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CANONICITY AND LITERARY INSTITUTIONS

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In this paper I would like to deal with two issues: (a) the theoretical need for the notion of institutions in the framework of Even-Zohar's polysystem theory (Even-Zohar 1978; 1979; 1990); and (b), the function of the literary institutions in the process of stratification. I take it as my point of departure that any analysis of the structure of the literary system involves two different ways of looking at the system, two points of view: the internal and the external (Lotman 1976a; 1976b; 1976c; 1976d; 1978). The internal point of view relates to the structure and the dynamics of culture as conceived of at a certain point in time by the members of this culture. The external point of view relates to the way in which these issues and/or processes are understood and interpreted from a perspective of time by the historian.

In spite of the conceptual and essential difference between the two, there are still many historians of culture who ignore this seemingly self-evident difference and confuse the two in their analysis. Even those who do postulate it, like Even-Zohar, Lotman and Bourdieu, have not yet offered a theoretical notion which can be empirically used for the description of these points of view. I contend that the notion of institution offers a theoretical as well as an empirical solution for the need to adopt the internal point of view of a certain culture at a certain point of time, which is indispensable for exploring the stratification process of a system in culture, since the internal point of view is an outcome of the cultural forces which are responsible for this process.

Unlike the notion of system which is 'merely' theoretical and can thus be applied to any 'phenomena in reality', but cannot be identified with them, institutions are created by a particular culture (cf. Sheffy 1985; forthcoming) and manifest the way a culture is understood by its members. Each culture is divided into fields of activities. These fields are then signified, that is to say, are given a semiotic value. Their division and semiotization process determine the boundaries, the options and limits of a culture at a certain point

in time as far as the text's production, its use and its status are concerned.

However, a discussion of the various institutions and their operations in a given culture would require too much space. Therefore, I would like to limit myself to just one aspect of the institutions, activity in the stratification's process of gaining a position at the center which often results in becoming canonized. I postulate that literary canonicity, as any other literary position, is a result of an accountable process which consists of literary-political operations. In passing I would like to remark that although such a postulation might sound trivial, it is not widely accepted by scholars of literature who still stick to the naive belief in the existence of 'poetic justice' as far as attribution of literary values is concerned. I contend however, that literary canonicity is determined by a distinct group of people-in-the-culture, whose power is gained by their control over literary institutions. I have chosen to deal with the center because the most significant operations of the literary institutions take place at the center (cf. Bourdieu), unlike the most significant textual operations which in my view and contrary to what is usually assumed take place at the periphery.

First I would like to describe the structure of the center and then to analyze the procedures which determine its structure. The notion of the center assumes that it is a body in which the most significant and influential institutionalized activities take place. Their importance is twofold: (a) the significance attributed to it by the elite and consequently the high societal status it enjoys; and (b), the relatively large number of texts produced according to the models it supports.

As to the models governing the center: from the model's point of view the structure of the center is more complicated than what was usually assumed. It is not a homogeneous body. It is neither governed by a single model, nor by a homogeneous group of models. We can even formulate it as a universal, namely, that the center is governed by a set of different models. Moreover, the phenomenon of two centers active at one and the same time is not a rare one.

Furthermore, the center is composed not only of active models, but also of a body of texts which create the opposition between the constant and the changing strata. This opposition is an opposition between models and texts, between current operations and the historical memory. The constant stratum is composed of a body of previous texts (and note, not models), transferred by previous generations and accepted as such by the current governing institutions usually with a slight change only. It is hence characterized by its stability and uniformity throughout generations.

The changing stratum, on the other hand, can be characterized by its short lifespan and its diversity. Its diversity lies in the repertoire of its models: alongside the highly valued models, there are models which enjoy less prestige, but are more productive, i.e. they govern more of the textual production of the center at a certain point of time. Additionally there are models which might in future enjoy higher status or more governing power. The center is hence characterized by the existence of an opposition between the more productive and the more valued models. Productive and valued models are not necessarily identical. It is true that in some periods, especially periods which are characterized by rigid cultural norms, the body of highest valued models and the body of productive models overlap to a great extent. However, more often than not they do so only partially. Consequently they differ from each other in their status, nature and functioning in the system.

With this understanding of the multi-faceted nature of the center, I would like to turn now to the question of the processes which determine its nature by formulating the following hypotheses:

(1) Both constant and changing strata of the center alter historically, due to the operations of the dominant institutions which have gained a temporary mandate to determine the character of the literary center.

(2) This mandate has nothing what-so-ever to do with 'poetic justice' nor with the question of the value of the texts. The question of 'value' is irrelevant to the status gained by a certain text. A text gains a high status not because it is valuable, but because someone believes it to be valuable and more important, because someone has the political-cultural power to grant the text the status they believe it deserves.
This is so because the notion of value changes from one period to another as the taste of people-in-the-culture who have the power to force it upon culture changes.

What sort of cultural forces take part in the process of status attribution? They are forces active in standard institutions of cultural life, the most prominent among which are publishing houses, literary groups, literary journals, literary supplements, literary critics, literary prizes, literary unions and literary curriculum.

Once a text is written in the framework of the canonized system, it will endeavor to be published, read, and gain recognition in various ways. Several literary institutions are responsible for both of

the stages involved: the first stage concerns the question of entrance to the center and the second, the status acquired at the center. Hence literary institutions aim to achieve two incongruous goals: they endeavor to provide a model a place at the center, or they struggle to reaffirm a position already gained.

When a new text is being written, decisive resolutions concerning its future are already being made. For instance, here the question of the status of the model upon which the text is structured is crucial. After a text has been written, the next crucial step concerns its place of publication. Since publishing houses play the most important role in the process of status attribution, I will touch here briefly upon some features of their operations.

The acceptance of a new text by a prestigious publishing house automatically entails a certain degree of recognition, though its final status is a result of the activities of many other factors. However, a text which is structured on a new model will usually not be published by a prestigious publishing house. More often than not it is published by a publishing house which has not yet gained a central position, but is still fighting for recognition and prestige. Writers are interested in being published by a prestigious publishing house due to the societal implications this involves, many of which are interpreted into financial terms.

In spite of romantic views which loathe the proximity of financial means with high culture, the prospect of acting at the center depends to a large extent upon financial possibilities and involves struggles over the financial means which are offered by the state or other forms of patronage. Historically speaking this has always been the case. High culture has always been dependent upon patronizing activities and the willingness of patronage to support culture. Once the cultural-financial support used to be more private, and today it is more governmental, but a subsidiary basis has almost always been a pre-condition for the possibility of the canonized system to exist. The subsidiary basis of the canonized system gives the literary institutions much more power in determining the character of the system, in opening and closing options of operations.

The financial aspect involves much more than book sales. We can even claim that financially speaking, from the writer's point of view, book sales do not always play a major role. There are many other and more important direct financial rewards, or quasi-financial rewards, which are strongly linked to publishing houses but are carried out by other institutions. Most obvious are the literary prizes and literary grants, literary positions at universities and

colleges, governmental service, such as a position in the foreign office as a cultural attache etc. Quasi-financial rewards are no less significant, though their financial component is less overt. I refer here to phenomena such as inclusion in text-books which ensure steady royalties, purchase by public libraries, invitations from abroad to represent a country at conferences and other cultural and literary events. I also refer here to rewards such as subsidiary rent, subsidiary vacation, being promoted for translation and eventually being translated etc.

The people who decide how the pie will be divided are, of course, active in certain literary institutions (usually they are somehow also connected to a certain publishing house). Moreover, they are personally involved in the cultural life and hence have vested interests. The circle of people involved is so small that the exchange between receiving and giving should not surprise us. As a rule we can find an interesting exchange between those who donate a prize and those who get it. The two lists are almost identical, only the years change. A writer or a man of letters who participates in a certain prize committee, is most likely to get the prize or the grant in one of the following years. I would like to emphasize that this state of affairs is typical not only of small cultures, such as the Israeli culture, but also of larger cultures, such as the French or the German. This is the case due to the structure of the group of 'people-in-the-culture', and the cultural institutions, which is similar in all parts of the Western world, regardless of the size of the nation itself, as is clear from various works on the sociology of culture (for instance Les Intellocrates by Hamon and Rotman 1981).

Literary institutions operate in fact on the same principle as show business. Some supply the entrance ticket, others take the ticket and usher you to your row and seat. The chances of replacing your seat are better if there are lots of vacant places. If a seat is taken from its rightful owner, he is most likely going to protest, though his power to gain his seat back depends on his position in the system, as well as on his opponent's position. Sometimes, however, when all the tickets are sold, one cannot but try another theater.

The fight for a good place at the center (I cannot elaborate here on the features of this fight) is motivated by the cultural-historical implications of becoming a member of this stratum. Having this ticket implies that for a short (or even long) period certain texts and their writers enjoy an official position in culture: that is to say they will be read and referred to by the 'people-in-the-culture', and

thus will come into existence as part of the cultural life. It also implies that there is some chance for them to become part of the national-cultural memory. The length of their stay in this memory varies and depends upon the power of the institutions by which they are represented, as well as upon the norms and interests of future literary institutions.

The activities at the center, like any other historical activities, involve concurrently the consideration of the present and the reconsideration of the past. It is in the power of the dominating institutions of the center to determine temporarily how the various strata of the literary center will look for a certain period of time. But it is only temporary. A center of any literary system is characterized by one process of reshuffling replacing a previous one, due to the change of guards at the center. The life-span of those guards is evidently short, but each member of the literary system wishes, even for a short time, to become part of it and have the power to make a decision concerning the even briefer life of glory.

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