Literature in South Africa: suggestions for systemic research

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Summary

At present literary evolution and the characteristics of literary systems are generally being investigated in an outdated fashion, as the result of the simplification of complex relationships. It is proposed that a systems approach be used in the study of the structures of, and relationships between, literatures and especially that norms and models be identified. Literature in South Africa is seen as a test case for a truly comparative approach. Autonomous, peripheral and complex systems are described, and it is suggested that a literary situation such as that in South Africa be approached in this way.

Opsomming

Navorsing wat tans oor literêre ontwikkeling en die kenmerke van literêre sisteme onderneem word, geskied oor die algemeen op 'n verouderde wyse, as gevolg en die manier waarop komplekse verhoudings vereenvoudig word. 'n Sisteembenadering word voorgestel by die studie van die strukture en verhoudings tussen letterkundes. Aandag word veral gegee aan die identifikasie van norme en modelle. Die letterkunde in Suid-Afrika word gesien as 'n toetssaak vir 'n werklik vergelykende benadering. Selfstandige, periferale en komplekse sisteme word beskryf en daar word voorgestel dat 'n literêre situasie, soos die letterkunde in Suid-Afrika, op hierdie wyse benader word.

1. A systematic study of literary evolution

This article has to be situated within research projects which try to reconsider radically the concept of national literatures.[1] The way most scholars are presently dealing with literary evolution and with the characteristics of literature (or literary systems) in different languages and cultures seems to be outdated, because it oversimplifies complex relationships. Their method is based upon ideological presuppositions according to which literature in a given situation is reduced to literature in one given language (not to mention oral/written literary phenomena), and to canonized authors, works, genres and countries, if not also to certain styles and themes. The non-canonized literary phenomena and general relationships with other literary systems (contemporary or from the past) as well as with other artistic systems, are taken into account only in exceptional situations, and not as an essential part of the question. Traditional literary scholarship also tends to deal with (national) literature in terms of general characteristics, and not in terms of relationships.

This reductionism prohibits us from recognizing the main structures of literary systems and the main structures in their evolution. While adhering to the old schemes, one is never able to explain how certain literatures can be absorbed by surrounding literatures (as was the case in XVIIth century French literature, when the canonization via classical literature implied the destruction of the previous poly-central system), or how certain literatures

nearly disappear under the influence of literary import (in colonized countries, for instance), or under the influence of literary traditions from the past (for example French classical literature in the beginning of the XIXth century).

Other reductions, less specific to the description of literary evolution or national literatures, but which are rather characteristics of literary studies in general, can be observed. National literatures are often studied in terms of authors or works. When more synthetic categories are used, such as genres, poetics, social classes or distribution rules, the link with the great authors (or with others of less importance) is not discussed at all. As long as the parameters we use for examining what we call 'literature', (which very often is just an accumulation of literary phenomena) are not made explicit in our research, we cannot pretend that we are focussing on literature.

Since literary theory is obviously an important part of literary research, it seems necessary to use it for constructing a more systematic study of literary evolution.

Any theoretical base can be misused while we are describing literary evolution. Theoretical research should imply that we apply hypotheses (and not theses) to empirical phenomena. Many theoreticians instead use their schemes as a priori constructs, and they select materials from their historical corpus in order to prove what they seem to have known from the beginning. Theories can help us only when they allow us to interpret all phenomena within a given corpus. This means that we can never say in advance whether our theory will function or not; if it does not, we have to complete or correct it. On the other hand, historians working on a particular historical work or period, within a given literature, often accept a priori the specificity of their material and the impossibility of valid theoretical utterances about it. If they were using hypothetical working schemes, they could probably observe with greater accuracy and speed the basic structures of the authors and the works they are attempting to explain.

Instead of accumulating historical data, the literary scholar who wants to describe literature(s) and literary evolution has to look for principles (norms) and for models (genres, styles, etc.). He has to determine how literature is organized and what kind of system it is. Such an approach is far removed both from the positivistic methods and from the subjective-critical methods many scholars have been applying up to now. Many literary scholars are over-familiarized with their object since they also behave as writers or as critics who comment on literature basically from a normative point of view; they cannot avoid observing particular aspects from a particular point of view; they can never grasp synthetic systemic features, but they can propose excellent hypotheses about the situations they are living in.

In order to elucidate synthetic features, scholars need to observe their object from a distance, without identifying themselves with it. If they are also familiar with the situations they try to analyze (like the critic), they can regard their knowledge as pre-scientific and use it as a starting point (a hypothetical basis) for their research.

Since we need a better connexion between theoretical and historical re-

search, we also need a better collaboration between outsiders and insiders, between historians and theoreticians, even between critics and literary scholars. Such a collaboration should nevertheless imply that they do not have exactly the same task or the same competence.

It is hard to imagine a better challenge for a new historical approach – the (poly)systemic approach – than complex national literatures, especially national literatures which coexist within one political system, with different linguistic and cultural varieties. We can imagine that literature in Canada, in Switzerland, even in Spain, and certainly in Belgium or in Yugoslavia, should have many features of such complex literary systems. In recent years, many scholars have also discovered some mechanisms within the relationship between Dutch and French literature in Belgium. Nevertheless, the difference between these complex literary systems and the 'normal' systems seems to be very limited, if not relative. Within German literature, or within literature written in German, a few very important new norms and models have been developed since 1945. In France, the very concept of 'francophonie' has been submitted to so many revolutions that historians of modern French literature hardly know what 'littérature française' means. (Are Kafka and Brecht part of it, or Césaire?) Are there any non-complete literary systems?

The nature of these complexities is possibly due to different factors. Since we are accustomed to talk about national literary systems from the point of view of nations and languages, we are most puzzled by the coexistence of various literary systems in different languages within one or more nations.

2. National literatures in terms of (poly)system(s)

As we have shown recently (Lambert 1983a), no single national literature can be explained or defined in static terms, as being just a 'national' literature. According to the situation, we have to take into account the various and complex links with particular neighbouring literatures, with recent and older traditions, or with other systems, for example political and artistic systems. In short, as literature is never just literature, no single national literature can be reduced to only English or Dutch or South African literature. These examples seem to indicate that the main problem to be solved is the question of the boundaries of a (national) literature.

More than fifty years ago, Youri Tynjanov wrote (Tynjanov 1965[1922]) that literature should not to be studied in terms of essences, but in terms of relations. Since our concept of national literature can only be a relative one, it might be very profitable to apply Tynjanov's ideas to 'national literatures' and to describe them in terms of relations.

Until the present, according to the information we have, literary scholars have generally adopted the occidental way of studying national literatures, that is, separately (see Gérard 1981a). The comparatists have for approximately one century been trying to improve this 'nationalistic' perspective. But we still have no clear model for the study of literary systems in their relationships with subsystems and surrounding systems. For the moment, theoreticians can

only suggest descriptive models, adapted to the situation they intend to clarify.

All these restrictions allow us to suggest research categories borrowed from similar, that is, Western European, situations. The most elaborate categories can be found within the study of translations, which serves a very definite literary function between national literatures.

Guidelines for a model and its definitions could be formulated according to the following questions:

□ Does a 'national literature' exist? (This replaces the question: What are the basic features of a given national literature?)
□ If so, when and under what circumstances did the particular 'national literature' commence?
□ How does it differ from the surrounding systems?
□ With which surrounding systems does it have common features, and on which levels do these features occur?
□ Is there any grouping or polarization of national literatures, and within which parameters do they behave as groups?
□ Are boundaries based upon literary criteria, or have they been imposed by linguistic, religious, economical or political systems?

The reason why literature in South Africa deserves special treatment, and why it deserves to be looked upon as a test case for truly comparatist approach is that it:

□ Is a combination of old (autochtonous and foreign) and new literatures;
□ Is a combination of different language and cultural traditions from Western Europe (Dutch and English), from the United States (American English influences), from Asia and from various African traditions;
□ Has been influenced continuously by political, social, religious and other interferences and shifts;
□ Has recently been submitted to new political situations.

Like many (ex-)colonial countries, South Africa not only combines Western and African literatures, but also written and oral literature, with various phases of transition from one to the other.[2]

Can scholars coming from abroad who do not have an inside knowledge of the situation within these literatures, say anything useful about them?

It might even be nonsensical to talk about 'literature in South Africa', because there are at least ten written literatures functioning within South Africa.[3] This could imply that they have a few common features. This could also imply something most important: all literary systems in South Africa have changed since independance. Literary systems have been influenced thoroughly by political norms and models.[4] It is clear that this could not have happened similtaneously for every literary system within South Africa. Moreover, it would be fascinating to determine which rules explain the different positions within the general political and cultural framework.

As is generally the case within nations with different languages, none of the

literatures within South Africa are totally autonomous or totally subordinate. Without knowing the exact history of every linguistic group, we can suppose that every literature has been subjected to difficulties and conflicts of its own, which have accelerated or delayed the common orientation of the South African literatures.

Within historical evolution, clusters of South African literatures have been formed, either by direct influence or by reactions to situations, such as the use of a new official language, or by literary or cultural 'import' from a dominating culture. According to Even-Zohar (1978), no literature is in 'non-contact', and every literary contact is, like communication, based upon the sender-receiver principle. Within South Africa, the dominating literatures are obviously Afrikaans and English. Which (cultural, political or social) systems dominate literary systems? And, for how long has this continued? Some countries have hardly any national literature: they take their books, their norms and their models from abroad, sometimes even from different countries (as is somewhat the case in Belgium). The question of literary autonomy for each South African literature in particular, and for all South African literatures in general, has to be discussed by a series of general and particular questions, such as:

□ Are the literary norms and models imported or not? Are they traditional or not?
□ Which is the dominating literary centre? For how long has this been the case?
□ Which are the (dominating) genre rules?
□ With which centres does it have links? (Are these from abroad or not? Are there dominating/dominated relationships?)
□ From which literary systems do they import texts? Are these translated texts? Who is translating them? According to which selection and translation rules does this happen?
□ Are there positive/negative links with literary traditions? (From which traditions and when have there been shifts in these literary traditions? Are these shifts parallel in all literary systems, from the chronological point of view and from the point of view of norms and models?)
□ What are the norms and models within the peripheral (sub-)systems? What are their origins?
□ To what extent does the attitude towards tradition influence the attitude towards import? Are there any historical revolutions in this respect?

One of the quickest ways of detecting (dis-)similarities and dominant/dominated relations between two literary systems and within larger systems is to study translations as interferences between literary systems. The way in which target literatures select and (re)write translations from the surrounding (or from very remote) literatures is symptomatic of what their needs are and what they refuse to accept. Recent research in diverse cultural situations has

provided very sophisticated models for macro- and micro-structural research concerning the function of translations within literary evolution. Teams of scholars from various countries are beginning to undertake research on the history of translations in European literatures. It would be fascinating to apply similar models for research to literatures like the South African ones, where one finds a large number of structural shifts through history and through language and literary (or other) systems. The literary scholar could even determine whether translational activity in different literatures is carried on according to international or local standards.

The poetics of different national literatures could also be analyzed in terms of other interferences, such as the distribution of literature. I suggest that literary import from English into South African literatures since the XIXth century, could be analyzed successfully according to the systemic hypotheses.

The interferences and the dominant/dominated positions can and should also be examined in relation to the whole set of metatexts (e.g. pamphlets, essays, satires, thematics in novels, reviews and synthetic articles in periodicals). The very presence/absence of dominant problematics in these metatexts can be revealing. (Since when? Where? By whom? By writers? By politicians? etc.). Which literature is exporting to other ones? Which one is importing from one or other literature, or from all surrounding literatures? Just as in translation, selection and exclusion mechanisms will be obvious in all kinds of metatexts. The problem is that we need a large corpus for observation as well as complex confrontations in order to reveal systemic features.

While studying these interferences, it is important to keep in touch with a large research scheme on which we indicate the synchronic and diachronic boundaries and parameters. Diachrony is obviously important also on the synchronic level, since tradition is a key in the relationship between literatures on the synchronic level. Tradition in literary systems is never passive: literary systems select traditions and traditional values according to their own norm systems. Clashes between literary systems may be explicitly based upon conflicts between different traditions or between traditions which are interpreted in different ways.

I suggest that literatures in South Africa are both unified and separated by their traditions, and that the shifts within literary history are linked to the shift from one substratum (Afrikaans) to another (English). Throughout its history, Afrikaans literature has been part of a substratum, as a result of political and other infrastructural organization. Most African literatures have been influenced by this (if not in themes and communication techniques then perhaps in genres or in stylistic procedures). Political and cultural activities have strenghtened the prestige of Afrikaans literature, at least in certain (sub-) systems and at certain moments.

And it would be fascinating to examine whether or not the genre systems in all local African literatures are parallel, and if so, in what way. Further, when did European or American subgenres and genres penetrate into some or all African literatures? It seems that the genre system is one of the keys for determinating literary canons and the dependance of these canons on cultural, artistic or political bases.

3. Autonomous, peripheral and complex systems

On the basis of these indications of intra- and intersystemic behaviour, we can attempt to categorize all literary systems by locating them in one of three positions, or somewhere between them. These positions can be designated as: 1) autonomous systems; 2) peripheral systems; and 3) complex systems. When observing a given literary situation such as literature in South Africa today, it would be helpful to organize it in this way.

1. Autonomous systems

In this position, imported literature is relatively unimportant (that is, subservient) within the system itself; it is limited to certain areas, and to certain surrounding systems (*surrounding* meaning more than geographical space). Export literature, on the other hand, is relatively strong and is not limited to these surrounding systems. In fact, the autonomy of a system depends on its imported rather than on its exported elements. Autonomous systems, however, may not necessarily have strong import, or strong export functions. If this is the case then they behave as closed systems. Autonomous systems generally dominate the surrounding systems via export relationships.

2. Peripheral systems

A peripheral system does not behave as a single system, but rather as part of a group of systems in which a given hierarchy is prevailing. It is part of a group of 'lower' systems in which the prestige of a dominating system is accepted (or still has to be accepted). Of course, the prestige and the power of the dominating elements are never accepted as such nor are they permanent. There may be strong reactions to them, but these very reactions indicate how important the relationships are to one given 'central' system. The dominating system is relatively autonomous in its relationship with the peripheral group: these relationships are mainly unindirectional, whereas the relationships between the peripheral systems are bi-directional and open (including both import and export elements). The basis of relations within and among literatures is their *hierarchy* of values: authors, books, readers and critics belonging to the central areas, are considered to be higher than the members of the peripheral areas. However, there is a certain consensus concerning the organization of the group (the macro-system) as such, which means that systems 1, 2 and 3 relate to each other, and to the dominating system, but not to areas across the borderline.

3. Complex systems

We need to discuss the complexity of the *inter*systemic relationships. There are interesting and fundamental links between the intrasystemic and the intersystemic relationships. All kinds of complexities must be considered, but the most important concern the multi-directionality of certain peripheral

relationships, especially when a given peripheral system has important links with two (or more) dominating systems. The relative autonomy of these peripheral areas is due to selection mechanisms within the peripheral system. The independency of the rules governing import is the basis of system independency as such, even within an open system.

Of course, these system models refer to synchronic structures, which are always abstract structures. But they help us to describe shifts from the diachronic point of view. The more complex a given situation (system) is, the more chances there are that it will not be static.

4. Conclusion

The use of these system models may allow scholars to grasp, in a synthetic way, both the tendencies of one given literature and of certain given literatures. It is important to bear in mind that both negative and positive observations are equally important; for example, it is important to notice that oral literatures seem to be autonomous, rather than peripheral; and that Afrikaans literature along with English and 'Soweto literature' do have intersystemic relationships between one another, though they may be uni-directional in many cases.

It is a pity that international scholarship has, generally, neglected to look at literary structures, hierarchies and boundaries within world literature. Scholars have neglected to ask fundamental questions when studying world literature. For example: Are there any major zones or groups? How do they change and how do the peripheral zones adapt their strategies to the emergence of new dominating zones as well as to the destruction of previous central zones? The study of literature in South Africa, or in Africa or North America in general, is just part of a more panoramic way of looking at literary phenomena and at literary evolution.

Notes

1. In South Africa, for example, the relationship between the various literatures is at present being investigated by way of a systemic approach by CENSAL (the Centre for South African Literature Research of the Human Sciences Research Council).
2. For an overview of the written literatures in South Africa, see the annual literary survey series compiled by Francis Galloway (1982, 1983).
3. English and Afrikaans, each with its own subsystems, while the African language literatures comprize *at least* Northern Sotho, Southern Sotho and Tswana; Swazi, Xhosa and Zulu; Tsonga and Venda.
4. See, for example, Chapman (1982) on the emergence of the subsystem of Soweto Poetry.

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