system TS. It is usual that translated literature remains something peripheral within the given system, but sometimes it happens that it occupies the central position and creatively helps model the literary center as a primary innovative force. Through translated literature new

models entering the target system, which essentially changes the repertoire, introducing new composition patterns, techniques, genres etc. But it should be stressed that a target system always selects its source according to its own needs and preferences (Even-Zohar 1990, Toury 1995).

There are three circumstances in which the translated literature is likely to occupy a central position in a given system:

- if a young, not yet fully developed literature is in question;
- if the literature has a peripheral/minority position with regard to another literature;
- when it is weak because of an internal crisis.

(We will see later that in the case of Prešeren most of these conditions were present)

Literary interference. Nevertheless, creative connections between literatures need not be carried out by directly translating individual artistic creations. One of the key polysystemic concepts is *literary interference* – which seems to have much in common with the traditional comparativistic notion of influence (although Even-Zohar criticizes comparativistic research into influence, claiming that they have not moved beyond the level of individual studies towards general laws and mechanisms; most comparativists would probably not agree with that). Interference is when a source literature becomes a source of direct or indirect borrowings in the target literature. These processes are essential for every literature and should be studied intensively and be included in explanations of national literary histories (which in practice is rarely the case). But these borrowings need not be connected only to texts, genres or models – and I think it is here that we can look for one of the differences from comparative research into influence – it is possible to model all the relations in the target polysystem on those of the source system: this also includes, for example, the organization of literary critique, institutions, publishing system, state funding of art and so on.

The fact remains that every young literature was established on the basis of interferences – and its subordination to foreign influences could have lasted for a long time – which is especially characteristic of minority literatures. Many historical examples can be indicated: the subordination of American literature to English, Czech or Slovenian to German etc. The subordination lasts longer especially when the producers are bilingual and also take an active part in the dominant polysystem. The Slovenian romantic poet Prešeren also wrote poetry in German, and actually – as Kajetan Gantar has pointed out in an excellent study – he could use more sophisticated allusions, for example, from Latin poetry in his German sonnets because of his awareness that he could address more sophisticated, intellectual readers. Actually, with Slovenian poetry he was not only creating the 'products', but he also had to create an adequate audience – which was quite a task, taking into account that he had to dispute with a strong faction advocating "rural" language and literature.

Anyway, if we observe it from this perspective, the relation dominant-subordinated becomes something "normal": it is no shame to recognize

that at least once all European literatures were in a similar situation – which is when they ‘separated’ from Latin tradition. Even-Zohar’s working hypotheses concerning the general principles of interference tell us that literatures are always in interferential relations (all of them once developed through interference from more developed: Accadian could not manage without Sumeric, Latin without Greek, the major European literatures without Latin), and that interference is usually one-way: source literature can have a strong impact on the target, and ignore the latter completely at the same time (still, two-way interference is possible). There are also some conditions necessary for the emergence of interference: first of all, certain contacts must exist. Usually, the source literature is selected with regard to its prestige, not necessary political or economic, but cultural. It can also be selected because of its dominance. But in most cases interference appears when the target literature lacks something, for example when the young creative generation feels the current norms existing in the repertoire/polysystem are inadequate. In this case they want to renew them, and if they find the things they need already developed in another polysystem, interference is very likely.

Interliterary exchange mechanisms. A high degree of responsiveness to interference can be found in so-called *dependent* polysystems – those that have been leaning on a foreign polysystem for a long time and become weak – not necessarily in terms of economy or politics, but when another system offers new, more developed functions. A weak polysystem cannot operate using exclusively its own repertoire, which is why it takes up foreign models and repertoires. This insufficiency cannot be numerically evaluated, yet on the level of the structure and repertoire it is possible to speak of a *systemic optimum*. If this optimum cannot be maintained within the framework of the domestic repertoire, the need to adopt foreign models is generated by systemic requirements: this happens through mechanisms of interference and transfer. In this way, systems *renew* their repertoires. The traces of these relations remain visible, structurally built into the polysystem’s history, also when direct relations are long past.

In his numerous studies Even-Zohar has considered especially the complicated relations between Russian and Hebrew – this for him is an example of transfer, where Hebrew is in the position of a dependent (weak) polysystem. In its young phase in the 20th century the emerging Hebrew literature leaned strongly on the Russian repertoire and adopted the latter on all structural levels. Actually, it was more than just an influence, it helped to constitute the new Hebrew culture, its literary language, and (with that) also models of reality (The levels of transfer mentioned in Even-Zohar’s studies include directly ‘importing’ avant-garde prosody and intonation models, syntax, calques – in fiction writing the use of indirect speech – dramatic dialogues; the use of ‘void pragmatic connectives’ as a marker of a ‘live’ spoken language etc.) An important point here seems to be that through taking up the elements of repertoire *more is going on that just a pure exchange of “patterns”* – because these patterns

hide more than that – within them a culture's general models and the societal values are inscribed. And after the phase of direct transfer is over, the next generations take up what was already there, and often the new repertoire elements start developing their own dynamics. In the course of time the original source becomes less and less visible, but anyway these processes remain inscribed within the structure of a polysystem.

Prešeren and renewing the Slovenian literary repertoire

These processes can be illustrated by one of the key periods in Slovenian literary history, a period in which the development of a repertoire became a central problem, which was dealt with consciously at least by one part of the participants in the system. In the early 19th century the literary system in Slovenia was evidently underdeveloped and weak, unable to perform aesthetic functions comparable to other European languages and literatures, having a little bit more tradition only in religious, utilitarian and quasi-nationalistic writing. Attempts to provide highbrow reading for the small educated population were mostly not very convincing in terms of aesthetics. Even more – a great number of intellectuals shared the opinion that it was first necessary to develop literature for simple, uneducated people, so more ambitious attempts were often condemned as being too early in regard to 'the state of the art' in Slovenia.

In this period (the 'twenties and especially the 'thirties) two men appeared with high potential and high aspirations: an unusually educated critic and essayist, Matija Čop, and an extremely talented poet France Prešeren – let it suffice to say that they, especially the latter, now represent the top canonical figures in Slovenia's history, bordering on national idols, and that 'Prešemoslovje', studies of Prešeren and his works, is actually one of the founding pillars of Slovenian literary criticism and historiography. It is hard to say anything new on this subject – I will therefore only try to present (from a new vantage point) some of the well-known facts which are interesting in the context of the interliterary exchanges that take place through literary repertoire.

'Cultivating' a poetic language. The first thing that is interesting here is the idea of *cultivating a poetic language* through the systematic introduction of new poetic forms. This project, initiated by Matija Čop's famous literary program (the program itself was obviously based on the ideas of the Schlegel brothers) includes the development of complicated poetic forms mostly from Italian and Spanish poetry. A fortunate coincidence provided an able artist on the other side of this program – able not only to perform this 'metrical tasks', but also to pour a real lyricism into these verse forms (Prešeren's poetry can still please even a contemporary reader). The list of the forms introduced and mastered by Prešeren is impressive: the sonnet (in Schlegel's theory this form was a real test of artistic and linguistic ability), the wreath of sonnets, terza rima, ottava rima, Spanish romance with assonances, oriental forms (ghazal), nordic ballad, complicated forms of Latin poetry etc.

Versification system. One of the crucial repertoire questions that the Čop-Prešeren duet faced successfully was the *question of a versification system* that would best suit the emerging Slovenian literature. Here we must admit that both had a profound sensitivity to this problem, which was not only in Slovenia burdened by the tension to 'copy' the antique quantitative system. It is interesting how Čop's attitude towards the antique verse system (which he was very familiar with, besides being a great fan of Roman poetry) was ahead of his time. His analyses and argumentation are very clear: the most appropriate versification for Slovenian literature is a syllabotonic system which is also supported – unlike in some other Slavonic countries – by the fact that the accent of the word is not fixed to first, second, last or any other syllable. The quantitative verse system simply doesn't suit! Čop's conclusion becomes even more important when we take into consideration the fact that at least a small part of the learned literary production in Slovenia was – following German examples – trying hard to imitate ancient quantity and its complicated versification rules. Although Prešeren had also written some poetry in the "ancient" way, the general decision for syllabotonic versification system was made – and this gave Slovenian literature a chance to develop according to the natural conditions of its language: using the various rhythmical patterns of exchanging accented and non-accented syllables, combined with rhymes, as its primary expressive means. In this way this unstable systemic feature was stabilized – which was of extreme developmental importance.

Opening new spaces. Prešeren had really adopted many models (of his creative influences one could mention Petrarca, Dante, Ariosto, Tasso; Vergil, Ovidius, Horatius; Voltaire, Gleim, Uhland, Burger, Byron, Kollar, Mickiewicz and many others) – and here it is not crucial at all whether he adopted them directly or indirectly – the point is that these models became an important part of the Slovenian literary repertoire and began to live their own life (for example: the sonnet has been a very popular vehicle for poetic expression since then). Even more: Prešeren adopted these models so naturally, as if they were 'ours'. And this is how the worlds of the medieval troubadours, the Roman empire, medieval and renaissance Italy or Prešeren's contemporaries, European romantic writers, became the 'common property' of our culture and literature – we actually feel them to be Slovenian ways of experiencing life! It is possible to say that a by-product of Prešeren's enterprise – especially in regard to the later significance of his works for the development of the literary system – was also *anchoring* the connected 'semiotic spaces' of other cultures in the Slovenian cultural sphere.

There are also some other 'repertoire changes' provoked by Prešeren – I would like to mention his introduction of a new, 'bohemian' type of romantic poet into Slovenia's social life with his introduction of 'scandal' through poetry, with his interesting erotic life, his love for excessive drinking, rumors about pornographic ditties he is said to have written and so on. We can also mention the heavy conflict with the censorship system

and the development of means for fighting against it: the censorship pressure lay heavily on this generation – they had to consider the possibility of their products being banned for ethical or political reasons at any time. In this situation they activated a network of supporters, intellectuals from other Slavic countries, which helped in this uneven cultural confrontation of concepts.

Conclusion

Prešeren's example shows how repertoire development requirements are one of the crucial generators for changes and exchanges in literary poly-systems. National(istic) literary historiographies resist and try to conceal these processes by overemphasizing the originality of national authors and their products, yet history shows clearly that no literary system could do without borrowing repertoire elements from other systems at least in one phase. In this way the historical interconnectedness – or transgressiveness – of literary discourse (which has been acknowledged by literary comparatists at least since thematological discoveries of 'travels' of fairy motifs in Euro-Asian) comes to the fore.

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