Slauerhoff and "Po Tsju I": Three Paradigms for the Study of Influence

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Twenty years ago students of literature in Europe were still taught to somehow assemble "bricks" of knowledge for later inclusion into some definitive "edifice" that would be the mainstay of literary scholarship for years, if not centuries to come. Gradually, though, it became clear that the groundplan, the basic design for this edifice did not really exist: as the bricks piled up, the pyramid's construction kept being deferred indefinitely.

Structuralism did away with all that of course. Yet it brought in its wake such a proliferation of literary theories that the field, at this moment, does exhibit various basic designs (indeed, hardly a month passes without a new one being added) but this time the bricks appear to be lacking.

My present paper is symptomatic of the long overdue disenchantment with a certain kind of theorizing, which is now increasingly making itself felt in Europe. I see four reasons for this state of affairs:

1. Everybody writes theories, these days, which leads to a kind of inflation and subsequent weariness – possibly even inflated weariness.

2. Most of those who write theories, these days, have little or no idea of what they are doing, or are supposed to be doing. They have little or no knowledge of metatheory (or philosophy of science) and so they mainly display the word "theory" conspicuously in the titles of their contributions and then proceed to offer collocations of previous theories, with little or nothing new added, until the audience begins to wonder how many "statuses" your ordinary "quaestio" can bear. The answer to which is, of course, intricately bound up with the question how many Ph. D. theses the literature "business" itself will bear. This kind of theorizing is, moreover,

abetted by its readership, which also doesn't want to know too much about theory, preferring new labels for old ways of thinking instead.

3. Most theories of the kind I am discussing here are elaborated on a very narrow basis. Starting from this basis, they then proceed to make unwarranted generalizations, claiming as their justification a flawed understanding of Popperian falsificationism. As a result obviously falsifiable statements are passed off with great aplomb as "bold theories." Moreover, this type of theory immunizes itself from attack by a difficult, mystifying style and by a kind of "semantic terrorism" which attempts to smother the reader under an avalanche of jargon. These theories also prosper for a short while because formal arguments as such have no power. Arguments not supported by what is called "attitude," a complex of sociocultural factors which actually resist argument on non-rational grounds, and which is rather slow to change, hardly stand a chance in so-called scientific discussions.

4. Finally, most theories of this kind are essentially programmatic: they sketch an enormous research programme and then duly lament that it cannot be implemented, except perhaps by interdisciplinary teamwork, probably the most fashionable of contemporary immunization strategies. Furthermore, theoreticians responsible for this kind of theory often make no attempt to implement the research programmes they have sketched. Instead, they keep turning out refined versions of both programme and lament.

What follows is not a theory, but the next step: a case study to serve as a touchstone for a theory. The theoretical background for the case study is very briefly supplied in this paper, and references are added.

If I had written this paper some twenty years (or more) ago, I would no doubt have contrasted the "Po Tsju I" Slauerhoff, a Dutch writer who lived from 1898 to 1936, invents in four novellas and three poems with the "real" Po Chü-yi (白居易) as we "know" him from histories of and critical works on Chinese literature. The conclusion of my paper, as indeed of all such papers, would have been as predictable as it is irrelevant: I would have said, in a politely condescending tone, that Slauerhoff had got it all wrong, or most of it at any rate, but then what can you expect of a poet?

This type of caricature has been seriously written and taken seriously as a way of studying "influence" within the framework of comparative literary studies over the last thirty years at least. Why, then, do I contend that it is irrelevant? Quite simply because it mixes what I would like to call

the literary and the metaliterary level. Slauerhoff has not the slightest intention of presenting the "real" Po Chü-yi to his readers; on the contrary: he wants to use the name of the Chinese poet as a sort of weapon or, in practice, more as a sort of alibi in his own creative work. To say that the alibi does not correspond to the "real" poet is merely to state the obvious and, in so doing, to answer a totally unproductive question – unproductive because the answer doesn't teach us anything we couldn't guess before the question was asked. And yet this type of question has been asked and answered in the way sketched above quite a number of times in the not too recent past. Is it any wonder, then, that the study of "influences" is rather unproductive at the present moment?

If I were writing now, and if I had my own "poetic concept" of what literature is or should be (if, in other words, I were either a Marxist, or a Structuralist, or a Poststructuralist, or a Neo-Metaphysicalist), I would presumably write a paper in which I would carefully analyse Slauerhoff's poetic concept which is, as we shall see, anything but original and heavily tributary to the Romantic poetic concept, and then proceed to criticise it. I would, therefore, point out how – all things considered – "transient" a poetic concept like that of Romanticism has been. I would further point out that Slauerhoff did not see alternatives available to him at the time – I would, in short, sit in judgment on a transitory or, if you prefer "historical" poetic concept on the basis of – what? A poetic concept that has progressed rather a lot compared to the one Slauerhoff adopted and one which I, at this moment in time, project for myself as more or less absolute, precisely when I am criticising one of its predecessors for being "relative." I would, to sum up, criticise a poetic concept that does no longer play a dominant part in the metaliterary discourse of the day, while denying the rather eminently conceivable possibility that the poetic concept on the basis of which I criticise the other one might be just as short-lived, or even, as is increasingly likely, shorter lived.

Here again, what I would come up with could hardly be called "productive" in the framework of the study of influence as part of the larger study of comparative literature. And yet I have written a paper. My approach differs from the other two – admittedly – caricatured above in that it does not confuse the literary and the metaliterary level, and in that it is not interested in poetic concepts as such, or in trying to establish the "superiority" or "inferiority" of one poetic concept when compared to another,

but in a historical poetics of literature, against the background of which the study of influence might become productive again. Therefore the question I ask is not "did Slauerhoff get his 'Po Tsju I' right?" or "did Slauerhoff make use of the 'right' poetic concept?". I ask rather: "What is the function of contacts between two literatures" or, in a slightly different formulation, "Why does a writer make use of another writer?"

To answer that question I shall stay within the framework of the polysystem theory (Even Zohar, Lefevere), which develops certain aspects of the thinking of Russian Formalism on the mechanisms of evolution in literature. This thinking, characteristic of the second phase of Russian Formalism, appears to be much more important as an "impulse" or a "legacy" than the writings of the early phase, which concerned themselves mainly with the analysis of individual works. In the second phase, moreover, the Formalists took great pains to make clear the essential relationship that exists between literature and society, a fact not always taken into account by those who are still prepared to dismiss the Formalists as "mere formalists," which they certainly were not, or no longer, in the second phase of their evolution.

The polysystem theory is, to make this clear at the outset, not interested in what literature *is*, nor in what "messages" it has to offer, but in how it *works*, precisely because this is the kind of pursuit that seems to legitimise the existence of literary scholars. The polysystem theory aims to make statements about literature which are scientific, i.e. intersubjectively testable – as far as possible – in nature. Yet at the same time those engaged in elaborating the theory would not for a moment equate "non scientific" with "nonsensical," since they are well aware that most of the day to day conduct of human life is by no means scientific in nature, but not therefore nonsensical. If somebody decides, e.g., to model his or her life around a statement like "I love you" made by another person, he or she is definitely not acting in a scientific manner, because there is no way in which that statement can be made intersubjectively testable. Yet he or she is by no means engaging in nonsensical activity, but rather in one of the great adventures of mankind.

The aim of these scientific statements about literature (i.e. metaliterary statements) is to show the reader that a given work of literature is put together against the background of a given culture and, more specifically, against an "inventory of literary procedures," such as genre, symbol, motif

and many more. The literary scholar attempts to make the connection between the procedures used in a given work of literature (in this case Slauerhoff's) and the inventory from which these procedures have been taken (in this case a rather eclectically put together combination of certain features from the Dutch inventory of literary procedures and a number of features selected from the biography of "Po Tsju I" and the cultural milieu in which he lived).

In other words, the literary scholar can show the reader what kind of meaning is attached to the different procedures an author uses in a given literary work at a given time: he or she helps the reader realize the "signal value" of certain procedures at a given point in time. In doing so, he or she assists the reader with his or her "concretisation" of the literary work. The "inventory of procedures" to which individual procedures are related in order to establish their signal value, assumes the dimensions of a "historical poetics" of literature, in which procedures are described, not evaluated, and in which their meaning is given. Obviously, this inventory, or historical poetics, should not exclude any literature's procedures. On the basis of the tension between the procedures as used in a given work, and the procedures described in the inventory, the literary scholar can show the reader the parameters between which a concretisation of the work is possible within the framework of its time and culture. This is all the literary scholar can or should do. He or she should not attempt to decree what kind of concretisation the individual reader should make, since the individual reader is perfectly entitled to reject a reading arrived at on the basis of the inventory of procedures. In other words, the literary scholar can show the reader how all kinds of signals used in a given work of literature collaborate to establish a meaning on the basis of historical poetics. He or she should not go on to dictate what kind of value the reader should attach to that meaning. Showing how meaning originates in a given work of literature by relating it to the wider framework of historical poetics is a task that can be accomplished in an intersubjectively testable, scientific manner, by which is meant that two or more people who are competent in the field can argue about the meaning attributed to a given procedure. Establishing, or investigating what kind of value a reader should, or does attach to a given meaning cannot be done on the basis of intersubjective testability, and therefore falls outside the domain of the literary scholar. Which, again, is not to say that the attribution of value to meaning by readers is not important, or even nonsensical. On the

contrary, it may turn out to be of the utmost importance in the reader's life. Which is precisely why the literary scholar should have both the humility and the good sense to leave the reader alone with his or her concretisation. In short, the polysystem theory considers the province of a science of literature to be the elaboration of a historical poetics (as opposed to a poetics based upon transitory poetic concepts) and the establishment, on the basis of the tension between a given work and that historical poetics, of the meaning of a work within the framework of historical poetics. The polysystem theory is not interested in criticism, mainly because it respects the maturity and emotional and intellectual ability of the reader to make his or her own interpretation of a given literary work.

The polysystem theory offers the following hypothesis as a framework for the evolution of literary procedures. Inside each of the literary polysystems (which sometimes, as in the case of Chinese, correspond with a linguistic area, but sometimes, as in the case of European and Islamic literature, do not) a struggle goes on between a canonized system (what is accepted as valid, or even great literature by the consensus of the day) and a non-canonized system (what is not), which tries to oust the canonized system from the centre of the polysystem and to take its place – a generalization for which countless examples may be found in the evolution of Chinese literature over the last sixty years.

In trying to hold their positions, or dislodge their rivals, both the canonized and the non-canonized systems often have recourse to other, "alien," or even "exotic" literary polysystems. In other words, procedures from the inventory of a certain polysystem are "transplanted" into another one, where they become "weapons" in the struggle for the canonized position. Or, in terms of the question posed in this paper: writers often make use of other writers because other writers, who belong to different polysystems, can be used to give prestige to innovations within the native polysystem, in which the "challenger" often has no prestigious works at his or her disposal to pit against the canonized system. Or, as in the present case, to shore up a canonized system which has not produced much of value over a number of years or decades. The problem of "influence" in literary studies can, therefore, be reformulated as the problem of the "migration of literary procedures" within the framework of the theory of the polysystem.

Most case studies written within that framework have – no doubt for psychological reasons – tended to analyze what happens when the foreign

literature is used as a way of forcing a "breakthrough" in the native literature. The present paper wants to be a case study of what happens when an author makes use of a figure from another literature in an essentially "conservative" way. My contention is that, in order to state an essentially epigonal poetic concept – i. e. a poetic concept which has not produced prestigious works over a given period of time – a given writer often makes use of the trappings of a foreign literature, because they give him or her a lot more "manoeuvering space." In particular, they often allow him or her to switch genres in his or her native literature.

Slauerhoff's poetic concept is by no means original, as I pointed out before: "although one may easily discern, here and there, a feature borrowed from the Sturm and Drang of the late eighteenth century, by way of Romanticism, Symbolism and Vitalism, Slauerhoff reasonably contented himself with following (and extending) the track beaten by the 'Tachtigers' in Holland" (Fessard, 330). Who these enigmatic "Tachtigers," i.e. the poets who began to publish in the eighties of the previous century all were is not a question profitably answered within the confines of this paper. Suffice it to say that they were, or rather, that their poetic concept was and continued to be the "canonized" one: it was taught at schools and in universities, where quite a few of them occupied chairs of (Dutch) literature, long after prestigious works based on that concept had ceased to be written. To (re) state this poetic concept in an essay, the genre available for this kind of thing in the native polysystem, would have been a rather unproductive literary act. So Slauerhoff uses the literary procedures of both the persona of "Po Tsju I" and the genre of a "Chinese novella" to try to express the basically epigonal in a nonepigonal way.

In other words, the foreign Chinese writer is, to all extents and purposes, used as an alibi. Because he is at the same time foreign and semi-naturalized, he is allowed to sit on the fence with decency and serenity. He obeys the laws of the native polysystem and at the same time he disobeys them. He occupies an essentially ambiguous position, which allows the native writer, Slauerhoff, much more leeway than he would otherwise have had to get away with many more things than he could otherwise have done. Yet in this game, as in all others, there are certain rules to be followed. I shall spell them out at the end of this paper, but first I would like to take a closer look at the poetic concept that can be reconstructed from Slauerhoff's "Po Tsju I" writings. What emerges is little more than a con-

catenation of Romantic clichés, as adapted by the "Tachtigers":

Poetry as spontaneous composition: "Po Tsju I was comforted and carried away by a poem that originated as if on its own: the characters fell on the page like snowflakes and Summer blossoms, it seemed to unite all things in itself, just as some crystals unite all the structures creation consists of: joy in life, love and death" (Slauerhoff, 1975, 187). Notice the epigonal nature of what is said and the "exotic" way in which it is said.

Poetry brings "wholeness," on condition that it has "the accent of disastrous honesty" (Slauerhoff, 1975, 193) and that some lines are "like a shudder of bare feeling" (1975, 194). It has the kind of unity that transcends what the Romantics used to refer to as the "ironic" state of man: his fragmented, torn nature, sometimes "great and powerful and of stronger stature than anybody" else, and sometimes "a strange, ageing man who was losing his powers" (1975, 199). The poet floats "from one thought to another, and (his) poems are more often criticised as pinnacles of levity and inconsistency than as examples of virtue and patriotism" (1975, 207).

The poet is condemned to write: "neither you nor I are strong or weak. We are what the gods made us. We obey" (1975, 184), even though he knows that poetry is a flower whose "smell is poisoned and which brings nothing but misery" (1975, 173).

Beauty is a dangerous thing, because it is "subject to decay and causes catastrophes" (1975, 183). A life passed in its service alone becomes inhuman ("Yuan Sjen" [元稹] is introduced as the figure who does not devote his whole life to poetry, but is able to find some kind of equilibrium between his public and his private self). In one of the novellas "Po Tsju I" and the woman he loves come to the conclusion that

> they would have done better to follow their love, as other mortals do, who live happily and not too long and die in peace. They had followed what they considered most worthy: Li Sao to be admired by everybody and to give joy to all merely by her elegance and beauty; Po Tsju I his desire to live too soon in a perfectly pure atmosphere, which no man can demand for himself. Blessed with their gifts, they came to grief by them and regretted for ever that they had neglected normal earthly love (1975, 210).

The poet is more than an individual: he is a type of man and he is reborn time and again, as in the poem "Samenval" (Collocation), in which

Slauerhoff quite literally becomes "Po Tsju I":

> My name was not Slauerhoff, but Po Tsju I
>
> I remember well why I wanted to drown,
> I had nothing left, no cloak, no wine
> No money and no song to sing
>
> I sank and abandoned myself to joy
> But soon regrets came into my soul
> I wanted to rejoin life on earth
>
> All is the same: a weak light only
> Burned like a pale face among green leaves.
> Do I write about life or does the poem live,
> Was then now or is now then? (1940, 198-9)

And now, finally, for the rules: the writer who wants to use a foreign literature, or a figure from it as an alibi must preserve the ambiguous status the foreign work enjoys in his own polysystem. He or she does this usually by a judicious balancing of both ironising the foreign literature (to show that it is not really to be taken "seriously" and hence that it does not really represent a "threat" to any of the competing systems) and reinforcement of those features in it that seem "well known" to the native audience: the clichés of setting and theme.

We find ironising of theme in the treatment of one of the well-known anecdotes connected with Po Chü-yi:

> [Po Tsju I] reread [his poem,] saw that it could not be stated more simply, walked gaily up to an old peasant woman who was gathering leaves and recited his poem to her. She replied: "It isn't wheat growing on this here piece of land, but barley. Why should you write songs about it anyway? And you are lying when you say that you are at court. Would you be tramping about on muddy roads in a worn coat if you could lie on silk cushions in splendid robes? If you had been an honest man I would have given you five cash for your song, but now I won't."
> Po, sad because his poem wasn't simple enough, but glad that his disguise had served him so well, wanted to give the woman a tael. But now she thought she was in the presence of a demon, threw the coin away and whispered a prayer. Po Tsju I walked on (1975, 168-9).

In another novella "Po Tsju I," who has written an immortal poem the night before, "came to the office much too late that morning and the first thing he got for his immortal work was a threat of dismissal" (1975, 180). In yet another novella the woman "Po Tsju I" falls in love with but cannot keep, is actually called "Li Sao," which serves to explain, of course, with a wink and a nod to those in the know why Po Chü-yi wrote one of his most famous poems. Only Slauerhoff has got the wrong "Song of Everlasting Sorrow" and the wink is at his own expense. There is also a wink and a nod for those who do not know anything about Chinese literature at all, when "Po Tsju I," in a jibe at Dutch philistinism, mentions a country in the West "where they say that poetry corrupts youth" (1975, 173).

The cliché is just as much in evidence: "Po Tsju I" tries to drown his sorrows in wine in a tavern; he visits the obligatory brothel; both "Yuan Sjen" and "Po Tsju I" have to take their imperial examinations; "Po Tsju I" has no children, hence "no incense would be burnt before tablets inscribed with his name, no prayers of remembrance would be said" (1975, 178). The emperor wants to flee the court, mix incognito with his subjects, or even become a monk, and the girl "Yuan Sjen" falls in love with "has many talents: embroidery and playing the lute, painting flowers and birds. She plays the harp to perfection" (1975, 177). These and other clichés must serve to give the setting a certain degree of "authenticity." What matters is that this "authenticity" is "exotic" enough to allow Slauerhoff to disguise the epigonal nature of the statements he makes about his poetic concept, and of that poetic concept itself. The over-all cliché of "oriental wisdom" allows him to give an oracular ring to what have almost become platitudes.

I have tried to show how the polysystem theory can make sense of the study of literary influence in a way that is productive for the understanding of the work of the writer who instigates literary contacts. I have also done this in an intersubjectively testable manner: it is true that my reading of the part of Slauerhoff's work under discussion has been heavily "theory-oriented." Yet it is remarkably free (for such is the "state of the art" at present) of critical jargon, or indeed of jargon of any kind. Moreover, if somebody else were to offer a different reading of the texts I have commented upon – a "psychoanalytic" reading, say, or an "existential" one (it is difficult to imagine a Marxist reading in this case, but nothing is safe from critical ingenuity), I could enter into a discussion with him or her without having to give up my own theoretical framework, which either

the "psychoanalytic" or the "existentialist" critic would have to do. Or, at the very least, they would have to agree to put their respective frameworks between brackets for the time being if they wish to enter into a productive dialogue. There are no texts that are "not, or less" suited to a polysystemic approach, precisely because the polysystem theory works towards an historical poetics, not poetic concepts ultimately based on ideologies quite extraneous to literary scholarship.

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