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The Concept of Canonicity in Polysystem Theory

Rakefet Sheffy
School of Cultural Studies, Tel Aviv

Polysystem Theory has not shown much interest in dealing with canons; the concept of canon, as such, is not in its stock of current concepts. Instead, the theory discusses the notion of *canonicity.* Technically, "canonicity" is derived from canon *(canonicity:* "the quality or state of being canonical"; *canonical:* "of or relating to a canon" [*Webster's* 1981]). Yet, in stemming from a very specific tradition of Russian Formalism (hence referring to very specific theoretical problems), canonicity is, in fact, only loosely associated with the existence of canons in the common sense of the term. In the context of current "literary theory," however, this concept is surely not the order of the day. Since problems of "canons" have recently attracted great interest and been made a controversial issue in literary study (at least in the U.S.A.), I find it especially vital to make clear beforehand some of the differences between this conception and the more common sense in which canons are usually discussed.

From the viewpoint of literary study (i.e., a study, either "theoretical" or "historical," of *literature),* "canon" means practically everything accepted as literary, hence worth the attention of scholars. It is a basically normative concept, given as a point of departure and determining, actually, the boundaries of the object of study itself. Since what

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literary students are concerned with is literature per se, the material studied as well as the categories applied to it are those pertaining most typically to the "literary" corpus par excellence, with the aim (however unintended) of justifying its glorification. In short, it seems that from this perspective the canon is actually identical to what "literature" is believed to be. In this context, thinking about canons is, in fact, thinking about the "great literary tradition": the durability of celebrated past works and figures, and their invocation and reevaluation in order to establish the value of the contemporaries (i.e., "the classic"; see, for instance, Kermode 1983). It is against this background indeed that the more relativistic interest in canons, newly arisen in literary study, has made a significant challenge to the definition of "literature": the awareness of the relativity of canonical criteria and of their being reshaped through admitting previously unaccepted material into the canon ("opening up the canon"), and the attention to conditions and processes of constructing canons ("canon formation"). Nevertheless, in most of these discussions, it is usually still the destinies of individual, recognized figures and works (the literary "highlights") that are retrospectively placed in question, with no systematic attempt being made toward a comprehensive theoretical framework to explain the complexity of the issue.

By contrast, the Formalists' endeavor (especially Tynjanov's), of which the Polysystem Theory is a successor, is first and foremost theoretical; there, canon may (or may not) be part of a constructed mechanism (the "system") hypothesized for cultural institutions. Doubtless, this theory has been developed mainly with reference to literature, yet its attempt is by no means aimed at an exclusively literary theory. Once it is a "system" that is under discussion, it becomes clear that the notion of "literature" is by definition larger and more heterogeneous than what is included in the canon, and that there is no point in dealing with the particular literary "masterpieces" any longer. Further, as a functionalist theory, Polysystem Theory dissociates, in principle, properties (i.e., "canonicity") from their carriers (i.e., canonical items); "canonicity" is believed to be *a function* which pertains to the theoretical notion of "system," whereas the material to which it is attributed varies in each and every specific case study.[1] As I shall try to show, since this theory was developed more or less out of dissatisfaction with the reduction of the concept of literature to an accepted corpus of canonical texts or genres, awareness of the historical relativity of canonicity

1. As Even-Zohar explains in a footnote (1990: 16), this is in fact the reason why Polysystem Theory tends to avoid the attribute "canonical," which may wrongly imply that canonicity is an inherent feature, and prefers, rather, the attribute "canonized," which implies that canonicity involves an activity exercised on certain material.

was inherent to its program from the beginning; canons, as such, were actually overlooked by the theory. However, precisely at this point, in my opinion, lies a serious inadequacy, namely, the fact that "canons" are absent from the theory while present in its objects of study (for instance, in literature).

I

If canons are ordinarily associated with "the classic tradition," that is, with what is believed to be "the common heritage of past and present valued texts," Polysystem Theory's notion of "canonicity" is closer to that of the "fashionable"; it is one of the terms which the theory uses to suggest the privilege of certain items over other (marginal or outdated) ones, in literature (or in any other cultural field). This disparity between the two concepts illustrates most typically the special accents of the systemic approach which Polysystem Theory inherited from Russian Formalism.

A crucial point in understanding Polysystem Theory's notion of canonicity is that it is based on the concept *of oppositions*, that is, it relies directly on the opposition between "canonized" and "non-canonized" literature, as first introduced by Shklovskij. This is indeed a key point: in this context, there is no sense in talking about the canonized unless we take into account the non-canonized to which it is opposed. Even today, the conceptualization of canonicity still seems constrained by the view of that early phase of Russian Formalism which established the prominence of this opposition in the conception of literary systems. Then, the power of this opposition arose precisely (and exclusively) from its opening the way to explain the relativity of "literary facts," which, as mentioned above, turned out to be the major task of systemic studies (instead of seeking the *differentia specified* of literature). Having begun by defining literature on the basis of its opposition to what is not literature, it was soon realized that the very notion of "literature" includes in itself an opposition of hierarchical nature. No matter what Shklovskij's original intention was, for Tynjanov, "canonized" and "non-canonized" suggested, above all, that literature is a *stratified* system which imposes hierarchical relations on its parts. Until today, the idea of stratification in this theory has been so strong that it has tended to overshadow all other possible implications that may be relevant in discussing canonicity. This point cannot be formulated more boldly than in Even-Zohar's own words:

> It was Shklovskij, who seems to have first conceptualized the socio-cultural distinctions of text production in terms of literary stratification. According to him (1921, 1923), in literature certain properties become canonized, while others remain non-canonized. . . .
>
> The tensions between canonized and non-canonized culture are uni-

versal. They are present in every human culture, because a non-stratified human society simply does not exist, not even in Utopia. (1990: 15-16)

As it happens, from the beginning canonicity has been more or less confined in Polysystem Theory to such notions as status, dominance, or relative position. However, perceiving canonicity in this way only is deficient in more than one respect.

First of all, stratification is often described in the theory in terms of "center" and "periphery" relations. These terms were used by Tynjanov (1969 [1924]) and later were also borrowed by Lotman (1977 [1974]) in his discussion of systems (to which I shall refer below). On the whole, this set of terms seems to be more adequate in the way it introduces the social context to the conception of semiotic systems. In any case, since the theory applies these pairs of oppositions together, it seems to suffer from inflation (and vagueness) of terminology. But this alone could be easily solved: if canonicity is reducible to dominance, the theory can manage without it. To be sure, however, this is not merely a question of pure terminology. Reducing canonicity to the idea of "center" as opposed to "periphery" means that the theory ignores some very important aspects in the conception of cultural systems. This bears mainly on the way the theory views the systemic *dynamics.*

Since one of the major concerns of Polysystem Theory lies in problems of literary evolution, it warrants special attention here. For as long as we confine our attention to hierarchical relations, we necessarily view literary evolution as a succession of *substitutable dominants:* given that we deal with an open system which evolves and changes in history, we take it for granted that its center is transitory too. This is a commonplace shared by all discussions concerning shifts of taste (the recent controversy over canons included). Indeed, it turned out that questions of change became the focus of interest, and thus they remained, until today, the point of departure for most of Polysystem Theory's major projects. It was already apparent in Tynjanov's "On Literary Evolution" (1969 [1927]), where fascination with the indefiniteness and instability of any literary component whatsoever was pushed to such an extreme that anything appearing to be permanent was deemed no more than a "working hypothesis." There, shift and substitution were declared the crucial features of literary evolution and, therefore, the main issues in the study of literary history. Consequently, traditions (or what we call canons) were actually denied as simply illusory:

Tradition, the basic concept of the established history of literature, has proved to be an unjustifiable abstraction of one or more of the literary elements of a given system (within which they have the same "emploi" and

play the same role) and their equation with the like elements of another system (in which they have a different "emploi"), so that they are brought into a seemingly unified, fictitiously integrated set.

The main concept of literary evolution is the *shift* of systems, and thus the problem of "traditions" is transferred onto another plane. (Tynjanov 1969 [1927]: 337 [translation mine])

Accordingly, the basic hypothesis suggested for the systemic dynamics is that literary strata are (and have to be) in constant fluctuation, which is perceived in terms of the interplay between "center" and "periphery," to quote Tynjanov again:

Here not only the borders, the "periphery," the marginal areas of literature appear as fluid, no, it is the very "center" itself: . . . any privileged genre, by the time of its decomposition, is removed from the center to the periphery, and in its place a new appearance rises to the surface from the trifles of literature, from its backyards and lowlands into the center. . . . *This is the appearance of canonization of the "younger genres," which Viktor Shklovskij discusses* [my emphasis]. (1969 [1924]: 399-401 [translation mine])

In other words, literary evolution is discussed in light of the constant shift of canonicity between repertoire of different strata. This shift results from interactions between central and peripheral options in their struggles for dominance in shaping contemporary taste, interactions which bring about mutations of the internal systemic organization. From this perspective, *canonicity* is totally reducible to contemporary taste, and *canonization* is no more than "gaining prestige or dominance": canonized items may lose their status and be ejected by newly canonized ones which, in their turn, take precedence in the center. This view remains even in the most recent formulation of Polysystem Theory:

As a rule, the center of the whole Polysystem is identical with the most prestigious canonized repertoire. Thus, it is the group which governs the Polysystem that ultimately determines the canonicity of a certain repertoire. Once canonicity has been determined, the said group either adheres to the properties canonized by it (which subsequently gives them control of the Polysystem) or, if necessary, alters the repertoire of canonized properties in order to maintain control. On the other hand, if unsuccessful in either the first or the second procedure, both the group and its canonized repertoire are pushed aside by some other group, which makes its way to the center by canonizing a different repertoire. (Even-Zohar 1990: 17)

No doubt, such a view has proven particularly fruitful for dealing with cases of literary innovation (now perceived as emergences). However, it may appear problematic in accounting for those cases of more or less solid canonized items which, once canonized, survive shifts of taste throughout history and are never totally deprived of their literary value (even in cases where contemporary ideology tends to reject

them). These enduring items are in fact canonized in the sense that, unlike central ones, they are fixed and durable; they endure in our literary consciousness or, at least, they seem to be much less sensitive to transitions of center and periphery, which for other items may result in total rejection and oblivion. To take one example, it would be wrong to account for the canonization of the novel in the eighteenth century by simply saying that the novel, in the process of gaining its status as a new literary form, replaced the previously canonized ones and pushed them aside so that they became marginal literary genres. No doubt, the new form had in a way challenged their dominance (for instance, by gaining wider popularity or, to a certain extent, even by challenging their prestige), yet, on the whole, it is clear that the formerly canonized activities were never really displaced; people continued to practice them in different ways and on different occasions, and even if they ceased to be practiced, they still remained until today the most important representatives of the literary tradition.

It follows, then, that apart from the mechanism of shifting centers, literary evolution also proceeds by the accumulation of a rather stable reservoir consisting of the most valued and most established literary items of all past and present generations—in other words, by constructing canons. As I have said, it seems that the theory makes very little of this fact, and there are two main reasons for this. One is methodological: since the canon is only a restricted section in the system, Even-Zohar argues that "when only official products. . .were treated, the work of the Polysystem constraints often could not be detected." The other reason is theoretical, and therefore more problematic: from the viewpoint of the theory, which focuses on dynamics, the tendency to stabilize (or to stagnate) is considered a deviation (rather than a "normal" operation) of systems: "Without the stimulation of a strong 'sub-culture', any canonized activity tends gradually to become petrified. . . .For the system, petrification is an operational disturbance: in the long run it does not allow it to cope with the changing needs of the society in which it functions" (ibid.).

II

As dictionaries tell us, "canon" is a rule, law, decree, (even "model" or "standard" [*Webster's* 1981]), and also "any officially recognized set of sacred books"; sometimes, with special reference to literature, "the works of an author that have been accepted as authentic" *(Random House* [1983]). That is, when speaking about canons, we often mean more than one thing at the same time: we ordinarily refer to groups of highly prestigious texts, as well as to sets of prescriptive norms for producing and evaluating texts. To be more specific, in terms of systemic thinking, this notion implies at least two theoretical distinctions: one

is the distinction between *texts* and *models* ("real things" and abstractions); the other is the distinction between *position* (status, prestige) and *function* (in different activities, for instance, text production).

As for the former distinction, the position of the theory is very clear in that it is designed to deal with models rather than with texts. In fact, the very notion of repertoire is intended to better account for the levels of rules which govern the systemic activities rather than for their finalized products (the texts). However, it seems that the theory is not altogether clear concerning the dissimilarity between position and productivity. Apparently, the theory's original notion of canonicity in the sense of "dominance" was misleading in that it seemed to confuse prestige with the potential to serve as models for imitation in generating new texts.

Yet it is necessary to make this distinction: canonized items are present in the system without actually taking part in the cycle of literary production. In other words, these items are canonized in the sense that they are largely recognized and their prestige acknowledged, yet they are not central in the sense that they do not meet contemporary prevailing literary norms nor serve as active models for producing new texts; in fact, some of them are hardly circulated in the literary system in any way (if we only think about a long list of indisputable literary figures and masterpieces). In short, these items attain a high status which does not derive from their position in actual center/periphery relations. This is clearly manifested through literary institutions, for instance, collecting institutions: ordinarily, contemporary book publishers and editors of periodicals exercise norms of selection which tend to reflect (and, indeed, to create) "literary fashions," that is, their choices of inclusion and exclusion directly reflect preferences in the field of actual literary production; whereas anthologies or libraries tend to maintain canonized collections. Within the boundaries of these collections the center/periphery relations are entirely irrelevant because such collections consist of items which do not relate directly to each other; they are compilations of canonized literary items of different kinds, lifted out of different phases in literary history, regardless of the shift of positions they have undergone since. No wonder that it is in this latter type of collection where we tend to look for canons: the canon of Western literature does not privilege any of its great names over the others (Wordsworth's masterpieces are still celebrated as much as Eliot's).

Further, it should be noted that this is true not only for individual texts; it also holds for generic patterns which share the same canonical status (in the sense that we talk about "the idyll," "the Shakespearean sonnet," or "versification" as literary facts); it may hold just as well for any recognized literary practice or figure that has become fixed in

our literary consciousness, that is, for any literary convention. Indeed, with respect to the field of the literary production, the models of these texts or patterns may even appear marginal; for instance, patterns of verse which no longer generated poetry writing at the center of any of the modern Western literatures continued for a long time to be reproduced in marginal literary activities, such as poetry for children. All the same, as literary texts or conventions, these items remain most prestigious; the major literary works they once generated have never ceased to be read, praised, and studied by contemporary elite audiences, regardless of what may be viewed as their "secondary use" as peripheral literary models.

Moreover, as the people-in-the-culture, we indeed tend to believe that canonized items, "old-fashioned" as they may be, are always available for us as potential models to be "recycled" time and again within the central literary activity. We often hear about the so-called revival of old forms in different literary milieus (indeed, it is a favorite cliche, even among scholars). Yet, as a rule, these canonized items remain nonproductive forever, without "risking" their status. In fact, we know of definite cases where the presence of a canonized item is severely sanctioned by an ideological authority and pronounced sacred to the extent that making use of its models is utterly unthinkable. An outstanding example of this is the status of the Bible in many cultural contexts (including literary) throughout history. Rina Drory describes the status of the Bible in the context of Jewish literature in the tenth century:

> It was, apparently, the sacred status conferred upon the Bible by the rabbinic literature of an earlier period which kept it from the realm of literature, prevented it from being active within it and assigned it to ritual functions only; it was read in public at religious festivals and its phrases illustrated liturgical texts, . . . yet it was not the focus of literary interest and was not considered a possible source of literary models. (1988: 162 [translation mine])

Of course, this is a rather remote parallel to what we tend to call the literary canon par excellence, yet, in principle, a similar situation may be found within the boundaries of the literary system itself. The more we worship a text or the oeuvre of an author, the stronger the tendency to inhibit access to it (for instance, through professionals). I would even say that canonicity has nothing to do with actual taste at all; there is no argument about Shakespeare's being a canonized literary figure, whether people like it or not. All of these examples seem good illustrations, at least, for the fact that prestige and productivity are not inseparable, that the position of canonized items with respect to the field of actual production and reception is not only different

from that of the central ones, it may even be (and indeed is more likely to be) the opposite.

This must have consequences for the theory's conception of canonicity. To be sure, in the latest formulation of the theory Even-Zohar has taken care of this problem by introducing a dual notion of canonicity: there he suggests that canonicity may be a *static* notion when attributed to texts, which is different from *dynamic* canonicity on the level of repertoire. This, indeed, is a step forward in that it indicates the presence of prestigious items (texts) which are not dominant in the sense that they do not participate in the field of text production:

> It is one thing to introduce a text into the literary canon, and another to introduce it through its model into some repertoire. In the first case, which may be called static canonicity, a certain text is accepted as a finalized product and inserted into a set of sanctified texts literature (culture) wants to preserve. In the second case, which may be called dynamic canonicity, a certain literary model manages to establish itself as a productive principle in the system through the latter's repertoire. (Even-Zohar 1990: 19)

Yet, what is the function of this so-called static canonicity? According to the theory, only the dynamic canonicity (of models) is thought to have a function in the system's dynamics (namely, to generate texts); canonized texts, however, are not considered factors in the system's dynamics, or, at best, they are considered so only insofar as they manage to be "revived" to serve as models for generating new texts. If that is the case, canons are considered, if at all, nothing more than by-products of the system's dynamics (which simply wait for their "revival"). In any case, the only thing that counts is models:

> It is this latter kind of canonization [of models] which is the most crucial for the system's dynamics. Moreover, it is this kind of canonization that actually generates the canon, which may thus be viewed as the group of survivors of canonization struggles, probably the most conspicuous products of certain successfully established models. Naturally, any canonical text can be recycled at any given moment into the repertoire in order to become a canonized model again. But once it is recycled, it is no longer in its capacity of a finalized product that it plays a role, but as a potential set of instructions, i.e., a model. The fact that it had once been canonized and become canonical, i.e., sanctified, may or may not be advantageous for it vis-a-vis non-canonical products that have yet no position at all. (Ibid.)

The problem seems to be, above all, that the theory concentrates disproportionately on the field of production, as if defining it as "the system" itself, without taking much note of other activities which are no less essential in literary dynamics, especially those concerning the creating and securing of canons. Given that canons do exist, there are two principal questions to be asked: (1) How and under what condi-

tions do they emerge? (2) What is their function in the system, that is, how do they relate to dominants in the field of production or, more generally, to the dynamics of systems as viewed by Polysystem Theory? I suggest that the next step in developing the theory should be taken to elaborate on the functions of the canon, especially on its role in the evolutionary process.

III

While center/periphery relations are universal in any system, establishing a canon is only an optional procedure: not all systems necessarily maintain canons. It is indeed quite natural to speak about religious or legal—or even literary—canons, yet it seems rather inappropriate to speak about canons in the sphere of, say, gesticulation, diet, manners, even fashion, or many other activities, some of which we are hardly aware of. Not that these semiotic systems do not have their dominants and peripheries; further, every system tends to establish within itself a more stagnant repertoire which appears more obvious than others in regulating the activities of that system. In fact, it is clear that institutionalization is at least as strong as fluctuation and change in systemic evolution. In this respect, Tynjanov's obsession with mutability is rather exaggerated; as Even-Zohar himself indicated (e.g., 1990 [1986]: 85—96), there are many instances in culture where perpetuation (rather than change) prevails and leads to a stable and long-lasting state of affairs.

In any event, canonization is not merely stagnation. The crucial point seems to be that constructing canons is an entirely autonomous procedure which involves intentional acts of reflecting upon literary activities, with the tendency to stabilize them, performed by powerful ideological authorities. In this light, the opposition between canonized and non-canonized strata becomes much more powerful than a nuance of relative positions since it stands, rather, for the tension between conscious and unconscious, formal and informal cultural activities; canons result from special, deliberate activities of preservation and sanctification, exercised only in response to certain ideological demands. Such activities have the effect of securing these items to the extent that they need no longer be actually reproduced in order to be real parts of the system, whereas in non-canonized systems, once a model is no longer reproduced it simply vanishes (sometimes together with its products); here, the very fact that a reservoir of finalized items is preserved makes it possible to go back to it and to manipulate its content (if not to "revive" it). Text preservation is, then, a most important activity pertaining to the very idea of system operation. In this respect, the opposition "canonized vs. non-canonized" is most significant not in the sense of relative positions, but rather in the sense

of distinguishing between those systems which maintain canons and those which do not.

Unlike Polysystem Theory, Lotman's (1977 [1974]) conception of cultural systems includes more awareness of such reservoirs and of the way they crystallize; indeed, his very notion of culture is associated with reservoirs of collective memory. Rather than being preoccupied with questions of status and stratification, Lotman is concerned with the degrees of *structuredness* which govern the different systemic strata. Precisely on this point is his contribution to the conception of systems indispensable. Lotman too refers to Tynjanov when discussing the fluctuation of systemic boundaries, yet, very interestingly, he prefers the notion of "nucleus" to Tynjanov's original notion of "center": "The space of a structure is not uniformly organized. It always includes in itself some nuclear formations and a structural periphery. . . .Tynjanov's works discuss the mechanism for the mutual alternation of structural nucleus and periphery" (Lotman 1977 [1974]: 92).

According to Lotman, the tension between strata is perceived in terms of what is indispensable for the description of the system versus what pertains to it only loosely, or is even regarded as extrasystemic. His key concept, then, is the *description* (or self-description) of the system. Since any description is by definition reductive and much more rigid than the complex, fluid phenomena of the system in reality, it means, for Lotman, an imposed *structure* which tends to determine the system's components and to establish its norms of correctness such that they may be officially formulated as "rules." If we think of a living language as a stratified system, we ordinarily take note of its various strata from which utterances are generated (standard, written, vernacular, slang, etc.); according to Lotman, however, we must also take note of the fact that there exists a *grammar* in the traditional sense of the word—namely, an official, normative description of the language which in effect has very little to do with the way people really speak and understand the language, yet still serves as its official criterion (as representative and censor):

> Since a description involves ... a higher degree of organization, the self-description of a semiotic system, the creation of a grammar of itself, is a powerful means of self-organization of the system. At a given moment in the historical existence of a given language, or, more widely, of a given culture in general, a sub-language, . . . (and sub-group of texts) isolates itself in the depth of the semiotic system and comes to be regarded as the meta-language for the description of the system. (Ibid.: 84)

In conclusion, Lotman's argument is complementary to Polysystem Theory's view of the system's dynamics in supplying exactly what the theory's concept of "canonicity" left out of focus, namely, the structuring of reservoirs as means of control over such actual activities as the

production and evaluation of new texts. Viewed in this way, canonicity has less to do with the dominance of models which are actually reproduced; in fact, it is more likely that canonicity has the reverse effect: since it goes hand in hand with stabilization, it tends to exclude models and to discourage their "productivity." Therefore, the function of canonized items would be better conceptualized as that *of exemplars.* If we take a closer look at cases in which it is claimed that canonized items have been borrowed and transplanted as a means of innovation within contemporary text production, we shall see that it is not so much their models as their *labels* that are adopted in order to confer their prestige upon other models, and thus to serve in legitimating the circulation of new models (of different sources, mainly marginal) in the production of texts.

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