Itamar Even-Zohar’s Polysystem Studies: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Culture Research

ORIGINS AND BACKGROUNDs

Systemic or functional(ist) research developed within literary studies before the 1970s. Nevertheless, for many scholars the beginning of a functional approach to literature coincides with Itamar Even-Zohar’s Polysystem theory. At that very moment, the use of literary theories as such was still very much at stake, and the conflict between theory and history was discussed as the main problem in the field. Although there was an inflation of theories, often developed on a linguistic base, most theoretical models focused on texts rather than on the phenomenon of literature as such. This was the case at least in Western Europe and in many other countries linked with Western European research. An interesting illustration of this so-called new paradigm was the symposium on "Literature and Linguistics" in 1972. In the search for more basic and satisfying models than those dominating the conference, the then yet unknown Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser argued for the historical approach in the study of literature (see Adriaens). During this early period and for many years to come, continental European trends in literary scholarship were, generally speaking, reduced to Tzvetan Todorov’s Theory of Literature and to René Wellek’s and Roman Jakobson’s works. Contrary to this reductive and historical view, Even-Zohar argued for a holistic and programmatic approach. He claimed that his own concepts go back to the Russian Formalists, especially to some of Tynjanov’s and Jakobson’s texts, and that they are incompatible with any static or a-historical approach, among others with the (post)-Saussurean linguistic view on "systems." Moreover, he systematically employed insights of modern sociolinguistics (Weinreich; Labov) and semiotics (Lotman; Bakthin), he borrowed some empirical tendencies from behaviorism, and he located his theories in the field of semiotics and culture research rather than limiting his scope to literary studies. Thus, Even-Zohar’s notion of a "Historical Poetics" (1978) was meant to be a new challenge for scholars dealing with literature in general, rather than for literary scholars only.

It has been shown later how much Even-Zohar’s concepts are indeed...
indebted to particular (East-)European traditions (see Segal). Other specific elements from his own personal and institutional background played an important role as well. Briefly put, before launching his Polysystem theory, Even-Zohar completed his PhD with a dissertation on literary translation (1971) and thus the question of languages and translation became a starting point of the Polysystem framework. Even-Zohar used the heterogeneity of language and translation as one of the keystones in the exploration of cultural dynamics, while opposing language (considered as institution, although he seldom used the term at that time) to other institutions such as literature, nation, religion, or social order. A considerable part of Even-Zohar’s framework and thinking is displayed in a privileged way in his 1976 text on “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem.” His attention to and interest in the multicultural and multilingual complexities of any society explain why from the beginning on the notion of the polysystem has been thought of as a set of hypotheses rather than as a closed or finalized theory and why such a set of hypotheses is proposed as the basis for a broad common enterprise, that of descriptive research in a global context.

However, a theoretical framework stands or falls by its relevance in various cultural frameworks. A theory is not an a-cultural phenomenon but rather it is itself a part of historical dynamics or, as the German romanticists would have said: "sie ist (nur) im Werden." As a final remark about the origins of the Polysystem theory I would like to point out that the first official and published application of the Polysystem theory’s (hypo)theses to literature have not been provided by Even-Zohar himself, but by one of his disciples, Gideon Toury, in 1974. At the same time, many further developments in the Polysystem theory are the result of other partly organized and partly spontaneous collective research projects.

THE PROGRAM

An important difficulty that hampers the development of collective programmatic research is the institutional component and this has been the case with the main source of the Polysystem theory, Russian Formalism. In addition, Even-Zohar’s often ambiguous position does not facilitate the dissemination of new ideas either. Many of the explicit formulations of the Polysystem theory as well as Even-Zohar’s personal as well as institutional and international activities have always shifted between literature and other semiotic sign systems. During a period of ten years he has been directly connected to international literary programs, which, consequently, recognized him as a theoretician of literature. However, Even-Zohar was always looking for underlying cultural patterns on the one hand, while questioning the possibility to make extrapolations on the basis of one particular discipline on the other, whether he was dealing with language, verbal communication, literature, or cultural patterns. He is looking for “universals” and “laws” of (inter)cultural behavior and communication without claiming their relevance a priori.

In the case of literary studies the innovative aspects of the Polysystem theory are obvious. It explicitly states that the study of and research in literature should be recognized as radically different from literary and/or critical activities. What writers, critics — as well as many academics — have in mind is partly the promotion of literature but they should not confuse these activities with research. Further, rather than accumulating data (writers, texts, names, "national literatures"), Even-Zohar wants to observe, to describe, and to analyze literary manifestations in order to reveal their underlying principles (norms, models, their primary/secondary nature, their central/peripheral position, etc.). Instead of accepting essentialist and normative values, he insists on the description of the functions assigned to literature within given traditions and to specific techniques, devices, or forms. He does not accept that "a literature" coincides with a nation or a language, although he does recognize the relevance of local, national, and international patterns as well as "mega-polysystemic" properties. He examines to what extent authors, readers, distribution channels, texts and microscopic textual features (textemes) are submitted to larger principles, and how macroscopic frameworks shape the so-called nature of literature(s). Based on many aspects of the Formalist School and long before many other theoreticians of literature, Even-Zohar stresses the necessity to extend the concept of literature and culture far beyond canonized phenomena, and he assumes that the very opposition between central and peripheral (or a-systemic), primary and secondary forces represents the motoric force of literature and culture. Thus it comes that one of the critiques by younger colleagues on the communication-oriented (rather than action-or society-oriented) features of his work may be wrong, in my opinion. Not texts or messages are at stake, probably not only sign systems, but culture, while culture may be reflected in a privileged way in signs.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

There are no perfect theories. In the case of the Polysystem theory this fact was an explicit premise of theorizing as such, although on this point an evolution in Even-Zohar’s position can be observed. An additional difficulty is that most discussions dealing with the Polysystem theory have their own implicit or explicit assumptions, and these do not necessarily coincide. This tends to make the discussions very ambiguous in some cases. Taking one of the basic postulates of the Polysystem theory as a point of departure, namely that research is accorded a priority, the real Auseinanderersetzung with the Polysystem theory must take place in the realm of historical-descriptive research. The development of descriptive research is an inevitable feature from the theoretical outset when the very use of theory for its own sake is questioned. There is still a widespread tradition in the humanities that avoids this exchange
between descriptive and theoretical research. In my view, such a position reveals that mere theoretical discussions are, after all, the result of \textit{a priori} positions and distinctions. It is true, however, that the development of descriptive literary research in the polysystemic tradition is generally speaking more limited than in translation studies. Within translation studies a rich methodological discussion, founded on polysystemic principles, has taken place in the last two decades (see, for a state of the art, Lambert 1995). In order to test what the relevance of the Polysystem theory in general or of some of its particular hypotheses may be we ought to do research rather than talk about it. Similar statements may be formulated about other theoretical models, especially if they claim to have no strictly theoretical goals in themselves. Such considerations also make clear that neither research nor theory nor a combination of both are sufficient in order to work out new programmatic models of research. As has often been stressed in translation studies — especially in the descriptive branch of translation studies (Lambert 1995; Toury 1980, 1995) — a methodological bridge is needed in order to connect theories and hypotheses with specific and particular historical and cultural situations. This is whatToury calls the \textit{triptite model} (1980, 19-34). Without such a bridge, research tends to be trapped by the traditional theory and application dilemma that often leads to a mechanical approach.

However, the priority of research over theory does not imply that no basic theoretical questions deserve to be raised from the beginning. Some of the objections formulated may not be specific to the Polysystem approach at all, some may seem to be more relevant than others, but they are part of the history of this approach to literature and culture. Let us start with a negative observation: very few discussions among specialists of literature really insist on the \textit{poly}-aspect of the Polysystem theory. In turn, this may compromise the traditional definition of literature resulting in a static state, especially in its relationship with nation(s) and/or language(s). From this point of view, systemic-functional approaches to literature have hardly been discussed (see Lambert 1989) although Siegfried J. Schmidt’s considerations on the role of communication channels and their institutional power may be an innovation (see Lambert 1996). Last but not least, recent developments in the functional study of institutions, especially in the Bourdieu—tradition — now more or less integrated also by Even-Zohar and Sheffy — may offer us an idea of the amount of questions and insights that literary scholars still need to take into consideration (see Beekman; Fokkema; Lumsden and Patke; Moisan 19-50).

It has been argued that the polysystemic view on culture proposes a highly metaphorical and organismic world view (as in the best of Darwinist traditions). Another problem is the closedness or openness of the various systems as well as their interrelatedness or autonomy. Does "the" system exist as such, or is it simply an empirical tool that allows for a more operational and relevant description of cultural data? How empirical and how open to speculative discussion is the Polysystem approach, in theory or in practice? When it is noticed that it would be difficult to imagine a culture without hierarchies and order, one wonders whether this would imply that all cultural data are submitted to hierarchies. In fact, the idea of disorder and chaos is not disregarded in the Polysystem framework, but at certain moments the notion of hierarchy and hierarchies is more stressed than that of chaos, e.g., in the search for universals and laws. As the problematics of chaos theory is much debated in the hard sciences, their relevance in the Polysystem context probably means that the question of these are not superficial matters but key issues.

**DISSEMINATION AND IMPACT**

Owing to its particular cultural and institutional origins, the Polysystem theory has spread out in the research landscape of literature and culture through a limited number of channels and sub-disciplines. It has been an obvious disadvantage for the establishment of the Polysystem theory to deal with such large research objects as culture, sign systems, etc., where so many disciplines meet. The explanatory power of new approaches in any discipline is also a matter of institutional strength and it is clear that publications and research carried out on such a basis have been obliged to respect certain channels. Besides many other groups (for a recent description see Segers 190-92), Leuven University has played a strong role in the discussion, dissemination, and development of the Polysystem approach, although not always in an explicit and organized way. Being open-minded towards many approaches and models, our Leuven colleagues have always tended to behave either in a selective or an eclectic way, often opposing each other. As has been demonstrated elsewhere, the channels of the International Comparative Literature Association / Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée and some particular organizational structures in translation studies such as the Low Countries Group, the journal \textit{Target}, the CE(T)RA Summer School for Literary and Cultural Communication at Leuven, etc., have also played a substantial role in the dissemination of this particular approach. In addition, the bibliographies of (poly)systemic studies (Even-Zohar 1990; Lambert 1995; Töstys 1994, 1995) all testify to the fact that the Polysystem heritage is already rich as well as disseminated if not altogether well coordinated. Apart from the many translations of works by scholars working with (poly)systemic approaches in European languages, the approach has now begun to penetrate Chinese scholarship, for instance (see Töstys 1996, 1997).

Independently from explicit discussions of the state of the art, it is worthwhile to examine to what extent the Polysystem approach has modified literary research. An important achievement is certainly the revision of the position of translations and translated literature in the dynamics of literature (see Lambert 1995). Besides the explicit discussion of basic concepts such as
“import,” “international literary relations,” “literary evolution,” “genres,” “popular vs. canonized genres,” certain literatures and literary cultures have been investigated on polysystemic grounds. For instance, some of the “non-European” literary traditions — such as those in Canada, South-Africa, the Caribbean — have been investigated in-depth with the polysystemic framework. More traditional West European literary cultures have been also re-examined with the aid of Even-Zohar’s suggestions, e.g., Belgium in its relationship with its neighbors and with internationalization, postmodernism, etc. One of the most obvious consequences of the redefinition between literature and territorial principles is the redefinition of literature in South-Africa, in Canada, in Belgium, in France, etc.

THE POLYSYSTEM THEORY AND OTHER FUNCTIONAL-SYSTEMIC APPROACHES

It is of note that the Leuven conference on "Systems and Fields" is not the first Leuven conference dealing with the notion of (poly)system. In fact, the 1995 conference marked the twenty-year anniversary of the first Leuven conference where the Polysystem approach was inaugurated (see Holmes, Lambert and Van den Broeck). From my discussion above it is obvious that the impact of Even-Zohar and his work is sufficiently acknowledged and I would like to add only that this is also obvious from such widely used textbooks as Edwin Gentzler’s *Contemporary Translation Theories* (see 105-43). It would be very disappointing, however, to reduce the discussion to the relevance of one particular systemic tradition against another, instead of observing and testing their compatibility and their complementarity. It has become manifest on many occasions how static our views on literary theory tend to be. Literary scholars are often looking for one particular theoretical model which they simply want to apply. This explains why they want to compare various models with and against each other. Such an attitude may lead into more or less political and/or personal quarrels in either or terms. I am convinced that such attitudes are incompatible with the Polysystem approach to the extent that they are incompatible with real research. The very aim of our papers is to give an opportunity to theoreticians and scholars to establish how they can work together, and how to use particular hypotheses in order to achieve research goals. If this is one of the results of the Polysystem approach, matters look excellent indeed.

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**Works Cited**


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Factors and Dependencies in Culture: A Revised Outline for Polysystem Culture Research

I. RELATIONAL THINKING AND THE MAKING OF THE OBJECT

System, or better: relational thinking has provided the sciences of man with versatile tools to economize in the analysis of socio-semiotic phenomena. This approach has allowed the significant reduction of the number of parameters assumed to work in any given context, thus making it possible to get rid of huge nomenclatures and intricate classifications. Instead, a relatively small set of relations could be hypothesized to explain a large and complex array of phenomena. This explana-tory power of relational thinking has been used with some success in various domains of the socio-semiotic disciplines.

The power of relational thinking does not stop, however, at the level of analyzing "known" phenomena, which is basically explanatory. It lies also, and perhaps even more forcefully, in the ability to surmise unrecognized, yet unknown, objects, thus transforming it into a tool of discovery.

By hypothesizing a relation as an explanation for an object (an entity, a process, etc.), relational thinking can arrive at assuming the "existence" of some phenomena which have not been recognized before. The procedures of arriving at such conclusions are naturally less adequate than in disciplines with the capacity to calculate (e.g., astrophysics or quantum mechanics). Nevertheless, the very pioneers of modern relational thinking have fully used this avenue when they suggested phonology to replace the older classification of sounds. Through hypothesizing relations between the sounds, a new entity emerged, the phoneme. The series of sounds identified for so many centuries by generations of grammarians was thus transformed into something unknown, into a set of opposition-dependent sounds which for quite some time were considered (and may be considered that way even today) as pure constructs, i.e., entities that cannot be directly perceived. Notwithstanding, one more step was taken in the 1920s by Sapir who argued that a phoneme is not only an explanatory construct but the actual cognitive sound unit, rather than the sound per se. In this way, what was "actual" and what was an accidental sound changed positions. The traditional sound has become accidental, while the phoneme was analyzed as the