

About Literary Systems and National Literatures

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**Abstract:** In his article "About Literary Systems and National Literatures," Elias Torres J. Feijó offers a polysystemic analysis with examples from the Iberian Peninsula. He argues that a community's literature can be understood as a) the gathering of so-called literary activities, which take place in a social space or b) something that identifies certain characteristics of a part or the whole of the members in a given social space. For his analysis, Torres Feijó employs Itamar Even-Zohar's notion of polysystem because it allows us to interpret each system generated by members of a given community and its delimitation, differentiation, and integration mechanisms in supra-systemic relational schemes. In addition, mechanisms can be obtained for the analysis of the fabrication and promotion of formulas which have as their objective systemic sovereignty: proto-systems, sub-systems, and para-systems.

## **Elias J. TORRES FEIJÓ**

### **About Literary Systems and National Literatures**

Translated from the Galician by Manus O'Dwyer

Following the understanding of literature as social space, it is understood that a constant function of texts, authors, institutions, etc., is that of crafting literary production and the discourse surrounding it and its producers is one of the ways of elaborating identity. A revision of literary historiography in the studied community and literature's educational use shows that this function is fundamental (see, e.g., Cabo; Casas; Domínguez; Torres Feijó). It is obvious that paying attention to this dimension does not imply considering literary activity as dedicated exclusively to the questions of community and/or nation. On the contrary, it is about seeing how and to what point literary activity was and is used to lay the foundations of the worldview of the members of a community or nation. Such work also implies attention to literary tradition itself, elaborating and understanding its own literary ways of being, as well as the elements shaping the beliefs of actants about the system itself and its determining factors.

One of the first problems is determining the identities or social spaces to be compared. The consideration of Iberian comparative literature assumes a previous focus of the Iberian geo-human space as delimitable. However, the Iberian frame is composed of several groups which consider themselves different from the others and changing over time and the concept of "Iberia" also implies historical links with other geo-social spaces where the same bonds functioned for centuries joining the inhabitants of the original social space (i.e., diverse Latin American social spaces in relation to Spain or Portugal). In order to give account of the potential objectives of comparison and to best comprehend the problems derived from the comparison of literatures in the Iberian Peninsula, the methodological framework of Itamar Even-Zohar's polysystem theory for the analysis of culture along with those of Pierre Bourdieu's "champ littéraire" can be useful (see also, e.g., Bassell; Casas). The understanding of literary activity as an heterogeneous and dynamic network composed of a series of macro-factors including institution, market, product, repertoire, producer, and receiver enables us to pay attention to the structures of the fields, the positions and functions occupied by different participants, and the modes of relation between the fields of literature and power.

Even-Zohar's presumes the study of literary or cultural activity in a given social space where a given system works. This implies that, in the case of the Iberian Peninsula, the conflicts and confrontations existing, for example, in a given social space defined as Catalan or Galician belong to the repertoire level where the use of one language or another would be a component of each repertoire in conflict. It is, then, possible to analyze the defined object of study in the Iberian social space considering these different repertoires. It is almost a general rule that every literary system goes beyond the original social and political space of its activity and that, hypothetically, it may not reach all people or areas comprising it, as it might reach or be reached by others belonging to originally different social and political spaces. Therefore, we must consider at least three qualitatively different levels in the functioning of every literary system: 1) social space where the system develops its institutional coercion capacity over individuals, mostly in modern times, through school, law, and through the political-legal system in general, as well as through diverse cultural practices where mechanisms can also be diverse depending on the societies under consideration; 2) the social whole, necessarily different from those who activate links supported by arguments summoned forth in order to delimit cultural systems (origin, ethnos, language, etc.), in most cases forming relatively compacted and close groups; and 3) those related to the system without originally being able to participate in the same social space nor activate those links. For example, the Portuguese literary system is not explicable through activities developed only inside the Portuguese state: the consideration must be enlarged to all those who participate in that system in one way or another.

What allows us to de-limit a literary system, or, according to each case proto-systemic programs and developments (which, in the case of sub-systems, are set in the repertoire level and not in the systemic one) is what I call "systemic rules": rules whose existence somehow accepts all the agents implicated in different cultural systems, both for themselves as well as for others (since reciprocity guarantees existence), and contributes to their recognition, balance, and proficiency. Systemic rules (reportorial materials or rules in Even-Zohar's analytical perspective) are delimiting criteria which act

as basic principles which activate cultural practices of social spaces and their interpretation and acceptance by the participant community depends on the possibilities and the ways in which to obtain use, position, and function in cultural systems. Furthermore, systemic rules not only determine the nutrients of the system's structure: they determine the unfolding of the process and effects that are attained. Therefore, rules are not a way to identify *a posteriori* and neither are they a simple label of what is or is not: they determine, in every historical moment, the *operanda* of all the macro-factors they interact with in the social space in which they are active. Nationality, place of birth, or geographical location of the writer, race, language, and/or other elements are constituted as rules of the communities' literary/cultural (proto-)systems. Any one of these limits, which at any given moment may seem indisputable or, at least undisputed, is the result of the imposition as legitimate of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed principles of vision and division on behalf of certain groups. Systemic rules also constitute a mechanism triggered when an author or a text is to be localized. This does not necessarily imply that in intercommunitary relationships systemic rules from the originary system are still vigorous: a Portuguese text and author can be interpreted by a user as Italian, for example, although at the same time it functions as a mechanism which conditions or determines the participation in the system in question and acts like a defining element of the proposed addition. Thus, a Spanish receiver can understand that José Samarago's *La Balsa de Piedra* (*A jangada de Pedra*) belongs to Spanish literature: the receiver is perhaps applying the dominant systemic rules in his/her social space, the Spanish language and, eventually, the understanding of the name as Spanish. A Spanish critic or scholar could speak about Saramago as the "Spanish writer of Portuguese origin," making the place of residence, as well as his participation in the Spanish literary system the predominant systemic rule.

A literary system is not synonymous with national literature in any of the conceptualizations concerned here, be they from the epistemological point of view or from a national perspective. Dominant groups and agents who are able to impose the combination of their delimiting criteria for national literature legitimate this imposition in a previous configuration and imposition of the elements determining the "national being." They tend to support its practice with a determined political-legal device and they try to articulate systemic rules in coherence with what they consider to be the defining limits of a nation. The system, as a general rule, supports by a combination of elements that dominant groups of agents who consider delimiting as "national being" and this is articulated and articulates the "nation's memory." In turn, the "nation's memory" is constituted by a collection of elements which are selected by those who have the capability and power to do so and impose them as the most legitimate and defining elements of the community. These elements define the organization and the dominating customs, which can acquire the consensus (see Gramsci) of most of the community. This is because this consensus settles in the community's need to own common instruments and elements of recognition and social practice.

In the imposition of the community, national criteria are used as a way of creating its homology and dependence in the field of power as far as the agents struggling to obtain a guarantee in their entrance into the political-legal devices structuring the social space, for example education in Portuguese or the legal duty to know the language(s). This is how the gathering of systemic macro-factors acts as a guarantee of existence and the system's mode of existence concerning the canalization of dominance in the field of power in its institutional dimensions. This explains why the limits to be drawn for it are the same as those imposed for the "national being," since the literary system in a given socio-political space is understood as a network where the existence of a national literature is warranted. Thus, national literature is constituted by those products and producers who fulfill these characteristics, being in this way an essentialist construction and not an epistemological notion. That coherence I allude to is owing to a monological foundation of national expression, according to which "we are" as a "natural" and "essential" result of what "we were" after a previous "not being." Therefore, what we "are to be" must be present and clear in the origins of the nation (even attributing to those origins as much attention to efforts in defining the present), because it is a guarantee of the differential existence of a people. Evident as it is, literature constitutes a sometimes privileged space for struggle and diffusion of ideas and identities, which are also "national." In this way, if nation X is defined by the use of language A by those born (or producing) in nation X, that must also be the definition of its writers and their practices.

The concretization of functions of national literature results from the order and the arrangement to be made of that historical context. This arrangement, which stands out on its own right amidst a long and complex process of canonization with diverse origins ("national" but also "international") also relates to the interests of people, groups, or structures interacting to impose their principles in a part of or within the cultural system. In these processes, factors such as prestige, trajectories, ethical-ideological schemes, and visions and need(s) of the nation are relevant. What is at play here is what ends up being defined as values, individual, collective, or of the collectivity, eventually reflected, expressed, and projected in the works and/or canonized authors and as masked as universal aesthetic values. This hierarchy of texts and authors makes up a canon — the construction, function, and effects of which can constitute a secure object of study for comparative research. Here the values and principles of the imposing groups are projected and its fixation is justified in the spheres related to the "learning of the nation" (when this hierarchy is not simply obviated for what is a result of an imposition and when it seems to be "natural"). It extends itself in many cases to other functions, also appearing as a model of "beauty" in the dimension of aesthetic pleasure. Prolonging itself, this assimilation draws from a pairing of the "true" and "beautiful," which necessarily combine with (authentic and legitimate) "beauty." In this sense, I understand that it is necessary to consider the functional variations of one community's literature to another, over time, and also inside the same community. In some of these, literature as a foundation of national cohesion is diluted, switched off, or its invocation is considered unnecessary, while in others it is specified as the main objective. There were and there are social spaces where other media assure cohesion or where it is simply not an issue — which can lead to relegating the specification of that function and new community reformulations can appear. Thus we find the need to provide answers to the phenomena of the "immigration" of texts and ideas which can alter the cohesive objectives of the teaching of literature in directions which are opposed to current ones.

Even the process whereby literature is consolidated as an autonomous discipline from the eighteenth century onward and especially with the rise nineteenth-century nation states reveals those roles to be played by a "national" literature, as well as history, and how literary methods are derived from them so as to be used in education. In the same way, the projection of certain values of the national state are also elucidating and at times characterizing irreducible values of other national literatures. This perspective focuses our attention on the social functions of literature mentioned above, because of their link to the concepts and impositions/beliefs of the nation and the national. From this point of view, the need to delimit what is national/communitary literature from what is not consists in the value attributed to it in relation to the nation and the virtualities (political, social, economical, cultural, etc.) to be derived from that value. Uniting these facets has the fundamental function of maintaining socio-national cohesion. Of course, seen from today's perspective, the function of literature as community identifier are the most important and decisive: cohesion, memory, identification not only by text and language, but also by ideas fabricated about a collectivity and the role of literature. Historically, the field of education, the study of what a group and/or community understands as literature, language, and "arts," as well as other disciplines such as history and geography, is with focus on the objective of inscribing, first in certain elites of the community, and afterwards in the whole of the population as a repertoire of world views, rules, models, and materials that cement its cohesion. This process encourages a sense of common belonging and provides certain instruments of mutual recognition, comprising privileged ways of intra- and extra- communitary, referential, and symbolic communication.

Let us take, for example, Joám Airas, a bourgeois from Santiago, who was never Portuguese, but who belongs to "Portuguese literature" in all Lusitanian literary histories owing to the fact that in the national reconstruction of that time linguistic criteria (i.e., Galician Portuguese) prevails over criteria of origin. This is because of its foundational value which does not discriminate nationality but, rather, the production language: the fundamental requirement in all this national configuration. Even Alfonso X, King of Castile, is included because of his using Galician Portuguese. This means that systemic rules applied by the same agent change from one time to another according to the vision of "national" of the day. Moreover, these "incoherencies" never represented a substantial conflict as neither the quantity nor the appreciation of produced texts' quality was fundamental in the configuration of the "national." This does not mean that these cannot appear as cases of symbolic struggle (if they are

claimed as belonging to national literature in other systems) and that finally affects the first system. For example, Teresa Margarida de Silva e Orta, a Brazilian writer, author of the novel *Máximas de Virtude e Formosura* in 1752, is sporadically alluded to or dealt with in Portuguese historiography and is in increasing demand because of its "national" nature by those who see in this novel an example of political progressiveness and feminism. Its acceptance in Brazilian literature would bring a novel produced in a foundational period to it and one written by a woman portraying values presently considered as legitimate (see, e.g., Loureiro Vilarelhe).

However, the problem becomes more evident in the case of emerging systems which show discontinuity in the practice of some of the limits invoked in its "national being." Configured and legitimated from the eighteenth century, the belief that nations are gatherings of people linked to a certain territory with a dominant language, the coherence of the identity-literary-linguistic patrimony is manifested and exposed to a certain vulnerability. From this point of view, how can Brazilian or Angolan historiography argue that texts produced in colonial times — but which do not fulfill national elements within their repertoires — form part of the national patrimony of the nation? What does one do, in the Galician case, with texts in Spanish by Rosalia de Castro or with the whole Galeguist production by a "founding father" of the Galician nation as Manoel Murguia (conceived by Galician nationalism as one of the main constructors of Galician literary protosystem of the time) when almost all of it is written in Spanish? Admitting Murguia's work into the national patrimony, despite the articulation of coherence demanded from the language of the text and the nation's language, would be equivalent to admitting that Galician literature is bilingual and, as a consequence, that the nation is either bi-lingual or that it does not exist.

The elements that can appear as neutralized or secundarized in consolidated systems appear in cases such as Galician (or Angolan, Brazilian, Irish in their respective moments, and in their literary histories, as well as in the conformations of a national cohesive memory) and, from the other side, for cases such as Spanish, Portuguese, or British, as the first expression of a conflict, showing, on the one hand the systemic dearth of promoters of the systemization process and on the other the difficulties in continuing to impose their principles of vision and division upon the groups up until then dominant. This spawns contradictions in the configuration of national literary histories for each part since not all focused products and producers reunite the desired requirements for each nation, as well as different appropriation or disappropriation strategies. For example, in the Spanish case we would go from speaking about a Spanish literature produced in Spanish and of "minor" literatures or "vehicles in 'dialects'" in order to impose the vision of a Spanish literature produced in four languages (Catalan, Euskera, Galician Portuguese, and Castillian [Spanish]). Also important is the fact that agents within those Galician, Basque, or Catalan systemizations attempt to impose their vision of a Galician, Basque, Catalan literature different from Spanish.

I hold that the detection and/or deduction of those implied agents understood, implicitly or explicitly, as systemic omissions in these cases, and the eventual programmatic and/or practical formulation and intervention which they lead to must reach an important epistemological change. From the point of view of the systemization processes, these interpretations of systemic omissions are what I call projective deficits, "as far as they indicate an emptiness that wants to be filled (or a presence that wants to be substituted), a project that wants to be made" ("Norma" 975; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are by O'Dwyer), different according to the interests, forces, and groups in question. In such cases, the impossibility or incapability of agents for a maximum and systematic application of the proposals which form a part of their action program becomes evident. These circumstances, verifiable especially in contexts of political, economic, and cultural dependence on another system usually reveal not only the survival or developmental problems of the (proto-)system in question, but its own definition and limitation (its systemic rules) as well. Thus, the struggles for the delimitation of Angolan or Mozambican national literature and its systemic implications or the difficulties faced by Galeguist groups from the nineteenth century in imposing their own language as a systemic rule. For example, the Galician case begins in the mid-nineteenth century and, in a certain way, is still present. Along this arc we can verify struggles about what the demarcations of "Galician literature" as such would be (with its consequences in the systemic consideration): the use of Galician was one of the various elements proposed, next to Galician topics, the perspective used, or the Galician origin of writers, for example. The possibilities were, and are,



several, resulting from the selection or combination made by groups in question, with elements oscillating between its repertoire, systemic, sub- or protosystemic interpretation. Those who seek the construction of a politically autonomous community, for example, could and can propose and try to encourage Galician literature to be written in Galician or also written in Castilian or they might even renounce Galician and determine, at least provisionally, that Galician literature is defined by dealing with Galician topics or using Galician, or simply because it is written by Galicians.

It is enough to review the eloquently ambiguous designation and the consequent publicity of the most powerful print media in Galicia, *La Voz de Galicia* and of its "Biblioteca Gallega de Autores en Castellano." Note the title in the collection as "Writers of the Galician Library of Authors in Castilian also write in Galician." Or note the focus that texts originally written in Basque, Catalan, and Galician have in state media, such as the newspaper *El País*, where they are referred to when translated into Spanish as being from the original country's literatures, these being included in a wider consideration of Spanish literature. Now, the question of the "language to be used" — supported by an essentialist national nature since the romantic repertoire in nineteenth century — is the determining element for struggle, mostly in protosystemic processes. That is why, when "Irmandades da Fala," in 1917, proclaimed that Galician literature was the one written in Galician for which they received the rejection and hostility from media and authors like Pardo Bazán, Pérez Lugín, or Jaime Solá, the director of the most influential Galician review, *Vida Gallega*, and author of works with Galician topics in Spanish, like *Anduriña*. All of these writers claimed to be Galician writers and to represent Galician literature to the same extent as those from the *irmaos da fala*. This ambiguity operates as much with regards to the Spanish system or to Galicia as a Spanish subsystem as it does to the (proto)system of Galician literature. The problematic analysis of the works of Murguía and Castro are a good example of this, both in their contemporary reception as in posterior reconstructions of national (cultural) memory. *En Las orillas del Sar* (On the Banks of the Sar) is "Spanish literature" for some, because it is written in Spanish, and at the same time it is "Galician literature" for others, as a reflection of the opposed protosystemic and subsystemic criteria. For the Mozambican case, considering Rui Knofli as belonging to Mozambican national literature or not, does not fulfill all the national/systemic requirements: for some he is a colonial Portuguese writer in Mozambique, which directly affects, if only partially, the consideration of the configuration of Portuguese system itself (see Noa).

Cases like the above can be found throughout history in the systemic reconstructions of each considered social space. This will cause the (proto-)system to be introduced and developed in an ambiguous way, deliberately intending or running the risk of it being confused with subsystemic formulations (this is, introducing particularities in the way of producing some of their macro-factors — not only products, producers, repertoires, but also institutionalized elements, which are part of a system which is not intended to be substituted). In this sense, systemic rules oscillate between that nature and a functioning as repertoire rules (materials the use of which make products more "genuine" for macro-factors in question, but not to delimit systems), which is usually the peak of the allowable by dominant groups in the system to be emancipated from. Of course, these processes can be focused from the systems struggling to avoid losing that systemic area from which they wish to emancipate themselves and its subsequent social space. Attention to this system in the study of proto-systemic processes is, as one might imagine, essential. And there can even be cases of certain systemic rules which at times, united to others, are enough to be taken into account in a given (proto-)system, while they are not even necessary in other historical moments. It is a characteristic common to literary protosystems whether or not these become systems to change in the process of systemization of their systemic rules. This is owing to their promoters' (in)capability to practice hegemonically all their programmatic requirements and is applicable in its complex articulation to the promoted processes of "national" construction.

To fulfill these projective deficits in one or more of the systemic dimensions the agents or groups implicated can resort to importing, translating or producing materials and texts, the three constitutive sources of cultural and literary system repertoires, the weight and proportion of which determine the state of systems and their process (see Lambert). Regarding the first case, the transference of extrasystemic elements or materials, is a theoretical and applied framework Even-Zohar developed calling it a law of proliferation, especially prelevant in emerging cultural systems in contact or relation with other systems, after the reinforcement, legitimation, self-sufficiency, etc., of their systemic

project. These relations look different depending on accessibility, prestige, the imaginary, etc. and also depend on the consideration of the Other and the stereotypes circulating in each one of the systems in question (see, e.g., Machado and Pageaux; Pageaux). One of the systemic possibilities of communities and nations is turning to previously existing inter-systemic spaces or (co-)building them with other agents from systems with which they have common elements and these can occur from the sharing of systemic rules or predominant repertory materials and similar socio-political circumstances of inter-systems — i.e., the case of Basques, Catalans, and Galicians regarding the Spanish state in contemporary times — or by having a common referent of opposition in extending, legitimating, and defending themselves. Sometimes, the aggregation of factors causes groups or agents to have a prioritized space of action or eases the circulation of cultural products. Logically, the stability, pre-eminence, and permanence of circulation depends on, among other things, the importance to the different groups acting in them: sometimes, once the reason for the intersystemic construction has ceased, this is modified or it simply disappears (e.g., those of Portuguese African ex-colonies can go that way). These intersystemic cases deserve particular attention in a comparative process of literary activities in/of the Iberian Peninsula because they elucidate specific functions of literature: in the analysis and interpretation of relations, presences, and contacts of systems with others which they constitute or can constitute a cultural intersystem with such as Hispanophone, Lusophone, etc. intercultural systems. In some cases, such as the Galician, this can even act as a referent for possible reintegration and, conversely, a relationship can develop with a system from which emancipation is intended and where an attitude of rejection rather than reintegration is generated (see Beramendi). The relationship between the Galician and Portuguese can be seen as a "gathering" of systems which recognize themselves as using the same systemic rule — the Portuguese language — and that constitutes an intercultural system. In this sequence of analyses in the comparative frame, it would be useful to pay attention to different considerations about other systems.

In conclusion, I believe that the application of the comparative process between systems in order to analyze their modes of self-construction and the mechanisms of struggle, appropriation, and imposition of national literatures — together with their articulations in the field of power and the conditions they mark for literary systems — is worth our attention in scholarship. Such work could contribute to a clarification not only of how every system was constructed and how it works in certain social spaces, and the generation of world views within the community itself, but also how their agents observe and relate to others, synchronically and diachronically.

Note: The above article is a revised and translated version of Elias J. Torres Feijó, "Contributos sobre o objecto de estudo e metodologia sistémica. Sistemas literários e literaturas nacionais." *Bases Metodológicas para unha Historia Comparada das Literaturas da Península Ibérica*. Ed. Anxo Abuín González and Anxo Tarrío. Santiago de Compostela: U of Santiago de Compostela, 2004. 423-44. Copyright release to the author.

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