# Polysystem Theory Revisited:
# A New Comparative Introduction

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**Abstract**   In recent years, Itamar Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory seems to have lost much of its appeal for students of comparative literature, while more recent forms of systemic approaches to literature—most conspicuously, Pierre Bourdieu's praxiology and Siegfried Schmidt's and Niklas Luhmann's Constructivism—are becoming increasingly popular. To some extent, this is due to the misconception that the more recent forms of system theory have superseded their polysystemic predecessor. This is a misconception for two reasons. On the one hand, Polysystem Theory offers students of literature a framework for a wide-ranging and still topical study of a variety of cultural phenomena (that are not restricted to literature); on the other hand, the more recent system-theoretical approaches simply cannot replace Polysystem Theory, because they are interested in altogether different aspects of the literary system. This critical introduction aspires to rekindle interest in Polysystem Theory and briefly illustrates its application from the author's current research.

## 1. Polysystem Theory As a Dynamic Functionalist Approach

Polysystem Theory (PST) originated in the late 1960s in the writings of the Israeli literary and cultural theorist Itamar Even-Zohar as an alternative to the then current ahistorical, static, and text-oriented approaches to literature. The theory was further elaborated by other members of the Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics at Tel Aviv University, such as Gideon Toury, Zohar Shavit, and Rakefet Sheffy. Originally designed to deal with

specific problems in translation theory,[1] it soon became a comprehensive model to explain the relationships among various cultural systems as well as among the different subsystems of any particular cultural system. While initially Even-Zohar used the more modest term Polysystem *hypothesis*, by the 1990s, his work had acquired the status of a *theory* and was subsequently referred to as such. To a large extent, this theory is an elaboration of the principles of Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism, in particular the writings of Roman Jakobson, Boris Ejxenbaum, and Jurij Tynjanov dating from the late 1920s,[2] which gave rise to what Even-Zohar has labeled *Dynamic Functionalism* or *Dynamic Structuralism*.

Polysystem Theory is a *functionalist* approach because it sees all semiotic phenomena as belonging to one or more systems[3] and consequently analyzes these phenomena in terms of their functions and mutual relations. Functionalism, however, has often been associated with static system thinking or Structuralism, as exemplified by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure. Such a view obviously fails to take into account the insights formulated by the Russian Formalists—most conspicuously Tynjanov's (1971 [1927]) theses on literary evolution. It is therefore necessary to distinguish two separate functionalist programs, namely, "the theory of static systems" and "the theory of dynamic systems" (Even-Zohar 1979a, 1990b: 10). Whereas the former approach considers only the functional synchronic relations among the elements of a specific static system (that is, one fixed in time), the latter attempts to formulate rules regarding the diachronic as well as the synchronic relations within the system (i.e., it allows for the system's evolution in time). Furthermore, the semiotic system itself should be seen as a heterogeneous, open system; it is, "necessarily, a polysystem—a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent" (Even-Zohar 1990b:

1. And still used there, which is why this introduction will not pay too much attention to this specific field.
2. See Jakobson 1960; Ejxenbaum, 1971a [1926], 1971b [1929]; Jurij Tynjanov, 1971 [1927].
3. For Even-Zohar (1997d), a system is "the network of relations that can be hypothesized for a certain set of assumed observables ('occurrences'/'phenomena')." The notion clearly does not refer to "an entity in reality"; it is merely a functional working hypothesis, "dependent on the 'relations one is prepared to propose.'" This results in two possible definitions of the "literary system": "The network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called 'literary,' and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network" or "the complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them 'literary'" (Even-Zohar 1990c: 28). See also Fokkema and Ibsch 1992: 101–2; Fokkema 1997: 177–78; De Geest 1996: 63–76; and Tötösy de Zepetnek 1992: 21–38 for discussions of PST's systemic nature and for other systemic approaches.

11).[4] Though PST is an integrative approach that aims to be fairly comprehensive in its discussion of the different subsystems that make up the cultural polysystem, the concept of the heterogeneity of the system ensures its distinction from the more traditional—and vilified—theory of *Zeitgeist*, which considers culture a unified, homogeneous object of study (see Even-Zohar 1979a).[5] Thus, PST positions itself within a tradition which combines a functionalist-structuralist approach to semiotic phenomena with a view of the cultural system as a heterogeneous, dynamic entity to be studied in its synchronic and diachronic dimensions.

Another misconception about functionalism—apart from its association with static Structuralism—is that it is solely concerned with the end product of literary activity: the literary text. Even-Zohar (1990c: 29), however, stresses the fact that, since the mid-1920s, Ejxenbaum and Tynjanov "discussed, analyzed, and described [the literary 'product'] in terms of the intricate network of relations that condition it." In their writings, literary life became "*part and parcel* of the intricate relations which govern the aggregate of activities which make 'literature'" (30; emphasis in original).[6] Taking its cue from Russian Formalism, PST then focused on the dynamic relations that make up the literary polysystem rather than on the literary end products.

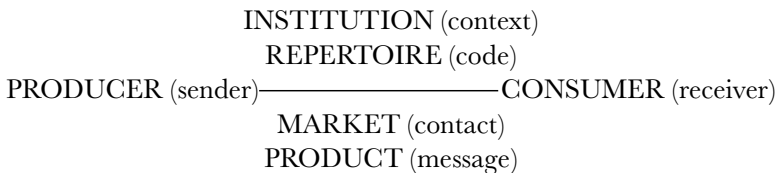## 2. Even-Zohar's Adaptation of Jakobson's Communication Scheme

An additional impetus for the contextualization of semiotic phenomena (specifically communication events) was given by Roman Jakobson in his well-known communication scheme. In this scheme, the *message* that is exchanged between an *addresser* and an *addressee* needs to be considered in relation to the specific *context* it refers to, to the *code* "fully, or at least par-

4. Because the system is a structured, fairly autonomous whole which, at the same time, relates to other systems, one should understand by the term *system* "both the idea of a closed set-of-relations, in which the members receive their values through their respective oppositions, *and* the idea of an open structure consisting of several such concurrent nets-of-relations" (Even-Zohar 1990b: 12). In other words, the system needs to be open and closed at the same time.

5. See, for example, Wellek and Warren 1942: 121–22 for an early form of criticism. See also Even-Zohar 1979a and Bourdieu 1996: 199–205.

6. See also Dimić 1990: 31, which discusses the Russian Formalists' and Prague Structuralists' evolution from syntactics ("the study of the internal, intertextual relationship of language and literature perceived as immanent systems") to an increasing interest in *semantics*, which widened the scope of literary studies to include "such traditional 'impurities' as politics, philosophy, art history, and biography." A third aspect, the study of *pragmatics*, was developed by the Prague Structuralists and, together with the syntactic and semantic aspects, was fully embraced by PST.

tially, common to the addresser and addressee," as well as to the *contact* that exists between them ("a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication" [Jakobson 1960: 353]). The revolutionary nature of this model lay in its regarding as *internal to the system* those factors that used to be considered extrasystemic restraints upon communication (i.e., the background against which communication takes place). A study of communication, then, can no longer be restricted to the mere message; it necessarily involves socio-contextual parameters of the communication situation. Even-Zohar adapts this model by replacing Jakobson's categories (found below in parentheses) with factors that influence socio-semiotic, cultural events in general:[7]

INSTITUTION (context)
REPERTOIRE (code)
PRODUCER (sender)——————————CONSUMER (receiver)
MARKET (contact)
PRODUCT (message)

The adapted scheme can be explained as follows:

> a CONSUMER may "consume" a PRODUCT produced by a PRODUCER, but in order for the "product" to be generated, then properly consumed, a common REPERTOIRE must exist, whose usability is constrained, determined, or controlled by some INSTITUTION on the one hand, and a MARKET where such a good can be transmitted, on the other.    (Even-Zohar 1997b)

The only radical change in Jakobson's original scheme concerns the substitution of *institution* for *context*, which are two completely different concepts. The *context* in Jakobson's theory pertains to elements in the outside world referred to in the message, "'referent' in another, somewhat ambiguous, nomenclature" (Jakobson 1960: 353), while *institution* refers to entities such as academies, universities, and the press. Consequently, Even-Zohar does not so much substitute one factor for the other as leave out one factor (because of its diminished relevance) and insert a completely new factor in its stead. He considers Jakobson's *context* to be implied "by the relations between producer and consumer via repertoire and market" (Even-Zohar 1997b). This strategy reflects an increasing interest in the polysystemic and institutional aspects of semiotic phenomena as well as a restricted interest in the purely mimetic function of literature. The model also introduces some of the principal terminology of PST.

7. The model was first designed to deal specifically with the factors at work in the literary system and was later reformulated to include all socio-semiotic events.

### 3. The Repertoire

#### 3.1. Definition

Perhaps the central notion in Even-Zohar's PST is that of *repertoire*, which designates "the aggregate of rules and materials which govern both the *making* and *handling*, or production and consumption of any given product" (Even-Zohar 1997b; emphasis in original). The notion largely corresponds to Jakobson's concept of *code*, except that the repertoire includes not only the *rules* for the production and consumption of semiotic phenomena, but also the *materials* themselves (individual elements as well as models).[8] It consists of those cultural items that a producer or consumer uses respectively to create or to understand and decode the product (or message). For the former items, Even-Zohar (1997b) uses the term "active repertoire"; in the latter case, the consumer of culture utilizes a "passive repertoire." This is not to say, however, that there are two different kinds of repertoire at work: the expressions in fact refer to an active and passive *use* of the repertoire.

#### 3.2. Cultural Repertoires As "Tool Kits" for Constructing Strategies of Action

For a better understanding of the functions of culture and repertoires, let us take a look at Ann Swidler's theories on this matter, to which Even-Zohar explicitly subscribes.[9] Unwilling to accept the traditional view—expressed by Max Weber and Talcott Parsons—that culture shapes action by "supplying ultimate ends or values toward which action is directed," Swidler (1986: 273–74) sets out to find a new model for culture's causal role in the creation of strategies of action. Instead of seeing cultural values as causal factors for action, she believes the process works the other way round: people organize their actions and values "to take advantage of cultural competence" (ibid.: 275). Consequently, if slum children do not "take advantage of opportunities to assimilate to the dominant culture in conduct and dress, acquire the appropriate educational credentials, and settle down to a steady job" (ibid.), this is *not* because they do not value the same things as the middle class, but simply because they lack the cultural competence or equipment to do so; they are not conversant with the rules of the game. Culture, then,

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8. In an earlier article, Even-Zohar (1990b: 17) defines the "repertoire" as "the aggregate of laws and elements (either single, bound, or total models) that govern the production of texts." If "literature" is seen as a system, rather than as a mere collection of texts, then the literary repertoire is "the shared knowledge necessary for producing (and understanding) a 'text,' as well as producing (and understanding) various other products of the literary system." This repertoire can be subdivided into repertoires for being a writer, a reader, or a literary agent, all of which are literary repertoires (Even-Zohar 1990c: 40).
9. Even-Zohar (1997b) refers to Swidler's notion of culture as a "tool kit" to support his distinction between active and passive repertoires.

becomes "a set of skills and habits" (ibid.), and one values whatever these skills give access to. One's actions, however, are never chosen in isolation. They are always part of what Swidler (ibid.: 276) calls "strategies of action," namely, "the larger ways of trying to organize a life . . . within which particular choices make sense, and for which particular, culturally shaped skills and habits . . . are useful." These lines of action inevitably follow certain prefabricated cultural patterns, and it is in those patterns that culture influences action.[10] If one wants to get married or buy a house, there are certain "ways to go about it," certain available patterns of action or procedures that lay out the steps to be taken. Yet, most ends will allow for various means; usually, several roads will lead to the same destination, and it is up to people to choose which of the available roads one wishes to take. Consequently, culture should be seen as "a 'tool kit' or repertoire . . . from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action" (ibid.: 277).

According to Swidler, this view involves "active, sometimes skilled users of culture," who consciously select items from the available repertoires, rather than "cultural dopes" whose means are determined by their cultural values (ibid.). Still, this view is somewhat problematic. Whereas in the older model, criticized by Swidler, human beings choose the goals they wish to achieve but not the direction taken (for cultural values direct the course of their action the way a switchman directs the route of the train), human beings are rendered equally passive in Swidler's model since "people will come to value ends for which their cultural equipment is well suited" (ibid.). She illustrates her model with the example of the ghetto kid who opts for group loyalty instead of individual achievement because he "can expertly 'read' signs of friendship and loyalty . . . or . . . can recognize with practised acuity threats to turf or dignity" (ibid.), while he lacks the social skills to be an apt player in the "game" of individual achievement. According to the traditional model, then, human beings choose the end but not the means; in Swidler's model they choose the means but not the end.

Perhaps a combination of the two models, which would grant human beings the greatest degree of freedom, would be more appropriate. In this view, people actively choose the ends they wish to achieve (ends which are, of course, culturally determined but still chosen from a large variety of options), and in order to arrive at those goals, they use culture as a "tool kit" from which they select the most expedient means. Applied to the "culture

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10. Even-Zohar (1990h: 208) refers to a similar situation when he asserts that, in established cultures with strongly codified repertoires, "the 'real world,' meaning in this context conditions which are inter-subjectively observable and experienceable, is replaced, so to speak, by *possible* worlds, i.e., prefabricated selections from the ready-made repertoire available to the culture."

of poverty" example, the ghetto youth would then select a purpose (such as becoming rich) and would likely choose to achieve this by means of "group loyalty" rather than through individual means. Changing social circumstances (e.g., the loss of friends, expulsion from the group) will probably lead to an individual pursuit of the end or to attachment to another group (depending on the available options). But the end, as well as the means, are chosen from a—culturally restricted—set of possible options.

An important question concerns the role of culture in the creation of social change. Swidler distinguishes two situations in which culture functions in strikingly different ways. In the first model, dealing with "settled lives," culture functions as a conservative force that sustains existing strategies of action: "cultural symbols reinforce an ethos, making plausible a world-view which in turn justifies the ethos" (ibid.: 278). A culture with settled lives allows for a great variety of these strategies. As a result, the relation between culture and social action is not very perceptible. Conversely, in a society with "unsettled lives," characterized by social transformation,

> established cultural ends are jettisoned with apparent ease, and yet explicitly articulated cultural models, such as ideologies, play a powerful role in organizing social life. . . . In such periods, ideologies—explicit, articulated, highly organized meaning systems (both political and religious)—*establish* new styles or strategies of action. . . . Bursts of ideological activism occur in periods when competing ways of organizing action are developing or contending for dominance.    (Ibid.; emphasis in original)

In these situations of social upheaval, culture directly shapes action; the chosen strategies of action clearly reflect ideological positions. According to Swidler (ibid.: 279), "explicit cultures"—those that are clearly committed to an ideology—"might well be called 'systems.' While not perfectly consistent, they aspire to offer not multiple answers, but one unified answer to the question of how human beings should live." These systems compete with other cultural models for the status of dominating worldview, and the outcome depends on the historical circumstances that accompany the struggle for dominance. The historical circumstances "determine which [ideologies] take root and thrive, and which wither and die" (ibid.: 280). Whereas settled cultures tend to restrain action because they have "the undisputed authority of habit, normality, and common sense," ideologies, which originate in unsettled cultures, are explicit calls for alternative modes of action (ibid.: 281).

Swidler's view of the nature of repertoires is fully endorsed by Even-Zohar, with substantive and unmistakable echoes. Her definition of the cultural

repertoire as a tool kit for the creation of strategies of action corresponds to what Even-Zohar dubs the "active repertoire."[11] In Swidler's terminology, the *passive* use of the repertoire can, then, be defined as "a tool kit of skills from which people construct their 'conceptual strategies,' i.e., those strategies with which they 'understand the world'" (Even-Zohar 1997b). Moreover, Swidler's discussion of the battle between ideologies that originate in unsettled lives—and whose outcome is determined by historical circumstances—finds its parallel in Even-Zohar's discussion of the intra- and intersystemic competition between various cultural repertoires jockeying for position (as will be discussed later).

### 3.3. The Structure of the Repertoire

The repertoire functions at two distinct levels. The first level is that of the individual elements of the repertoire, for which Even-Zohar coins the term "repertoremes" (or "culturemes" for cultural repertoires); the second level is that of *models*, which are "the combination of *elements* + *rules* + the *syntagmatic* ('temporal') *relations* imposable on the product" (Even-Zohar 1997b). The notion of "cultureme" as a unit of culture seems somewhat problematic, as it would be virtually impossible to distinguish such units in reality, even though the level of culturemes is supposedly the more concrete level of the two. The term *cultureme* seems a purely hypothetical, theoretical construct, for which Even-Zohar gives insufficient justification.[12] Not only is the concept problematic in terms of demarcation (drawing the line between cultural model and culture unit seems impossible), but the acquisition of culture also happens through clusters rather than via individual units, and PST therefore focuses on the functions of these clusters. These clusters or models provide producers with specific instructions about "what to do when" (Even-Zohar 1997b) and enable the receiver to interpret the

11. In this context, Even-Zohar (1997e) also makes a distinction between "culture as goods"—that is, cultural artifacts but also ideas and activities (such as books, paintings or performances of plays)—and "culture as tools," namely, "a set of operating tools for the organization of life, both on the collective and individual levels." The latter can be divided into passive and active tools, which correspond to the active and passive use of the repertoire.

12. "It is questionable whether culturemes are ever deciphered or acquired as isolated entities. However, I do not think we can do either logically or empirically without this level. There may be some use for the idea of culturemes as distinctive features" (Even-Zohar 1997b). In an earlier version of this article (1990c), Even-Zohar still had a third, intermediate level in the structure of the repertoire, that of *syntagms* (combinations of the individual elements), but he wisely left out this level in the later version, as this trifurcation would blur the distinctions even further. Possibly due to the lack of clarity in Even-Zohar's definition of the "cultureme," Patrick Cattrysse (1997: 52) interprets culturemes as "cultural communities," which is obviously a far cry from their intended meaning.

product.[13] Thus, they constitute active and passive repertoires. The repertoire and its constitutive models, however, should not be seen as "non-modifiable set[s] of commands"; though they often may seem ready-made scripts, their predictability and the leeway accorded to individual contributions usually vary, depending on the interactions with other models (Even-Zohar 1997b).[14] Users of the repertoire can therefore combine elements from different models as well as make mistakes in the implementation of a model, which, in turn, can lead to the establishment of a new model. Highly competent producers of culture can also introduce deviations of the normative model quite consciously, thus creating new options (Even-Zohar 1997b). In those cases, the personality of the producer of the cultural artifact is often as important as the work itself: the ideological content attributed to the work (such as the "encouragement to act for 'freedom,' 'heroism,' 'patriotism'") is often not so much derived from the work itself as from "what one has heard of the 'writers'" (Even-Zohar 1997c).

### 3.4. Primary versus Secondary Models

Now comes a distinction borrowed from the Tartu semioticians. Depending on the nature of its models, the repertoire can either be *primary* or *secondary*.[15] The latter refers to conservative repertoires; these are made up of models that result in highly predictable end products. If the repertoire is regularly restructured through the insertion of new, unpredictable elements, the repertoire is innovative or "primary." In practice, this dichotomy is hard to maintain, as the notion of "model" always implies a certain degree of

13. An example of a model would be "the church wedding," which is really a set of syntagmatic instructions: it tells the actors what to do when, and the model enables the observers to interpret the event. It would be difficult, however, to sum up the various culturemes that make up this model. The wedding banquet, for example, is one of the units that constitute the "wedding" model, but the banquet is a complete cultural model in itself.

14. In this respect, Sheffy (1997: 42–43) correctly points out that "the idea of modeling includes two different aspects which are often confused: a) *replication*: in this sense, the model is a detailed abstract pattern equally repeated in any number of concrete copies [which does not allow for individual variation], and b) *aspiration*: in this sense, the model consists of certain exemplary items serving as a source for imitation, without rendering a consistent pattern to be fully realized in all its manifestations." The latter, more creative type of modeling is closer to the notion of models used by Even-Zohar.

15. The primary/secondary distinction originated in the Tartu School. Lotman (1976) distinguishes between semiotic systems that transmit primary (or simple, system-internal) information, and secondary information (related to the system's environment). Traffic signs are an example of the first kind, poetry of the second. The former semiotic system can be static, while the latter kind is necessarily dynamic (i.e., ever changing by incorporating extrasystemic elements). Even-Zohar, however, considers repertoires "primary" if they regularly incorporate new elements.

predictability. Even-Zohar therefore acknowledges that the notion is purely historical: "It does not take long for any 'primary' model, once it is admitted into the center of the canonized system, to become 'secondary,' if perpetuated long enough" (1990b: 21). In that case, a process of reduction takes place and the model becomes simplified.[16] Heterogeneous models are consequently reduced to homogeneity.

While the creation of a cultural repertoire may seem the result of a spontaneous, organic growth within a society, shaped by the prevalent market forces, Even-Zohar (1994) modifies this view by introducing the notion of culture planning. Culture planning takes place "once any body, individual or group, holding whatever position, starts to act for the promotion of certain elements and for the suppression of other elements." There is an interesting link with Swidler's strategies of action in that groups involved with culture planning can select certain elements from the cultural repertoire to compose their strategies of action, but their strategies can also involve the promotion of these items or the repertoire as a whole. In both cases, what is really at stake is the maintenance or attainment of "power" in the sociocultural system.

## 4. Product, Producer, Consumer, Institution, and the Market

The other factors in Even-Zohar's adaptation of the Jakobsonian communication scheme need not be discussed in great detail, as their definitions do not vary significantly from what is commonly understood by the terms used. The term *product* refers to "any performed set of signs and/or materials," including "a given behavior." As the outcome of any action, the product can be "an utterance, a text, an artifact, an edifice, an 'image,' or an 'event'" (Even-Zohar 1997b). It is, in short, "the concrete instance of culture" (ibid.). The production of these cultural items always depends on a repertoire, though, as mentioned before, they are not necessarily the result of the strict implementation of a model. The products of the activity called "literature" include not only texts but also "images, moods, interpretations of 'reality,' and options of action" (ibid.). Even textual fragments (such as are used in daily conversations in the form of quotations or narrated episodes) are literary products, for texts hardly ever circulate on the market— or become canonized—in their entirety (Even-Zohar 1990c: 44).

The *producer* is "an individual who produces, by actively operating a

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16. Even-Zohar applies the terms "primary" and "secondary" not only to the repertoire but also to its constitutive models and even to its end products: "Products of the conservative system I label 'secondary'" (cited in Segal 1982: 273).

repertoire, either repetitively producible, or 'new' products" (Even-Zohar 1997b). The product can be a concrete cultural artifact, or a model derived from such artifacts, or even a full repertoire, if the producer is a ruler or an intellectual allowed to create new cultural options. At the opposite pole of the scheme is situated the *consumer*, who is quite simply "an individual who handles a ready-made product by passively operating a repertoire" (ibid.). This involves decoding (understanding) the message or product by identifying "relations (connections) between the product and one's knowledge of a repertoire" (ibid.). Every member of a community is a consumer of its cultural artifacts, even if only indirectly or fragmentarily—in everyday life, one inevitably "consumes" scores of textual or visual fragments.

The term *institution* refers to "the aggregate of factors involved with the control of culture" (Even-Zohar 1997b). It includes ministerial offices, academies, educational institutions, mass media, and any agent that affects the acceptance or rejection of models and norms. On the one hand, the institution acts as a conservative force (the keeper of culture); on the other hand, it can support the creation of new models or repertoires. Needless to say, "the" institution is really an amalgam of separate agents, characterized by internal conflict. Those agents who manage to occupy the center of the institution are commonly referred to as the *establishment*. It is these dominant agents or institutions that determine the status of a cultural artifact: "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" (Shavit 1991: 233).

A factor closely related to the institution is the *market*, which Even-Zohar (1997b) defines as "the aggregate of factors involved with the selling and buying of culture repertoire, i.e., with the promotion of types of consumption." Like the institution, the market is an intermediary "between social forces and culture repertoires" (ibid.), but its decisions are geared toward shorter periods of time. Both the institution and the market are social factors that determine whether a repertoire is promoted or repudiated and, thus, whether a repertoire functions or fails (Even-Zohar 2000: 401). Because the "products" that are marketed need not necessarily be cultural artifacts (see above), the boundaries between institutions and markets become very blurred. Consequently, royal courts, literary salons, and even schools could be seen as both institutions and markets.

### 5. The Polysystem's Intra- and Subsystemic Relations

#### 5.1. Center versus Periphery

Even-Zohar's analysis of the socio-semiotic system's internal structure—
that is, the intra-relations that hold between the different subsystems—is
grafted on Tynjanov's theory of literary evolution, to which he added a
synchronic perspective (Segal 1982: 266–68). For Even-Zohar, every cul-
tural polysystem is characterized by stratification. In every system, he dis-
tinguishes a *center* ("official culture as manifested *inter alia* in standard lan-
guage, canonized literature, patterns of behavior of the dominating classes"
[1990b: 14]) and a *periphery*. Both of these strata can be further subdivided
into different subsystems or *genres* (see Even-Zohar 1973: 40). Though it is
sometimes possible to distinguish more than one center, "in historical cases,
centers are stratified in such a way that chiefly one eventually succeeds in
dominating the whole" (Even-Zohar 1990f: 88). Due to the heterogeneity
of the cultural system, there are always several repertoires competing for
dominance. As they become more prestigious or less, these repertoires can
move from the periphery to the center and vice versa.

#### 5.2. Canonicity

In Even-Zohar's view, the distinction between the central and peripheral
strata corresponds to the more traditional distinction between "canonized"
and "noncanonized" cultural phenomena. For the literary system in par-
ticular, the term *canon* refers to "those literary norms and works (i.e., both
models and texts) which are accepted as legitimate by the dominant circles
within a culture and whose conspicuous products are preserved by the com-
munity to become part of its historical heritage" (Even-Zohar 1990b: 15).
However, the concept of canonicity is somewhat more complex in PST
than the traditional notion, because this theory deals chiefly with "dynamic
canonicity":

> It therefore seems imperative to clearly distinguish between two different uses of
> the term "canonicity," one referring to the level of texts, the other to the level of
> models. For 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.   (Ibid.: 19)

As canonicity implies being situated at the center of the cultural system, the
center is marked by an opposition between constant and changing strata,

due to the twofold nature of canonicity. The constant stratum is that of extant texts, which essentially belong to the past; the changing stratum consists of models which, as guidelines for cultural production, are geared toward the future (Shavit 1991: 232). Rakefet Sheffy, however, is correct in asserting that this view of canonicity is far too restrictive, as it is focused on literary innovation via models. Whereas for Even-Zohar, the constant stratum in the canon (or the center of the literary system) is wholly reserved for individual texts, Sheffy points out that one should also take into account the existence of canonized repertoires or models that are never deprived of their literary value. These are, in other words, canonized models, "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" (Sheffy 1990: 517).

The problem really boils down to Even-Zohar's oversimplified equation of *canon* and *center* and his confusion between *prestige* and "the potential to serve as models for imitation in generating new texts" (ibid.: 518). Clearly, items can be canonized ("in the sense that they are largely recognized and their prestige acknowledged") but not central ("in the sense that they do not meet contemporary prevailing literary norms nor serve as active models for producing new texts") (ibid.). The canonical status of these models is thus not at all related to a central, influential position in the literary system. An example of such a canonized item would be the Shakespearean sonnet. It is obviously part of the canon, even at times when it is not "fashionable" and does not serve as a model for further text production—in other words, when it does not belong to the center of the literary polysystem.[17] In fact, the reverse of Even-Zohar's view seems to hold true: "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" (ibid.). Canonical texts and models will often be considered outdated or "holy" and they are therefore not likely to be emulated.

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17. In Even-Zohar's view, such a model would no longer be canonical (as model) once it has moved from the center to the periphery (i.e., once it has ceased to be influential)—a notion that clearly does not correspond to the commonly held view of the canon, in which Shakespeare and the Shakespearean sonnet are undoubtedly some of the main representatives (even if they have not always been part of the canon). Though one could argue that the popular genre of the novel now occupies the center of the literary polysystem—which was once occupied by the Shakespearean sonnet—it obviously did not push the Shakespearean sonnet out of the *canon*. Literary evolution not only entails the displacement of certain models from the center and their subsequent disappearance; it 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" (Sheffy 1990: 515).

It might be best, then, not to use Even-Zohar's ambiguous concept of the canon. Instead, one would reserve the term *canonized* for those items—texts and models—that enjoy or enjoyed cultural prestige, while the term *central* would refer to those texts and models that, at a certain point in time, influence the production of new texts.[18] If this terminological distinction is upheld, PST is, strictly speaking, not very interested in problems of canon formation, as influential models or repertoires should not be seen as examples of "dynamic canonicity" but rather of "dynamic centrality."

Moreover, PST focuses on tracing such (literary) models rather than dealing with individual works, though, obviously, one can only conceive of a model by means of representative texts. To draw a clear distinction between the individual text that enjoys cultural prestige (i.e., an item of the traditional canon) and the text as "a potential set of instructions" (i.e., a model in the "dynamic canon"), Even-Zohar (1990b: 19) sometimes talks about *canonical* texts and *canonized* models. While every text producer of course wants to see his or her text become canonical (accepted as a valuable cultural contribution), the greatest achievement is to have one's text canonized, as a model to be followed.[19] In a sense, the acceptance of the model also implies the perpetuation of the writer's career. If the model becomes peripheral, the author needs to look for new models in order to remain successful. Usually, however, authors stick to one model, whose loss of prestige entails the author's movement from the center to the periphery of the system, even if the texts are valuable in themselves. For the dynamics in the literary system operate through models, rather than through individual texts.

18. Examples of texts that are central—as texts, not as models—are perhaps less obvious but not unimaginable. In that case, a specific item from the text (e.g., a character or a fictitious location in a detective novel) would be used in other texts (e.g., in a romantic novel or a poem). If one accepts the strict separation of the dichotomies "central versus peripheral" and "canon versus noncanon," the concept of canonicity is further complicated by new possibilities offered for categorization by means of combinations of the four terms mentioned. In that case, the four possible statuses of models and artifacts within the cultural system are: (1) canonical + central: this would be the logical situation, where items or models that enjoy prestige in the system influence the production of other cultural items or models in the system (though Sheffy points out that this does not count for older models and artifacts); (2) canonical + peripheral: here belongs the case of the Shakespearean sonnet and other models and items that are prestigious, though no longer influential; (3) noncanonical + central: this would be the case of models and artifacts that are popular and therefore occasion much imitation, even though they are far from prestigious (i.e., they enjoy no critical acclaim and are not taught in schools or colleges); (4) noncanonical + peripheral: this is the position of works and models that are generally considered inferior, both by other artists (who do not use them as models) and by critics and institutions (who do not grant them prestige).
19. As pointed out, a more accurate formulation would be that "a text producer wishes to see the model, derived from his or her text, become *central*" instead of *canonized*.

### 5.3. Relations between Center and Periphery

It is the dynamic tensions between the center and the periphery that guarantee the viability of the cultural system, because the center, which is usually prone to petrification and automatization, needs the renewal offered by elements penetrating from the periphery. If, for some reason, this renewal fails to materialize, then the repertoires used in the center become stereotypes and lose their vitality: the system is unable to evolve, and it collapses due to its inability to address the ever-changing needs of society. Consequently, it is important to draw a distinction between the related concepts of "change" and "instability," "staticity" and "stability." A system is not stable because it is static, for stability should not be identified with petrification:

> stability or instability of repertoire do not reflect, or necessarily generate, stability or instability of the system. . . . A system undergoing permanent, steady, and well-controlled change may adequately be considered stable simply because it perseveres. . . . Therefore, crises or catastrophes in a polysystem (i.e., occurrences which call for radical change, either by internal or external transfer), if they can be controlled by the system, are signs of a vital, rather than a degenerate, system.   (Even-Zohar 1990b: 26)

It is also important to note that the primary/secondary opposition does not correspond to the central/peripheral opposition. A repertoire or model is not primary because it is situated at the center of the polysystem. Indeed, the opposite seems to be the case. Repertoires and models at the center tend to be consolidated and, therefore, secondary (in an attempt to maintain their central position by blocking out innovative, threatening elements), while the peripheral elements are usually marked by dynamic innovation. But again, the overall dynamic nature of the system needs to be stressed, for it will not take long before these consolidated, secondary repertoires at the center are replaced by new repertoires.

   The shift of peripheral elements to the center never takes place without resistance from the more prestigious elements at the center who see their monopoly threatened. These central elements will only allow for such change in the system as will enable them to maintain their dominance: "Thus, whenever domination is available by perpetuation (i.e., by nonchange), the extent of change will be minimal to nil. On the other hand, whenever non-change would mean loss of domination, change will become the leading principle for the system" (Even-Zohar 1990f: 89). However, if the center fails to adjust to new circumstances (which usually implies taking over certain elements from the periphery in a modified form), the entire center is liable to be displaced: "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 1990b: 17). Those who cling to this displaced repertoire become epigones operating on the margins of the literary system. As a result, the periphery houses innovating models and repertoires that have not (or not yet) been able to penetrate the core of the cultural system as well as those that used to belong to the center but have now become obsolete. The status of a certain repertoire within this hierarchy is never determined by its internal characteristics; it is instead the struggle within the semiotic system that results in the selection of specific repertoires for centralization. The outcome of this struggle is influenced by the dynamics of the system itself as well as by "the socio-cultural dynamics in general" (Even-Zohar 1990f: 88). Whether specific items gain admittance to the center depends

> on such parameters as the nature of stratification (whether it is "young" or "old"/ "established"), as well as the volume ("richness") of the repertoire available. Thus, when the use of the home repertoire is blocked by some of the factors mentioned above (and others), it is interference with another activity, either within the same culture or in a different one, that becomes the major means for supplying the needs of change.    (Ibid.: 92)

In other words, systems in crisis, characterized by some kind of social or cultural anemia, are especially susceptible to change: to a reordering of the system's internal structure (a migration of cultural elements between center and periphery) or to the intrusion of foreign elements from adjacent systems. The only necessary condition for change is that an alternative repertoire is available, though this availability can be not just a condition but an important generator of drastic alterations of the system. This view of cultural systems in crisis being extremely open to intrusions from various repertoires (from within or without the system) corresponds to Swidler's assumption that, in cultures with "unsettled lives," several ideologies start vying for position in an attempt to replace the common, central repertoires.

## 6. Polysystem Theory and Bourdieu's Praxiological Approach

PST's stress on the importance of models as prefabricated options that constrain one's action within a specific culture, combined with the view that the position of any model within the hierarchy of the cultural polysystem is governed by socioeconomic factors, such as institutions and the market, logically enables a rapprochement between PST and sociological approaches to the socio-semiotic phenomena under study. Hence, researchers interested in PST have increasingly paid attention to the writings of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (see, for example, most of Even-Zohar's articles

in the 1990s, De Geest 1996, Lambert 1997, Sheffy 1997). In fact, Even-Zohar (1997b) sometimes uses Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as if the polysystemic view of cultural systems and Bourdieu's approach were perfectly interchangeable. There are, however, some important differences between PST and Bourdieu's praxiology.[20] First, Bourdieu and Even-Zohar have radically different views on the ontological status of the (literary) system: hypothetical versus actual and heteronomous versus autonomous. Second, PST conflicts with praxiology about the deterministic nature of the habitus.

A marriage of the two theories seems doomed from the start. Bourdieu (1996: 201) openly criticizes the Russian Formalists—and Even-Zohar's subsequent PST bears the brunt of his criticism—because "they continue (especially Tynjanov) to believe in the immanent development of [the literary] system, and, like Michel Foucault, they remain very close to the Saussurean philosophy of history when they assert that everything which is literary (or, with Foucault, scientific) can be determined only by previous states of the 'literary (or scientific) system.'"[21] For Bourdieu, such an approach is useless if it does not take into account the social positions of the authors involved. However, this criticism does Russian Formalism and Even-Zohar no justice, for they sharply diverge from Saussure's static, homogeneous Structuralism. In fact, their linkage with Saussurian Structuralism is somewhat bizarre, given Even-Zohar's continued interest in contextual factors and intersystemic relations.

The gap between the two theories, then, would be fairly easy to bridge if it were not for some additional differences. Whereas for Even-Zohar, the systemic nature of literature is a working hypothesis whereby to deal with the hypothesized relations among a set of assumed observables, which do not necessarily correspond to any entity in reality, Bourdieu (1985: 17) defines the "system of production and circulation of symbolical goods" (i.e., cultural products) as "the system of *objective* relations among different institutions, functionally defined by their role in the division of labour of production, reproduction, and diffusion of symbolical goods" (my emphasis). Fields are the "social spaces where the agents who contribute to the production of cultural works are situated" (Bourdieu 1991: 4; my translation). Moreover, these fields of symbolical goods (for example, the literary field) are fairly autonomous in Bourdieu's view, which goes directly against Even-

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20. For earlier comparisons, see De Geest 1996, Geldof 1997, and Sheffy 1997.

21. Still, Bourdieu (1996: 241–43) considers the history of the novel a long effort to "kill the novelistic" and remarks that "what happens in the field is more and more linked to a specific history of the field, and hence it becomes more and more difficult to *deduce* it directly from the state of the social world at the moment under consideration" (emphasis in original). Here, Bourdieu comes close to doing precisely what he deplores in Russian Formalism and PST.

Zohar's thesis of an open, heteronomous literary system. Consequently, the relations between the literary field and adjacent fields (cultural or other) are of minor importance for Bourdieu (1996: 199):

> If one realizes that each field—music, painting, poetry, or in another order, economy, linguistics, biology, etc.—has its autonomous history, which determines its specific rules and stakes, one sees that the interpretation by reference to the history unique to the field (or to the discipline) is the preliminary for an interpretation with respect to the contemporary context, whether one is dealing with other fields of cultural production or with political and economic production.

In keeping with this view, Bourdieu consistently treats the various fields of symbolical goods as autonomous entities and analyzes their internal, field-specific characteristics.[22] Hence, changes in the literary field are mainly independent of external changes, though they "may seem to determine them because they accompany them chronologically" (ibid.: 239). Even so, the outcome of clashes inside the literary field still depends "on the correspondence they have with external clashes (those which unfold at the core of the field of power or the social field as a whole) and the support that one group or another may find there" (ibid.: 252). So external evolutions can support evolutions internal to the literary field (for example, when social changes offer a new reading public to new authors, with both the authors and the audience occupying comparable positions in, respectively, the literary and the social hierarchy), but any determinative effects are entirely lacking in Bourdieu's view. In fact, if there is any determination, it tends to work the other way round: the producers of cultural goods can use their power, which derives from "their capacity to produce a systematic and critical representation of the social world," in order to "mobilize the virtual force of the dominated and to help to subvert the established order in the field of power" (ibid.).

A third and major difference between Bourdieu's praxiology and PST

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22. This is not to say, of course, that Bourdieu believes in the immanent development of the literary system—this is precisely what he charges Russian Formalism with. For him, rather, the evolution of the literary field remains influenced by system-inherent impetuses, namely, the respective positions of the producers of symbolical goods within the literary field as well as the positions they take in their specific works: "The science of the work of art thus takes as its very own object the *relationship between two structures*, the structure of objective relations between positions in the field of production (and among the producers who occupy them), and the structure of objective relations among the position-takings in the space of the works" (Bourdieu 1996: 233; emphasis in original). Thus, changes in the literary field depend on the battles between agents and institutions for their position in the literary field but also on the positions that have already been taken (in literary works), which in their turn determine the *possible* positions within the field.

involves the concept of habitus[23] and its determinative nature. Bourdieu (1985: 36) writes:

> Because subjective intentions and unconscious dispositions [which constitute the habitus] contribute to the effectiveness of the objective structures to which they are adjusted, their interlacing tends to guide each agent to his "natural niche" in the structure of the field.[24]

On the basis of similar statements, Dirk de Geest (1996: 34, 75) points out that "a merging of systems and field theory is far from obvious"; it is not at all clear "to what extent Bourdieu's ideas of 'class' and his rather deterministic view of the habitus can be lined up with the perspective of the polysystem theory" (my translation). Similarly, and quite convincingly, Sheffy (1997: 38) argues that Bourdieu's deterministic conception of the habitus

> does not allow for the heterogeneity and dynamics of cultural repertoric options, nor for the leeway for individual variations within a given social formation . . . or for the possibility that one individual actor will be able to use various repertoires in relation to the various figurations relevant to his habitus (e.g., family, occupation, ethnicity, etc.). What lacks in this view is the understanding, so integral to the notion of cultural repertoires in the Polysystem theory, of the *conventional* nature, and hence the relative *autonomy*, of repertoric options (subject to the dynamic of models formation . . . ), which, once established, may not only endure beyond the social conditions which initiated them, but also *constrain*—or even *initiate*—other social formations.[25]

With this assertion, Sheffy obviously sides with Swidler (1986: 276), who acknowledges the usefulness of Bourdieu's concept of "habitus"—because

23. The habitus can be defined as the set of internalized dispositions that mediate between one's (or a group's) social position and one's practices, causing agents who share the same habitus to favor the same options.

24. In Bourdieu's (1971: 109–10) original text, the deterministic nature of the habitus is even more outspoken than in the somewhat reductive translation: "l'entrelacement des déterminismes objectifs et de la détermination subjective tend a conduire chaque agent, fût-ce au prix de quelques essais et erreurs, dans le 'lieu naturel' *qui lui est par avance assigné et reservé par la structure du champ* (my emphasis). See also Koenraad Geldof's (1997: 86) assessment: "Though it be true that Bourdieu sometimes seems to hesitate as to the *degree* of determination implied in the notion of habitus, his analytical *practice* invariably shows that we are dealing with a principle of strong *determination* which, according to Bourdieu, lies at the basis, at the *origin* of social practices" (my translation).

25. Strangely enough, Even-Zohar (1997b) himself never problematizes the possible relations between the repertoire and Bourdieu's concept of the habitus: "A significant contribution to the link between the socially generated repertoire and the procedures for individual inculcation and internalization is Bourdieu's *habitus* theory. . . . This repertoire of models acquired and adopted (as well as adapted) by individuals and groups in a given milieu, and under the constraints of the prevailing system relations dominating this milieu, is labeled *habitus*."

it corresponds to the "culturally shaped skills and habits" that are utilized for the construction of strategies of action and that influence the goals one wishes to achieve—yet clearly departs from Bourdieu's deterministic point of view in defining culture as a tool kit from which different agents actively select desired items. Only such a dynamic and heterogeneous view of cultural repertoires can account for radical shifts in authors' repertoric selections, despite their continued attachment to their social group and, therefore, to the shared habitus.

Still, to do Bourdieu justice, one has to admit that Sheffy's criticism is based on a somewhat simplified and reductive rendering of the habitus's function. For, in later writings, Bourdieu (1996: 257) emphasizes that "social origin is not, as is sometimes believed, the basis of a linear series of mechanical determinations, with the profession of the father determining the position occupied, and that in turn determining the position-takings." Instead, literary production depends upon a combination of different factors, such as the social positions and the structure of the field with its space of possibilities and positions taken.[26] Yet, this does not diminish the determinative nature of the habitus, on which the option chosen from the space of possibilities still ultimately depends.

In spite of these radical differences, there are some similarities between PST's analysis of intrasystemic relations and Bourdieu's praxiological analysis of the internal structure of the literary field, which enable a modest rapprochement between parts of the two theories, though never between the theories in their entirety. Both transcend the level of system-internal analyses: PST by discussing extrasystemic influences on elements within the system, Bourdieu by considering the position of the literary field as a whole in the structure of the field of power (i.e., the position, in terms of power and autonomy, of the literary field in comparison to the economic and political ones). These approaches are obviously so different that the resemblances can only hold on the level of the internal structure of the system and the field, respectively.

Both theories, then, consider the literary system or field a place where struggles take place for the attainment or preservation of cultural prestige or—to use Bourdieu's terms—of cultural or symbolical capital. Whereas Bourdieu focuses on the positions of authors as agents in this field, Even-

26. "In short, the only way external determinations are exercised is through the intermediary of specific forces and forms of the field, that is, after having undergone a *restructuration*. . . . Economic or morphological determinations are only exercised through the specific structure of the field and they may take completely unexpected routes" (Bourdieu 1991: 17; my translation).

Zohar (1990b: 19–20) tends to focus on the changing positions of models, but the movement of the model obviously entails the movement of the author who creates or uses it. Moreover, the struggles that take place within the field are, in Bourdieu's (1996: 223) view, inevitably conflicts of definition. Thereby, each party "is trying to impose the *boundaries* of the field most favourable to its interests, or . . . the best definition of conditions of true membership of the field (or of titles conferring the right to the status of writer, artist, or scholar)" (emphasis in original). PST, on the other hand, focuses on the displacement of models within a given system—which causes the system's perpetual and dynamic reorganization—but again this movement of models necessarily entails redefinitions of what is considered legitimately literary (or artistic) and thus allowed into the center. Consequently, the links between the two theories are only present by implication rather than based on common focuses or objects of study.

Still, some of Bourdieu's claims about the literary field directly correspond to Even-Zohar's views on the literary system. Here, for example, is Bourdieu (1996: 233–34) on the dynamic nature of the field, explained by the intrusion of new groups of producers:

> When a new literary or artistic group imposes itself on the field, the whole space of positions and the space of corresponding possibilities, hence the whole problematic, find themselves transformed because of it: with its accession to existence, that is, to difference, the universe of possible options finds itself modified, with formerly dominant productions, for example, being downgraded to the status of an outmoded or classical product. . . . Each position-taking (thematic, stylistic, and so on) is defined (objectively and sometimes intentionally) in relation to the universe of position-takings . . . The meaning and value of a position-taking (artistic genre, particular work, and so on) change automatically, even while the adopted stance remains identical, when the universe of the substitutable options simultaneously offered to producers and consumers is changed.

The idea expressed in the first sentence of the quote clearly corresponds to Even-Zohar's description of how central authors and their repertoires are relegated to the periphery and become epigones once new repertoric items penetrate into the system.[27] The remaining part of the quote shows that Bourdieu's thinking is fundamentally related to Structuralism and systemic thinking. This provides some additional suggestions that there are indeed

27. In this context, Bourdieu (1991: 24) also states that it is "the battle between the keepers and the challengers that creates the history of the field: the aging of authors, schools, or works is the result of the fight between those who have *made their mark* and who fight to survive, and those who cannot make their mark in their turn without relegating to the past those who have an interest in freezing time, in defending and conserving (my translation; emphasis in original).

similarities in Bourdieu's and Even-Zohar's thinking. It also renders Bourdieu's criticism of PST for its adherence to some (dynamic) Structuralist tenets all the more questionable. However, despite these correspondences, the foregoing discussion demonstrates that one should tread warily when trying to align Bourdieu's praxiology and Polysystem Theory.

## 7. The Polysystem's Inter-Relations with Other Polysystems

### 7.1. Conditions for Inter-Systemic Relations

The postulated characteristics of the polysystem's intra-relations also extend to the inter-relations between the polysystem and the adjacent polysystems. For if one generalizes the relationships among the various subsystems of a particular polysystem, one arrives at the idea of a "mega-polysystem," consisting of various polysystems belonging to different cultures. Needless to say, these notions hurl one toward infinity, as every subsystem of a polysystem is in itself a polysystem consisting of several polysystemic (sub)subsystems, while every mega-polysystem is the subsystem of a still larger entity. A scientific equivalent would be the line that runs from atoms to galaxies, from nuclear physics to astrophysics. These systemic constellations are always changing, in line with the borders among as well as within systems. This accounts for the dynamic aspect of every polysystem.

The interrelations can hold among different polysystems that are part of one and the same culture (e.g., literature and philosophy) as well as those belonging to different cultures or communities. The former kind rests "on the assumption that any semiotic (poly)system (such as language or literature) is just a component of a larger (poly)system—that of 'culture,' to which it is subjugated and with which it is isomorphic—and therefore correlated with this greater whole and its other components" (Even-Zohar 1990b: 22). It is important to study the relations among the various components, for their "contact" is a basic factor in "the evolution of any open system" (Yahalom 1979: 64; my translation). A unidirectional relationship between, for example, the social situation and the literary repertoire can no longer be postulated, but only a "mutual give-and-take" (Even-Zohar 1990b: 23). For the study of such relationships, nonliterary texts assume great importance:

> It is useful to study the contacts between a national literary system and other cultural systems through systems of nonliterary verbal texts because, in this way, the concept of the double function and the double ontological level of those contacts becomes more apparent. This concerns (a) the entry of new models of reality (social, ideological, political) into the literary system[;] (b) the reshaping of textual models in the literary system. In this context, one can conceive of sys-

tems of non-literary verbal texts as providing the literary system with [adaptable reality] models. These models are the verbal organizations of social, political, and ideological models.    (Yahalom 1979: 71)

However, even the study of literary texts per se should not be pursued along too restrictive lines. "If one accepts the polysystem hypothesis," Even-Zohar (1990b: 13) warns, "then one must also accept that the historical study of literary polysystems cannot confine itself to the so-called 'masterpieces,' even if some would consider them the only *raison d'être* of literary studies in the first place."[28] Value judgments that exclude in advance specific works from the corpus investigated should therefore be avoided in a polysystemic approach. This is not to say, however, that value judgments are alien to PST: they do matter, but only as objects of investigation, for it is due to them that the polysystem is stratified. Failure to include noncanonized strata in the analysis of the literary polysystem can obfuscate the dynamics behind interference:

links between literatures have often gone undetected even when they exercised a decisive influence on these literatures' development and nature. Links have tended to be sought only in the expected places. Yet intercultural contacts in general, and inter-literary contacts in particular, are not always so simple and overt as they might seem, and it is not always the most famous and central writers who serve as the source for features borrowed and adopted by a target literature. More often than not, this transfer, or movement of models, takes place through less renowned writers who have not gained a central canonized position and who were likely to have been quickly forgotten after their deaths, yet who might have been extremely popular and widely read. This may have been due partly to the fact that the models such writers tend to use are more transparent and "digestible," but partly, too, it is precisely their non-central position in the literary polysystem which makes an easier penetration possible.    (Even-Zohar 1990g: 135–36)

The objective of PST, however, goes beyond the study of the (literary) polysystem of one particular community. Its second major aspiration is

to deal with the particular conditions under which a certain literature may be interfered with by another literature, as a result of which properties are transferred from one polysystem to another. For instance, if one accepts the hypothesis that peripheral properties are likely to penetrate the center once the capacity of the center (i.e., the repertoire of the center) to fulfill certain functions has been weakened (Shklovskij's second law), then there is no sense in denying that the

28.  See also Even-Zohar 1979b: "Far too little research is done on cultural texts without reputation and especially on texts which, though saturated with the traits of *belles-lettres*, do not have the function of literary texts and are not institutionalized as such" (my translation).

very same principle operates on the inter-systemic level as well.    (Even-Zohar 1990b: 25)

On the intersystemic level, this interference[29] takes place when the target system (the receptor of new elements) "does not possess a sufficient repertoire for newly needed functions, or is prevented from using an extant, even a variegated, repertoire because of the latter's inadequacy [to those functions]" (Even –Zohar 1990f: 93). At that point, a transfer of elements from a foreign repertoire might occur to supplement or replace the home repertoires.[30]

This suggests that any cultural system will try to preserve its viability through an internal, dynamic reshuffling of its central and peripheral elements, so as to renew the center via additions from the periphery. If the repertoires available within the system are insufficient to deal with the changing sociocultural circumstances, then the system will either collapse or open itself up for renewal via repertoires imported from neighboring systems that possess the required options. In that case, the home system will consider the adjacent system "more 'complete,' 'developed,' or 'adapted' for the attainment of a certain goal, while considering itself 'inferior'" (Yahalom 1979: 65; my translation). Because this interference between polysystems often takes place via the peripheries, one needs to pay attention to phenomena such as semiliterary texts and translated literature, which are usually neglected in literary historiography.[31] Translated literature, which "may constitute the initial channel for interference" (Even-Zohar 1990f: 93), can indeed substantiate the key role played by alternative, foreign repertoires.

### 7.2. Translated Literature
What, then, is the position of translated literature within the literary polysystem? As innovatory forces, translations can actually play an important role in shaping the center of the (literary) polysystem by introducing "not only new models of reality to replace the old and established ones that are

29.  Interference is defined as "a relation(ship) between literatures, whereby a certain literature A (a source literature) may become a source of direct or indirect loans for another literature B (a target literature)" (Even-Zohar 1990e: 54).
30.  An example of such a system in crisis—or dependent system—was the French literary system in the eighteenth century, which subsequently opened itself up for transfers from the English literary system (Yahalom 1979). The concept of *transfer* refers to "the process whereby imported goods are integrated into a home repertoire, and the consequences generated by this integration" (Even-Zohar 1997c).
31.  Due to Even-Zohar's stress on the importance of translated literature, PST has been especially influential in the field of translation theory—see, for example, works by José Lambert and Gideon Toury.

no longer effective, but a whole range of other features as well, such as a new (poetic) language, or compositional patterns and techniques" (Even-Zohar 1990d: 47). The insertion of elements or repertoires from an adjacent system into a target system chiefly takes place in three situations: "(a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is 'young,' in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either 'peripheral' (within a large group of correlated literatures) or 'weak,' or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature" (ibid.). This is what happens when one or several of these factors operate in the literary system:

> The dynamics within the polysystem creates turning points, that is to say, historical moments where established models are no longer tenable for a younger generation. At such moments, even in central literatures, translated literature may assume a central position. This is all the more true when at a turning point no item in the indigenous stock is taken to be acceptable, as a result of which a literary "vacuum" occurs. In such a vacuum, it is easy for foreign models to infiltrate, and translated literature may consequently assume a central position. (Ibid.: 48)

Usually, however, translated literature is situated at the periphery of the literary system, as no system can remain forever in a state of weakness or crisis. Anyway, the transfer can be called successful if the center of the target system embraces not just the foreign text, but especially the *model* introduced by this text.

Nor is translated literature (as a collection of texts or models) the only result of interference between different polysystems. Even-Zohar (1990e: 54–55) points out that the "role and function of literature, . . . the relations between religious, political, and other activities within culture and literary production—all may be modelled in a given culture in relation to some other system." A prerequisite is obviously that there is some form of contact, if only indirect, between the two systems.

Systems that Even-Zohar calls "dependent," the most conspicuous examples of which are minority literatures, are especially open to interference, direct or indirect. In the former case, the producers in the target literature are conversant with the language of the source literature and therefore have direct access to the source texts. In the latter case, the contacts are somehow mediated, for instance, via translations, texts *about* the source texts, or any sociocultural activity that brings the source literature to the attention of the agents in the target system. In modern times, the mass media are often the major channel for such contacts: whereas fashions and conventions governing the repertoire used to be dictated by the ruling classes, "these classes

have been replaced by a variety of milieus empowered to dictate fashions, such as the mass media and their celebrities, highly respected critics, and others participating in the struggle over norms in society" (Even-Zohar 1990h: 210).

### 7.3. Laws of Literary Interference

Largely on the basis of his analyses of the Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian literary polysystems, Even-Zohar formulates ten general principles or "laws" of literary interference:

*Literatures are never in noninterference.* Interference between literary systems is the rule rather than the exception. Therefore, a researcher is "*encouraged to look for interference as a highly likely option, and reject it only if a non-interference solution can be shown to be stronger*" (Even-Zohar 1990e: 60; emphasis in original).

*Interference is mostly unilateral.* If the interference *is* mutual, it is usually not of equal impact on the two systems. This principle is somewhat questionable, however, as Dmitri Segal (1982: 278), using the example of the literary situation in the Soviet Union, points out very obvious exceptions to it.

*Literary interference is not necessarily linked with other levels of interference between communities.* This law is especially relevant to communities that are geographically separated, for in that case, "literary influence is fully conceivable" on its own (Even-Zohar 1990e: 62). In contiguous communities, interference will tend to take place on different levels, though not necessarily in literature.

*Contacts will sooner or later generate interference if no resisting conditions arise.* Interference, in other words, occurs only under favorable conditions. Even if a source literature is available, chauvinistic or protective attitudes within the potential target literature can prevent interference from taking place, but adjacent systems can never resist interference on all levels.

*A source literature is selected by prestige.* This means that the source literature (or elements therein) is considered a model to be emulated, due to its cultural power—or cultural capital, in Bourdieu's terms. The system's cultural power can be related to its political or economic power, but it is not necessarily so.

*A source literature is selected by dominance.* In this case, the source literature is dominant due to extracultural factors, such as politics or economics. This is most conspicuous in the (forced) interference between the literatures of colonial/imperialist powers and the literatures of their subjects, even if the target system is characterized by resistance.

*Interference occurs when a system is in need of items unavailable within itself.* This

situation, where a system in crisis seeks alternatives in foreign systems, has already been discussed at length.

*Contacts may take place with only one part of the target literature; they may then proceed to other parts.* While foreign elements or repertoires are imported into certain sections of the system (usually situated at the periphery), other sections can remain untouched, though they can appropriate these imported elements at a later stage.

*An appropriated repertoire does not necessarily maintain the functions it performs in the source literature.* Once the repertoire has been appropriated, its value—and hence its function—is no longer determined by its role in the source literature, but by the internal relations and hierarchies that hold within the target system. Repertoires may have moved to the periphery of the source system by the time they occupy the center of the target system.

*Appropriation tends to be simplified, regularized, schematized.* Complex, polysemic patterns will tend to be reduced when taken over by another literature. Still, the opposite can also hold true, since "a target literature may take simplified models and elaborate upon them, with products generated by them in a non-simplified, non-regularized, non-schematized context" (Even-Zohar 1990e: 72).

Apart from its somewhat unjust equation by Bourdieu with static Structuralism, Polysystem Theory has met with very little criticism, though some minor deficiencies were pointed out in this introduction. An additional downside to Even-Zohar's open-system approach is that it arguably precludes a truly exhaustive study of the phenomena under investigation, as so many factors have to be taken into account—both within the system itself and within adjacent or geographically removed systems. But this cannot be considered a defect. A detailed study of the individual phenomena that make up the system simply lies beyond the reach of explanatory models for general cultural phenomena such as PST; this form of scrutiny is reserved for the more synchronic approaches to cultural systems. Nevertheless, combining a polysystemic approach with textual analyses (for the study of a specific *literary* system) can bridge the chasm between the two approaches.

## 8. PST in Practice: Jewish American Literature in the Post–World War II Cultural Polysystem

To conclude this discussion of Polysystem Theory, I will very concisely illustrate its important role in my own research, which involves the study of French existentialism in the post–World War II Jewish American novel.

Needless to say, the scope of this study outreaches the boundaries of the literary system as such. PST, however, makes it possible to analyze how three adjacent subsystems—the political, the religious, and the philosophical—interfere with the post–World War II American literary system. These subsystems obviously do not exist in mere juxtaposition. They are intricately intertwined, each thoroughly affecting its neighbors.

The Holocaust, arguably the most important and unsettling event in the twentieth century, obviously had a major impact on the American political system. Even-Zohar's insistence on the role of *institutions* in every socio-semiotic event (see Section 2 of this article) makes it possible to trace how the Holocaust, as a specific repertoric element (a so-called "repertoreme" or "cultureme"), appears in the political-institutional and journalistic-institutional discourses before, during, and after World War II. The initial peripheral status of the Holocaust is illustrated by the minimization or blatant disregard of Jewish suffering before and during World War II in the discourses analyzed.[32] The American political institutions (notably the anti-Semitic State Department; see Feingold 1995: 59–84), as well as the mass media, refused to acknowledge the fate of the European Jews. In fact, the term *Holocaust*, as a reference to the organized destruction of five to six million Jews, was created only in the late 1950s (see Young 1988: 87). Until then, there was not even a *term* in English to refer to the specific events, far less a *referent* existing in the perception of the American public. Only near the end of the war, with the liberation of the concentration camps by American GIs, did the atrocities of World War II receive extensive press coverage in the United States (Abzug 1999: 179–82). However, against all expectations, given the magnitude of the European carnage, the media attention soon died down: the "Holocaust" clearly remained a peripheral element in American public and institutional discourses from the end of World War II to the early 1960s. It took a number of developments in the early 1960s—most conspicuously, the Adolf Eichmann trial in Jerusalem, Hannah Arendt's (1963) controversial coverage of the trial, and the 1967 Arab-Israeli conflict—for the Holocaust issue to establish itself at the center of the American political system (Novick 1999: 146–52).[33]

32. Only *Kristallnacht*, one of the first blatant violations of Jewish rights, received extensive media coverage. It was the subject of almost one thousand editorials and was featured on the front page of the *New York Times* for more than a week. Though the atrocities increased in intensity throughout World War II, none of the subsequent events in the Holocaust received the same degree of attention in the *New York Times* (Lipstadt 1986: 87; Novick 1999: 21–22).
33. The centrality of the Holocaust in the political system shows itself in federal government funding for the major Holocaust museums in Washington, D.C., New York, Los Angeles, and other cities (Novick 1999: 276). In addition, the central position of the Holocaust has played

Recall that any semiotic subsystem correlates, on the one hand, with the larger (cultural) polysystem and, on the other hand, with the other subsystems that make up the polysystem. Changes in one subsystem will, therefore, tend to affect the adjacent subsystems. However, when repertoric elements migrate from one system to another, the positions and the functions of these items in the source system are "irrelevant for the target system" (Even-Zohar 1990b: 22, 1990f: 94). These mechanisms are illustrated by the correlation between the political and the theological subsystems in post–World War II America.

The movement of the Holocaust issue from the periphery to the center of the political system (i.e., from an almost negligible to a major factor in political decisions) creates a dramatic shift in the ( Jewish) American religious system, which suddenly witnesses the rise of radical (or death-of-God) theology. Discussions of the Holocaust in the political system centered on the responsibility of the human perpetrators—essentially the Nazis, but also the indifferent Allies. In the religious system, the increasing visibility of the Holocaust led to questions about the responsibility of God. This is not to say, however, that the death of God theology was a direct result of the rise in Holocaust awareness; Protestant theologians, such as Thomas Altizer and William Hamilton, were also proclaiming the death of God (see Carey 1999). But the *popularity* of radical theology during the 1960s can partly be explained by the centripetal movement of the Holocaust in the political system. For, when Richard Rubinstein incorporated the Holocaust into his thinking about the death of God, his *succès de scandale*, *After Auschwitz* (1966), catapulted him, as well as the Death of God movement, into the center of the American theological system (see Roth 1999: 70). However, despite its instant success—the Death of God movement even made the cover of *Time* magazine in 1966—radical theology quickly lost its appeal and, by the end of the 1960s, had shifted from the center to the periphery of the theological system.

The dynamics within these two subsystems in turn explain the penetration of French existentialism into the American philosophical system and its popularity with Jewish American intellectuals. For French existentialism, which originated during World War II, is chiefly concerned with human responsibility in extreme (specifically wartime) situations (Sartre 1949: 11). Its basic tenet is the death of God, which is a precondition for human responsibility (Sartre 1946: 36). The growing importance of the Holocaust issue in the political system and the immense (though short-lived) popu-

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an important role in U.S. foreign policy, as the conflict in the Middle East was—and is—often viewed in relation to the Holocaust model (Berenbaum 1990: 45).

larity of radical theology, then, can help explain the sudden boom in French existentialism in American philosophical institutions. A case in point is the changing attitudes of the philosophical institutions toward Jean-Paul Sartre—the major representative of French existentialism in the United States—and Sartrean existentialism.

The change follows the rule that, when new repertoires enter a system, the system's initial reaction will be resistance or downright rejection, because the acquisition of a new repertoire can be "painful and risky." However, if the repertoire is considered "richer, more prestigious," it will gradually be accepted and move to the center of the target system (Even-Zohar 1997f, 1997c). This is precisely what happened to the French existentialist repertoire when it entered the American philosophical system. Initially, its reception was extremely negative: Sartre's ideas were considered "an ephemeral philosophical reflection of war-torn Europe . . . , an intellectual byproduct of the war" (Fulton 1999: 28). This negative reception was largely due to the American educational system's reluctance to support foreign language study (ibid.: 25): Sartre's extremely popularized version of his existentialist philosophy, *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (1945) was available in English by 1947 (*Existentialism*), and this highly reductive account became the basic text of French existentialism for scholars in the United States.[34] In 1943, however, Sartre had already published his major contribution to philosophy, *L'Etre et le néant*, which immediately put him on the map in France (Fulton 1999: 12). But American philosophers had to wait until 1956 for Hazel Barnes's translation (*Being and Nothingness*), and this interval accounts for the delayed response of the American philosophical institutions to the existentialist repertoire.[35]

By the early 1950s, the French existentialist repertoire started penetrating the American institutions: "courses on Sartreanism first appeared in philosophy departments, papers on Sartre were read at meetings and conventions, and existentialism became the topic of discussion in a prestigious lecture series" (ibid.: 76). The real vogue of existentialism hit the American philosophical system in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when "innumerable survey courses" brought "structural changes to college philosophy depart-

34. Sartre gave his lecture "L'Existentialisme est un humanisme" on October 29, 1945, in the Parisian Club Maintenant. It became a "cultural success without precedent" (Cohen-Solal 1985: 328; my translation). The small 1946 volume with the same title is based on a series of similar lectures and the subsequent questions from the audience. This volume was such a drastic oversimplification of Sartre's philosophy that the author later regretted its publication. For more information, see ibid.

35. The major philosophical work of Albert Camus—the second representative of French existentialism in the United States—suffered the same fate: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942) was available in English translation (*The Myth of Sisyphus*) as late as 1955.

ments" and articles on existentialism proliferated (ibid.: 112–14).[36] Clearly, French existentialism then pervaded the American philosophical institutions: in 1962, its central position resulted in the founding of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy at Northwestern University (ibid.: 133).

Because French existentialism also, and importantly, manifested itself in literature—Sartre and Camus were men of letters as well as philosophers—there is in addition the interference between the French and American literary systems. Sartre's and Camus's literary works were more readily available to American scholars than their philosophical works for two reasons: first, scholars in French departments were able to read the French originals, and second, the relevant major novels, plays, and stories were translated after an average of only 4.5 years (as opposed to the 13 years for the philosophical works).[37] As a result, French existentialism's "single most important port of entry into America in the mid-1940s was the Yale French department" (Fulton 1999: 22).

This links up with the important role of translated literature in introducing new repertoires into a foreign target system. Such transfers of foreign elements take place specifically in cultures with "unsettled lives" (Swidler 1986: 278) when there arise "turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature" (Even-Zohar 1990d: 47). At those moments, foreign models infiltrate the home repertoire. A culture with "unsettled lives" is an apt description of the post–World War II American cultural system, especially for the Jewish American community, whose literature is the subject of this discussion. There was a general feeling, however, that the American literary system as a whole (especially the American novel) was in a state of crisis, that the center of the system was petrified, and that there was no adequate repertoire to deal with the post–World War II situation: "there is abundant evidence that the imagination of the contemporary novel, particularly in America, has remained locked in certain stereotyped modes of perceiving and recording reality that it has inherited from the modern classic literary

36. The 1950s and 1960s also witnessed a flood of book-length studies of existentialism in English. Some examples are Hazel Barnes's *The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism* (1959); William Barrett's *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy* (1958); James Collins's *The Existentialists: A Critical Study* (1952); Wilfred Desan's *The Tragic Finale: An Essay on the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* (1954); Marjorie Grene's *Dreadful Freedom: A Critique of Existentialism* (1948) and *An Introduction to Existentialism* (1959); Walter Kaufmann's *Existentialism from Dostoyevski to Sartre* (1959); and Robert Olson's *An Introduction to Existentialism* (1962).
37. For Sartre, this holds for *La Nausée* (1938; *Nausea* [1949]), *L'Age de raison* (1945; *Age of Reason* [1947]), *Les Mouches* (1943; *The Flies* [1947]), *Huis Clos* (1943; *No Exit* [1947]), and *Le Mur* (1939; *The Wall and Other Stories* [1948]). Camus's major works are *L'Etranger* (1942; *The Stranger* [1946]), *La Peste* (1947; *The Plague* [1948]), and *La Chute* (1956; *The Fall* [1957]).

past, but that, as stereotypes, have now ceased to relate meaningfully to the reality of which we are, or ought to be, most intensely aware" (Aldridge 1966 [subtitled *The Contemporary Novel in Crisis*]: xi).[38] Such literary "vacuums" tend to be filled by foreign repertoires.

However, when introducing new models into a repertoire, the personality of the producers ("the story about them") is often as important as the work itself, for "the mass media and their celebrities" dictate fashions and conventions that govern the repertoire (Even-Zohar 1990h: 210). Sartre became such a celebrity in the United States. In 1946, he visited the United States for a series of lectures, which took him to overcrowded lecture rooms at Yale and Harvard, and the American media reacted with enthusiasm to the presence of one of France's most distinguished men of letters. Articles by and on Sartre (and his famous affair with Simone de Beauvoir) appeared in journals and newspapers as variegated as the *New Yorker*, *New York Post*, *Time*, *Vogue*, *Nation*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Life*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Partisan Review*, and many others. Sartre's philosophically inspired plays were even performed on Broadway. Stories abounded in which Sartre was praised as a wartime hero for his work in the French Resistance or vilified as a false bohemian. Often, commentators were interested in the author rather than in his work (Fulton 1999: 23–33). As a result, Sartre and Sartrean existentialism became a real fad in the United States.

Because of its affinity with World War II and death-of-God theology, the existentialist repertoire became popular with Jewish American authors. One of the earliest authors to embrace it was Saul Bellow, who was born in Quebec and speaks French fluently. The results show in his novels of 1944 (*Dangling Man*) and 1947 (*The Victim*), which introduced the model of the existentialist novel into the *periphery* of the American literary system: they were published by a minor publishing house (Vanguard) and were not commercial successes.[39] New repertoires or models typically enter the system via the periphery, and their penetration into the center depends not so much on their inherent qualities, but on the historical circumstances, on the socio-semiotic struggles within the system and "socio-cultural dynamics in general" (Even-Zohar 1990f: 88). Thus, with the increasing popularity of French existentialism in the American cultural system, Bellow swiftly moved to the center: his next novel, *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), was published by Viking and became a commercial success. By the middle 1950s, Bellow's model had become so prestigious that an impressive number of Jewish American authors who followed it entered the center of the

38. See also Bradbury 1992: 160 on the poor state of American writing in the 1950s.
39. Zohar Shavit (1991) points out that texts based on a new model are usually published not by a prestigious publishing house but by one that has not (yet) gained a central position.

literary system.[40] Some made it into the canon, others were soon forgotten, but their sudden success can be explained by their implementation of the increasingly popular existentialist repertoire.

This brief discussion of four adjacent subsystems of the post–World War II American cultural system should illustrate the wide range of possibilities offered to students of various cultural, semiotic phenomena by a polysystemic approach. It demonstrates that Polysystem Theory makes it possible to study (1) the dynamic interactions between subsystems that clearly overlap and intersect, (2) the penetration into the literary system of foreign repertoires via translated literature, and (3) the movement of repertoires (as well as their producers) within heterogeneous semiotic systems.

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40. The American literary system in the 1950s and 1960s was dominated by Jewish American authors, such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, Philip Roth, Edward Lewis Wallant, Norman Mailer, J. D. Salinger, Joseph Heller, Arthur Miller, Chaim Potok, E. L. Doctorow, and others. Examples of Jewish American authors who enjoyed great commercial or critical success but did not really make it into the canon are Stanley Elkin, Jerome Weidman, Budd Schulberg, Norma Rosen, Bruce Jay Friedman, Herbert Gold, Daniel Stern, Wallace Markfield, Jonathan Baumbach, Richard Elman, and Meyer Levin.

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