

Influence

— (Latin: *influentia*, French: *l'influence* (f.), German: *der Einfluß*, Russian: *влияние*) is one of the most intensive-

ly studied topics in studies of literature and a literary term with multiple meanings. Etymologically, the word “influence” means the movement of a liquid substance into a receptacle or container. In astrology, *influentia* meant the dependence of human destiny on the configuration of the stars. In medical discourse, beginning no later than the sixteenth century, the term *influenza* designated a contagious disease of the respiratory system (hence *flu*), since it was thought to be caused by the influence of the constellations. The word is thus, like many literary terms, a lexicalized metaphor with great cognitive and descriptive potential.

Reflections on the nature of influence go back to antiquity (Plato, Aristotle, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Horace, Quintilian) and are connected to the problem of imitation (*mimesis*, *imitatio*) understood not ontologically, but aesthetically. For the theorists of antiquity, *imitatio* meant making conscious references to previous works considered to be exemplary, not copying them. The creator-imitator was supposed to draw material for his own works from the models he followed, harmoniously joining together elements borrowed from them in a new artistic context. Jerzy Ziomek has placed the category of imitation (understood as a relationship to another author’s text) among the basic dilemmas with which all structures or systems in literary history must reckon.¹ The system of classical or classically oriented works was governed by the precept of imitation together with the absence of a notion of proprietary authorship, although influence thus understood could take the form of emulation (*aemulatio*) or creative competition.² In twentieth-century classicist circles, the problem of influence returned in the form of reflection on tradition, for example in the work of T. S. Eliot and Osip Mandelstam. The latter, in his manifesto “Слово и культура” (The Word and Culture, 1921) used the formula “the joy of repetition” and declared that “the poet is not afraid of repetitions. [...] The truth is always the same. [...] There is no point starting a new poetic school. There is no point in inventing one’s own poetics”.³ The Romantic system, on the other hand, featured open imitation, while an author’s unique, original expression acquired the highest artistic prestige. The concept of authorship itself began to be formally and practically protected, while the concealment of sources of influence could give rise to accusations of plagiarism. The nineteenth century saw the general dissemination of the concepts of the epigone and epigonism (from the Greek *epigonos* – born late; in Greek mythology, the name *Epigono* designated the sons of the leaders fallen in the battle of the Seven Against Thebes), applied to the works of secondary imitators of outstanding authors. In the construction of avant-garde works, the imperative to innovate culminated in a horror of plagiarism and a prohibition on imitation. Nonetheless, even such an avant-garde author as Aleksander Wat wrote in 1964: “[...] literature by its very nature, to be brutally frank, is plagiaristic. [...] Writers, at least contemporary writers, are recruited from among

¹ J. Ziomek, *Prace ostatnie. Literatura i nauka o literaturze* (Last Works. Literature and Literary Scholarship), Warszawa 1994, p. 55.

² J. Ziomek, *Retoryka opisowa* (Descriptive Rhetoric), Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 1990, p. 41.

³ O. Mandelstam, “Слово и культура” (The Word and Culture). Шум времени (The Noise of Time). Санкт-Петербург 2012, pp. 193-4.

youthful, passionate readers, memory at that age is tenacious and the impression made on the young mind by one book or another is often stronger, deeper, and more enduring than one's own feelings. Originality is often, if not always, a rebellion against a model, its negation or polarity. This negative influence, more powerful than positive, generally escapes the attention of specialists in the study of influence. But for a scholar who wishes to know and present the internal mechanics of a work, establishing dependence and kinship is as indispensable as is setting the magnetic azimuth for a watchmaker".⁴ In further pursuing Ziomek's guidelines with regard to periodicity, we may note that the system of postmodern literature reveals influence operating as the secondary use (recontextualization) of source material, but with imitation openly declared. A literary exploration of this theme is Jorge Luis Borges' famous short story "Pierre Menard, author of the Quixote," first published in 1939, and later interpreted through the postmodern paradigm by John Barth in his equally famous essay "The Literature of Exhaustion" (1967).

In a study written in 1921, *O wpływach i zależnościach w literaturze* (On Influence and Dependence in Literature), Waclaw Borowy dealt with the growing interest in this problem in early twentieth-century Polish literary studies and in literary criticism. Where the former treated the search for "sources, literary influences, borrowings, filiations, that is, generally speaking, the dependence of certain poetic works upon others"⁵ as a completely legitimate scientific method, critics and journalists reacted to such ideas with reluctance and distaste; they saw them as undermining the literary work's unique originality and weakening its power to affect the reader. In formulating the methodological bases for studying literary influence and dependence, Borowy used a wealth of examples to argue for distinguishing five categories among them: ideational, technical, thematic, stylistic, and phraseological. Without defining in greater detail the difference between influence and dependence, he used the former mainly with regard to the influence exerted by a foreign literary tradition on a given national literature (usually Polish), while using the latter term more frequently to discuss particular instances of intertextual relations. Borowy's study was answered with a polemic from the well-known literary and theater critic, Adam Grzymała-Siedlecki⁶, responsible for the adoption in Polish literary discourse of the still-functioning neologism "wpływologia" (influenceology). The term's inventor intended it to ridicule the excessive zeal devoted by literary historians to uncovering connections between individual works of literature, suppressing their ideational and artistic value. In response to these accusations, Borowy pointed to the differences between a scholarly (genetic) and unscholarly (aesthetic, impressionistic) approach to literary works. He also underscored the importance of studies of influence and dependence in literature for understanding the psychology of creativity, the nature of literary-historical processes, and the social conditions governing literary communication. In this sense, Borowy's study may be considered a precursor to our contemporary sociology and anthropology of literature. This genial Polish scholar also managed to forge some deft descriptive tags, referring to "a reminiscent work" or "the literature of reminiscence."⁷

⁴ A. Wat, *Dziennik bez samogłosek. Pisma wybrane* (Diary Without Vowels. Selected Writings), vol. II, ed. K. Rutkowski, London 1986, p. 111.

⁵ W. Borowy, "O wpływach i zależnościach w literaturze" (On Influence and Dependence in Literature), in *Studia i szkice literackie* (Literary Sketches and Studies), vol. II, Warszawa 1983, p. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

The term “influence,” linked to the problem of connections between various national literatures, has become a favorite in comparative literary studies. A great number of methodological disputes have of course raged over the subject of this field, beginning in the twentieth century, and continue to. They have transformed the field from the empirically oriented study of influences, dependence, references and inspiration between or among sources and literary phenomena from diverse areas of culture including texts, themes, genres, currents, conventions, etc. into studies focused on the category of intertextuality, and also into a vast area of theoretical consideration and reading practices with permeable boundaries, whose keywords include canon, translation, world literature, and multi- or transculturalism.⁸

The intertextual current in literary studies was initiated by Julia Kristeva, drawing inspiration from the concepts of Mikhail Bakhtin⁹, but developed far beyond what she had originally intended. The fundamental difference between traditional (positivist, geneticist) inquiries into sources, influences and dependence in literature and the new approach to the issue of connections between works is laid out in the following terms by Michał Głowiński, following a Structuralist view:

The sphere of intertextuality is delineated otherwise: into its domain enter exclusively those relations with other works that have become a structural element, or, if one prefers, a semantic element, i.e., at the level of meaning, an intentional relationship and in some way or other visibly evident, one might say: intended for the reader. For example, the influence of Niemcewicz’s ballads on those of Mickiewicz is not an intertextual fact, since there is no semantically marked reference to the works of the predecessor”.¹⁰

Influence, intertextually understood, need not have a strictly personal dynamic, it may be the result of a reference by the author to particular elements of literary tradition (genre, convention, style, etc.). The problem of intention as an essential condition for the study of the relationship between texts is not central to comparative studies, however. Their scope and subject in fact vary depending on the geographical area where they are being conducted. In Continental Europe comparative literature is predominantly viewed as comprising the establishment, analysis and interpretation of empirically verifiable relationships between texts, motifs, currents, periods, and other units of literary history (treated diachronically as well as synchronically), while in English-speaking countries the field is usually linked with the study of world literature. Very often, in those and other countries, comparative literary studies fall within the purview of Post-Colonial Studies. The problem of influences and dependence is then interpreted within the framework of such categories as colonization, domination, power, symbolic violence, subordination, and mimicry. An example of such practices is the Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade’s *Manifesto Antropófago*, published in 1928, but frequently invoked in our day, in reflection on literary translation among other contexts. De Andrade declared “cannibalism” to be a feature of Brazilian literature, in its creative “feeding on” (and thus reinforcement of) Western literature and culture. A further developer of de Andrade’s

⁸ J. Culler, “Whither Comparative Literature,” in *Comparative Critical Studies* 2006, vol. 3, issue 1-2, pp. 85-97.

⁹ J. Kristeva, *Simeiótiki: recherches pour une sémanalyse*, Paris 1969, pp. 84-85.

¹⁰ M. Głowiński, “O intertekstualności” (On Intertextuality), in *Intertekstualność, groteska, parabola. Szkice ogólne i interpretacje. Prace wybrane* (Intertextuality, Grotesque, Parabola. Loose Sketches and Interpretations. Selected Works), vol. V, ed. R. Nycz, Kraków 2000, p. 8.

thought is the poet and translator Haroldo de Campos, who has applied the metaphor of anthropophagy to describing the creative assimilation of a foreign tradition in the process of translation: “The philosophy of translation that he developed represents [...] a result of contemplating the state and position of Brazilian culture and emphasizes the need for transcendence of European models (and the logocentric myth of the ‘mighty original’) through creative translation of selectively assimilated cultural texts into Portuguese in its Brazilian idiom”.¹¹ The history of the concept of influence in translation studies is in fact a matter for separate discussion and we will not here endeavor to examine it in any greater depth.

Beginning in the final decades of the twentieth century, the problem of literary influence has been associated above all with the person of Harold Bloom and his academic essay *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (1973). This text elicited many responses and reverberations, both positive and negative; the author himself returned with further modulation of his theory of poetic influence in the book *The Anatomy of Influence. Literature as a Way of Life* (2011), published forty years later. In it (as in the introduction to later editions of *The Anxiety of Influence*) he attempted to clarify the misunderstandings to which his concept of anxiety of influence, usually interpreted (in accordance with Bloom’s original formulations) in terms of the Oedipal model of rivalry between “precursor” and “adept,” had given rise. Bloom, a remarkably erudite scholar, a venerator of masterpieces (particularly Shakespeare’s) and foe of popular culture, wrote in his first book: “Poetic history, in this book’s argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves. My concern is only with strong poets, major figures with the persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death. Weaker talents idealize; figures of capable imagination appropriate for themselves. But nothing is got for nothing, and self-appropriation involves the immense anxieties of indebtedness, for what strong maker desires the realization that he has failed to create himself?”.¹² The term “misreading” has no negative evaluation attached to it here and refers to a “revisionist, creative, idiosyncratic reading made by a strong poet of his precursor, resulting from fear of being influenced”.¹³ The rhetoric of the agon which Bloom maintains throughout his academic writing led feminist critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among other authors, to enter into a polemical dialogue with him. In their pioneering book *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*, Gilbert and Gubar opposed to what they considered the patriarchal notion of the anxiety of influence the female “anxiety of authorship,” the result of many centuries of exclusion from full participation in literary communication. “For our purposes here, however, Bloom’s historical construct is useful,” they wrote, “not only because it helps identify and define the patriarchal psychosexual context in which so much Western literature was authored, but also because it can help us distinguish the anxieties and achievements of female

¹¹G. Borowski, “Transkreacja: myśl przekładowa Haraldo de Camposa” (Transcreation: the Translation Thought of Haraldo de Campos), *Przekładaniec* 2012 vol. 26, p. 95.

¹²H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry*, Oxford 1997, p. 5.

¹³A. Burzyńska, M.P. Markowski, *Teorie literatury XX wieku. Podręcznik* (Twentieth Century Literary Theory. A Handbook), Kraków 2006, p. 376.

writers from those of male writers".¹⁴ In their framing, the woman author is not obliged to enter into rivalry with a strong precursor. She is, however, forced to engage in a struggle to define herself independently of gender roles imposed on her by the patriarchy. She is often aided in this emancipatory project by a strong female precursor and womanly sisterhood.

In response to such polemics, Bloom emphatically denied that his theory postulates an Oedipal rivalry between adepts and precursors as the main driving mechanism of the creative process. Without renouncing his vision of literature as an area of unceasing rivalries (in which he perceives the legacy of Greek civilization) he explained: "I never meant by 'the anxiety of influence' a Freudian, Oedipal rivalry, despite a rhetorical flourish or two in this book. [...] influence-anxiety does not so much concern the forerunner but rather is an anxiety achieved in and by the story, novel, play, poem, or essay. [...] What writers may experience as anxiety, and what their works are compelled to manifest, are the *consequence* of poetic misprision, rather than the *cause* of it. The strong misreading comes first; there must be a profound act of reading that is a kind of falling in love with a literary work".¹⁵ This affective aspect (falling in love) is underscored with particular intensity in *The Anatomy of Influence* – the book declared by the octogenarian Bloom to be his swan song – wherein it encompasses not only poets, but also literary scholars and ordinary readers. "Sometimes in the long nights I experience as I recover from my various mishaps and illnesses, I ask myself why I have been so obsessed with problems of influence. My own subjectivity from the age of ten on was formed by reading poetry, and at some now forgotten time I began to puzzle at influences. [...] Influence stalks us all as influenza and we can suffer an anguish of contamination whether we are partakers of influence or victims of influenza. What remains free in us is the daimon".¹⁶ The introduction to the book on love for poetry ends with the following gendered reflection from this incorrigibly androcentric, rather conservative old patriarch of literary criticism:

There are many candidates for Freud's best book, yet I favor his 1926 revision of his earlier theory of anxiety, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety*. Here Freud gets free of his weird contention that all anxiety ensues from repressed desire and substitutes the fecund notion that anxiety is a signal of danger, related to the infant's terror at its own helplessness.

A potentially strong poet is never helpless, and she may never receive a signal of anxiety in regard to the literary past; but her poems will tally them.¹⁷

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¹⁴S. Gibert, S. Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*, New Haven and London 1979, p. 48.

¹⁵H. Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. xxiii.

¹⁶H. Bloom, *The Anatomy of Influence. Literature as a Way of Life*, New Haven and London 2011, pp. vii, xii.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT:

The article presents a short history of the concept behind the word „influence” and the ways it is understood in various disciplines and currents in the humanities.

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