The Concept of Influence in Comparative Literature: A Symposium

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A SYMPOSIUM

The Concept of Influence in Comparative Literature

I. A. OWEN ALDRIDGE

THE ESSENCE of literary criticism is comparison—whether within a single national literature or in a perspective embracing several. In the same way that there never was a good war or a bad peace, all methods of comparison are good—even noting typographical characteristics. To take an actual illustration, it is valid literary criticism to note that Laurence Sterne and Machado de Assis deliberately left blank white pages as a hoax on their readers. It is equally valid to point out that Machado de Assis mentions Sterne in his preface, indicating that he also was aware of the similarity. When critics point out Machado's indebtedness to La Rochefoucauld, Hugo and Schopenhauer, they are noting resemblances at least equally important with the blank pages—merely less obvious.

Comparison may be used to indicate affinity, tradition or influence. Affinity consists in resemblances in style, structure, mood or idea between two works which have no other necessary connection. As an example, the Russian novel *Oblomov* may be compared to *Hamlet* because each work is a character study of indecision and procrastination. Tradition or convention consists in resemblances between works which form part of a large group of similar works held together by a common historical, chronological or formal bond. Here *Oblomov* may be compared to a number of nineteenth-century Russian novels which present a prevailing type in Russian history, the indolent man. Finally, influence represents a direct effect upon one literary work caused by a preceding one. To press *Oblomov* into service once more, when Peggy Guggenheim in her memoirs refers to Samuel Beckett under the appelation of *Oblomov,* she reveals a direct influence of Goncharov's novel.

The vogue of seeking influence in literary criticism has sometimes been attributed to the nineteenth-century emphasis upon scientific method—to an

analogy between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Literaturwissenschaft*. In English literature at least the method went back well into the eighteenth century, and since nearly all of the eminent critics were ministers and theologians, I would assume that the method is an outgrowth of textual criticism of the Bible, where seeking parallels between the Old and New Testaments was standard procedure. The method was stimulated moreover by the close relationship between poetry and the Latin classics, the poets themselves frequently printing parallel passages or pointing out resemblances in footnotes. T. S. Eliot's notes in *The Waste Land* belong to this tradition. In the Augustan age, hunting for parallel passages was almost a parlor game.

The three primary critical techniques of the neo-classical period were (1) applying the rules; (2) pointing out beauties and faults; and (3) indicating parallel passages and other resemblances. The reliance upon rules has faded out of criticism, but the seeking of influences remains. In a sense, the beauties and faults method was a forerunner of modern esthetic criticism or *esthétique comparée*.

The most penetrating study of a single English author in the eighteenth century was Joseph Warton's two volume *Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope*. His methed is essentially the same as that of R. D. Havens' modern study, *The Influence of Milton in English Poetry*.

The study of influence is, of course, much broader than merely isolating parallel passages or sources. All sources are influences, but not all influences are sources. I would define an influence as something which exists in the work of one author which could not have existed had he not read the work of a previous author. When the resemblances between the two authors are clear enough to be discerned, the literary historian has legitimate material for his use. Influence is not something which reveals itself in a single, concrete manner, but it must be sought in many different manifestations.

A major reason for our interest in influence is that it helps explain *why* a writer expresses a thought or a sentiment in the way he does. It has sometimes been held that when we look for literary connections "la création artistique se réduit à un processus mécanique, ou les concepts de cause et d'effet sont naïvement remplacés par ceux de 'sources' et d' 'influences.' " [1] Yet the discovery of a source is not merely an end in itself. Understanding a source shows the process of composition and illuminates the mind of the author. We may analyze a highly poetic passage in Shakespeare, for example, and elucidate the esthetic values which we find in it—but we cannot be sure that Shakespeare went through the same esthetic or emotional process in creating the work which we experience in interpreting it. But if we know, to be specific, that certain passages in *The Tempest* are a paraphrase of Montaigne, then we know that Shakespeare came into contact with the French essayist and was favorably impressed with what he read. We know something concrete about Shakespeare's mind and his process of composition.

Guillén has used precisely this contribution of influence studies as an argument against them—that influence shows creative process, but has no value in comparing one literary work to another. "Toda critica de influencias tiende a ser

un estudio de génesis" and cannot serve as means of "comparación de índole estética entre textos literarios, considerados como objectos artísticos." We can admit this—except when two works can be shown to have undergone similar influence. Then we have a clue to a common esthetic bond—or we may perhaps use one as a commentary on the other.

To point out influences upon an author is certainly to emphasize the creative antecedents of a work of art—to consider it as a human product, not as an object in a void. We derive a similar satisfaction from learning relevant biographical details. To most readers, it matters whether Milton wrote his *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* on his honeymoon or at some later period; and whether one of Wordsworth's most sentimental sonnets refers to his sister or to his natural daughter.

One of Harry Levin's discoveries of influence has by now become almost a classic. He used an edition of *Don Quixote* with manuscript notes by Melville to point out parallels between *Don Quixote* and *Moby Dick*. If this edition had been lost or if Melville had been without pencil, Levin comments, Melville's relationship to Cervantes would have been none the less authentic; but strict comparatists would have been able to refuse to recognize it. Another American writer, Hemingway, because of his cryptic style has left few traces in his work of the predecessors from whom he has drawn. But the biographical evidence that Hemingway attended the funeral of Pio Baroja with visible evidences of grief would indicate that Hemingway had learned from the art of his Spanish contemporary—and that a comparative study of the two men would reveal influence as well as affinity.

It is important to know whether an author is completely intuitive, relies entirely upon experience and observation, or is impressionable to his own artistic experiences to such a degree that he carries over an impression from another literary work into his own.

My further observations may be illustrated by some comments on the influence of La Rochefoucauld in the Americas.

Studies of influence may sometimes be instrumental in opening new perspectives and unsuspected relations. One would not, for example, look for the worldly philosophy of La Rochefoucauld amid the homespun proverbs of *Poor Richard's Almanac*. Yet a study of the sources of Franklin's proverbs reveals that two dozen are close paraphrases of the French moralist, embodying his cynical outlook. This reveals the influence of La Rochefoucauld upon Poor Richard, but not necessarily upon Franklin himself. Two of my colleagues who have made prior declarations concerning influence, Professors Hassan and Block, have insisted that we must make a distinction between influence upon a literary work and influence upon the author of the work. As far as Franklin himself is concerned, it may be of no significance at all that he incorporated maxims of La Rochefoucauld since his proverb collection, contrary to general belief, represents no fixed point of view, and many proverbs are contradicted by absolutely contrary ones. Yet one may point out that Franklin also elaborated one of La Rochefoucauld's maxims in his autobiography, giving no indication of its source and presenting it as his own view of human character. This must

be considered of vital importance in regard to Franklin's thought. But here we must make another distinction—the reverse of that insisted upon by Hassan and Block. One author may be influenced by parts of another's work without being aware of his predecessor as an artist or of the totality of his work. The study of Franklin's sources indicates that he drew most of his proverbs from compilations or anthologies, which printed proverbs and maxims indiscriminately with no indication whatsoever of their authorship. I am not saying that Franklin did not know La Rouchefoucauld's literary work—but the study of his sources indicates that he could very well have extracted from some intermediate source every one of La Rouchefoucauld's maxims which he used without knowing who had originated the saying.

The distinction between influence and reputation which Professor Balakian will elucidate may be illustrated by La Rouchefoucauld. In colonial America his work had a measurable influence upon Franklin, but his reputation was negligible. In nineteenth-century Brazil, La Rochefoucauld enjoyed a brilliant reputation and also exercised a direct and powerful influence—particularly upon the Marquês de Maricá, known as the Brazilian La Rouchefoucauld. We can be confident that this was a direct influence, not only because Maricá paraphrased a large number of maxims from his predecessor in his own collection, but also because a copy of the *Reflections morales* was found in his possession when an inventory of his books was made during his youth.

Maricá illustrates that which Professor Balakian calls a negative influence: an author impressed by a system of thought in a predecessor which repels him in part and causes him to repudiate it at the same time that he is imitating it. Maricá's own philosophy was an optimistic deism at odds with La Rochefoucauld's caustic view of human nature. He, therefore, paraphrased a number of maxims warning against the extremes of self-love but fitted them into his own benevolent system.

Another question of influence which a comparatist cannot avoid is that of why a work may have an effect in foreign countries quite different from that in its native literature. Young and Ossian in France and Germany are good examples. One must recognize in partial answer that translations are powerful arbiters of foreign influence.

This leads to the kindred question of the determination of influence as an element in value-judgment: for example, whether originality is good in itself. And whether an author should be held personally accountable for ideas or attitudes which are part of his literary heritage rather than his private feelings.

II. ANNA BALAKIAN

Studies which link the names of literary figures nationally apart, or situate a literary name in a national orbit other than its own generally contain in their titles the little word "and." A variant of the comparatist use of "and" is "in," and I am surprised not to see "with" used in the same sense. The flexible "and"

affords a most convenient ambiguity as it encompasses three different significations. The most obvious one is related to the discovery of real influences, and the most untenable one is the suggestion of vague and often far-fetched affinities. The latter objective seems a futile preoccupation for the comparatist, one more suited to impressionistic journalism than to scientifically oriented research. Between these two poles there is another line of study which is implied, though not often pursued, in titles containing "and" or "in," namely the discovery and evaluation of literary fortunes gained by writers in countries other than their own. Paul Van Tieghem in his *Littérature Comparée* called this phenomenon "doxologie" but went on to say that it was very difficult to separate the reputation from the influence exerted by a writer. Other treatises on methodology in historical and comparative research overlook entirely this form of inquiry.

In my opinion, it is not only true that influence and literary fortune can be distinguished one from the other, but that the lack of distinction is and can be the source of many misunderstandings and misconceptions in matters of classification and evaluation. Furthermore, it seems to me that the possibilities of research in this somewhat neglected area are infinite and worthy of the efforts of the comparatist.

First, even a rapid perusal of literary history can show that what is admired is not necessarily imitated. Consider the fame of Dante abroad, and his relatively minor influence on foreign writers. The corollary is that rarely does genuine influence occur without preliminary diffusion of the work. Thus the study of literary fortune seems to be a prerequisite to an accurate determination of influences.

It is true that this kind of work could be undertaken in a very superficial manner: compile editions, collect book reviews and journalistic comments, count the number of copies sold, and trace a graphic curve, give a delightfully accurate bibliography. All this is extremely commendable, and it is an essential ground work, but do you then have the literary fortune? Not as it concerns literary criticism, for the fortune of an artist transcends figures!

In the search for influence one must stop at a certain point to determine whether it is coincidence or imitation which has been discovered, or whether by some mysterious alchemy the borrower has found, *via* the influence of another's writing, his own true character and originality. In the case of literary fortunes the same kind of assessment is indicated. After the evidence has been gathered and the data compiled, the literary historian must determine the significance of the reputation acquired either as it reflects on the author or on the receptive country, whichever happens to be the objective of his study. If then he happens to possess a sense of perspective and a power of synthesis, his study can lead to specific and significant conclusions.

In the first instance, the author thus observed is freed from arbitrary classifications and local prejudices. Just such a case is brought to light in Josette Blanquat's study of "Clarín and Baudelaire." [2] Clarín is one of the first to have rehabilitated Baudelaire and to have viewed him not as the decadent whom Brunetière at that very moment was condemning, but as a master of poetic

mysticism; thus, the work, presented and diffused in Spanish speaking countries under the auspices of a critic such as Clarín, rises above the medley of notorious biographical facts that tended to distort the literary reputation of its author in his own country. Or consider the English Swinburne, overshadowed as a lesser constellation in the Pre-Raphaelite Pleiades. Abroad he becomes a poet in his own right and is discovered as a sensitive aesthetician. Or Richard Wright who, in our own day, is read in France as an American writer more than as a Negro, his power as a novelist looming more impressive than his rancor. In fact, may not our yardstick for the measurement of universality become more accurate and less sentimental if we take into account the scope and strength of the foreign reputations?

In the second instance, the study of a literary fortune can reveal a great deal about the receptive country. What better index to the taste and moral timber of a nation at a particular moment in its history than the authors it imports and loves, or even discards! May we not learn much about eighteenth-century Italy when someone is able to answer the question posed by Paul Hazard many years ago in his "Influence française en Italie au 18e siècle," [8] namely: why were certain writers such as Baculard d'Arnaud, Mercier, Sedaine and Flabaire so highly regarded, out of proportion to their merits, while Beaumarchais and Marivaux remained practically unknown? Was it accident? Was it intentional rejection? And today, are there not certain interesting indications to be probed in the fact Russians stand in line to buy a book of Hemingway, and that in India they take no interest in him; that one of the favorite authors of the Japanese is Mark Twain, while their novelists devour Zola?

Finally, beyond the study of an author and his general reputation we can observe the inroads made by an individual work of an author, or even of characters such as Hamlet or Faust as they pass from the literary to the legendary. Here is then a means by which the critic can ease himself out of the Sainte-Beuvian dogma that the work is the product of the author as the fruit is of the tree. The comparatist critic tracing the fortune of a work in a foreign land finds it plucked from its tree and the seed transplanted in a different climate; and by the same token the book is freed of the bonds of authorship, making its own personal fortune like the peregrinating message of Vigny's "La Bouteille à la Mer." The work, liberated from its mortal shackles, can then be viewed on a broader aesthetic plane, in a state of autonomy such as enjoyed in the field of the plastic arts; even as a painting or a statue is generally appreciated for its own intrinsic worth rather than explained away on the basis of biographical facts about its creator.

In addition, there are a number of supplementary themes that can be grouped around a literary fortune: the oversights, the failures, the declines, the revivals, all calling for interpretation.

In sum, here is an important branch of literary history. José Ortega y Gasset once distinguished between facts and history by calling the former a series of static images and the latter the fusion of these images into movement. It is unfortunate that so much of what is called study in influences winds up in static facts. Perhaps by tracing the evolution of literary appreciations over and

above a specific time and locality, and beyond the influences emerging from them, we can relinquish descriptive criticism and aspire for a place in the annals of universal history.

III. CLAUDIO GUILLÉN

Comparatists are embarrassed at times by the remembrance of things past. For Gustave Rudler could write forty years ago: "la Littérature Comparée est un cas particulier de la critique d'influence." [4] But the reign of influence studies has now ended. Even the specific field that they covered is being encroached upon—to be very brief—by the definition of traditions and conventions.

Influences, nevertheless, will not vanish—because they exist, or rather, happen. Poetic influences continue to take place and to disregard the indifference of critics. The ties between *Don Quixote* and *Tom Jones, Hérodiade* and *La Jeune Parque,* as Haskell Block was telling us not long ago [5], *are* influences that ought to be treated as such. One of our tasks, then, is to find the correct place for influences within the present coordinates of comparative studies—more precisely, to examine the articulation between influences and, in the general sense, conventions.

Allow me, first of all, to touch upon some of the problematical aspects of influence studies.

For many decades they reflected the spirit of what René Wellek has called "the genetically-minded nineteenth century." It was indeed in this use of the genetic imagination, in this concern with how literature is born and grows, that influence studies found their highest justification. The stress, in this sense, was not on *what* passes from one writer to another, but on the fact that it passes *from* one *to* the other and creates between them a direct, nearly biological link.

But the period in which we live is characterized in a number of fields not by a genetic but by an analytical or synthetic frame of mind.[6] The present emphasis, among literary critics, on genres, myths, archetypes, etc., is a perfect example of this. Simple chronology, to which the old concept of influence was wedded, is now used at will by both novelists and literary historians.

Even influence studies, paradoxically enough, are being stripped today, by the non-genetic mind, of their original meaning. They are being recommended for providing us with occasions for aesthetic analysis and understanding. Thus we may compare Kafka to Dickens with no real concern for influence *qua* influence or genetic link. Or because one book reminds us of another which we have not forgotten, habit leads us to think of influences instead of conventions. Influences thus become perspectives for reading and a critic's fair game. But as soon as we examine only the aesthetic end-result of influences no genuine distinction can subsist between their study and that of conventions, traditions and other correspondences. Influences become contingent

devices. In other words, it seems superfluous to keep them alive by equating them with conventions.

This and other confusions bring out the stupendous complexity of both the phenomenon and the word. The phenomenon cannot be separated from the riddle of artistic creation. The word conceals at least two sets of ambiguities.

When we state "Kafka was influenced by Dickens" we ought to be saying "*Amerika* was influenced by *Martin Chuzzlewit*," but do not because the verb appears to imply or require a person, a human agent. The word "source" is much clearer. But the metaphor of the source seems today not only more liquid than that of influence, but more simple-minded and positivistic. Thus we prefer to retain the equivocal "X was influenced by Y," where we blend the psychological with the literary. (Notice the passive mode of the verb. Influences, of course, often are. This is one of the departures from the active, neo-classical "X imitated Y.")

The word "influence" is also ambiguous in that it often implies both a fact and a value-judgement. We describe the effect of one work on another; but we also insinuate that this change, however slight, is not trivial. One can make the best of this and admit that "influence" is synonymous with "significant influence," inasmuch as these phenomena are truly innumerable.

Significant influences are usually individual, one-to-one relationships—not distant kinships by association. Where conventions are extensive, influences are intense. Mallarmé and Rimbaud were crucial nourishment for the younger André Breton, just as the conversations with Vaché and the events of World War I must have been. These were positive incitements, not just negative conditions "without which certain works could not have been written." If a recent war novel, on the other hand, reminds us of Homer, a common body of culture or a tradition comes into play, rather than the *tête-à-tête* of an influence. Similarly, it would be hardly adequate to state that Virgil influenced Dante, when so many other elements stood by and what was operative was the authority and continuity of a tradition. It is true that one steals from single works, not traditions. But it is also true that certain poems incarnate traditions and symbolize other poems. Also, when influences spread and amalgamate, when they become the air many writers breathe at the same moment, then they ought to be called something like conventions. Who influences, for example, the contemporary novelist, or the film-maker, who portrays aimless, cynical adolescents? Did a Renaissance poet have to have read Petrarch in order to write a petrarchan sonnet? In other words, literary conventions are not only technical prerequisites but also basic, collectively shared influences. To recognize this would lead us to limit the number of significant influences (and of wild hypotheses about them).

One tends to think of conventions synchronically, and of traditions diachronically. A cluster of conventions forms the literary vocabulary of a generation, the repertory of possibilities that a writer has in common with his living rivals. Traditions involve the persistence of certain conventions for a number of generations, and the competition of writers with their ancestors. These collective "available influences" permit and regulate the writing of a work.

But they also enter the reading experience and affect its meaning. The new work is both a "deviant" from the norm (as a crime is based on an attitude toward social custom) and a process of communication that refers to the norm. When influences, then, seem to make the deviant possible, rather than the norm, they are furthest apart from conventions and least likely to be confused with them.

Literary influences will continue to play an important role in Comparative Literature. But, whenever possible, they ought not to be miscast. Influences, of course, *can* lead to literary analysis. Conventions *can* provide us with an insight into the creative process. Yet it seems to me that in each case the opposite function is the more effective one. Conventions and traditions, themes and genres, etc., suggest broad perspectives more readily than influences can; and they lead us to the patterns that literature presents when viewed either historically or at a moment of time. Influences do not "organize the chaos" of individual literary facts in such a useful manner. But they can open, through the intense study of single writer-to-writer or work-to-work relationships, more vigorously than conventions or traditions could, the doors of the writer's workshop and the infinitely complex processes of artistic creation.

IV. WOLFGANG BERNARD FLEISCHMANN

It has become clear, in the past decade's discussion among comparatists, that the concept of influence corresponds to a reality at the answering position of valid questions in Comparative Literature studies. Whether the researcher addresses himself to finding causalities in literary history, to detecting formative factors for the individual work of art, to discerning affinities and relationships among authors and literary movements, or even to the epistemological problem of how the reader perceives resemblances among texts, a formulation of influence relationships—or a denial of them—is well-nigh bound to be incorporated in his answer.[7]

The concept of influence, or some more fiexibly expressed cognate formulation thereof, is thus to remain a working notion in the comparatist's methodological scheme. To what extent should he seek to make the concept central to this scheme? How should he phrase questions which address themselves to establishing influence, or non-influence? What kind of response relating to "influence" should satisfy him?

Answers to these questions are, I fear, dependent on final agreement as to what constitutes, in terms of aesthetics and of literary theory, the legitimate realm of comparative studies in literature. To the establishing of this comprehensive formulation of ends and methods in Comparative Literature, any attempt at redefinition and clarification of the concept of influence is secondary.[8] Indeed, I should assert that what constitutes use and abuse of the concept of influence, as well as what it precisely should connote, are sets of ideas which will "fall

into place" as deductions from a validly agreed upon theory of Comparative Literature.

Meanwhile, it might well be profitable to study the range of factors which currently make comparatists conclude that "influence" exists, in fact. The study of a statistical sample of recent articles concerned with asserting and denying influence, gleaned from journals representing Comparative Literature in any and all senses, might well reveal a profile of methods dealing with influence, now in use.

Such a study could focus on two points, neither of which has received much previous attention: What epistemological bases for perceiving influence are invoked by the majority of researchers? And, are there recognizable "minima" of formal affinity, stylistic resemblance, or demonstrated imitation, which lead investigators to conclude that an influence exists?

At the very least, such a study would help define a usual working procedure for comparatists, both for suspecting and for then establishing what they understand by influence. Hopefully, this comparison of working methods on a broad scale would also reveal unsuspected general agreement on what is understood by the concept of influence, and provide sympathetic ground for illumination by a comprehensive theory of Comparative Literature.

NOTES

1. Harry Levin, "La Littérature Comparée: Point de Vue d'Outre-Atlantique," *Revue de Littérature Comparée,* XXVII (1953), 24.

2. Cf. J. Blanquat, "Clarín et Baudelaire," *Revue de Littérature Comparée* (Janvier-Mars, 1959).

3. Cf. *Etudes Françaises,* 34e Cahier, (1934).

4. G. Rudler, *Les Techniques de la Critique et de l'Histoire littéraires . . .* (Oxford, 1923), p. 160.

5. Cf. H. M. Block, "The Concept of Influence in Comparative Literature," *Yearbook of Comp. and Gen. Literature,* VII (1958), 35–37.

6. Cf. Enrique Tierno Galván, *Tradición y modernismo* (Madrid, 1962).

7. It should be pointed out here that even the sharpest critics of the classical "Sorbonne" conception of the concept of influence, as it would be stated representatively by scholars like Van Tieghem or F.-M. Guyard, admit both to the existence of such a concept and to its usefulness in Comparative Literature studies. To the point, see René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1949), pp. 269–270; Ihab H. Hassan, "The Problem of Influence in Literary History: Notes Toward a Definition," *JAAC,* XIV (1955), 66–76; Claudio Guillén, "The Aesthetics of Influence Studies in Comparative Literature," *Comparative Literature,* I, ed. W. P. Friederich (Chapel Hill, 1959), 175–192.

8. It is not clear to me whether H. M. Block, when making such a plea in "The Concept of Influence in Comparative Literature," *YCGL,* VII (1958), 30–37, meant to imply that the concept of influence could be methodologically separated and clarified separately from other research procedures in Comparative Literature. If this was his implication, I should differ with him, here.