



Citing the world: A geometric data analysis of Swedish literary scholars' use of foreign critical resources



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ABSTRACT

The academic study of literature constitutes one institutional site for the production and reproduction of conceptions of literature. In a semi-peripheral country such as Sweden, this production partly relies on foreign intellectual goods. To analyze this transnational dimension of Swedish scholarship in a period marked by increasing internationalization, a Geometric Data Analysis (GDA) (Le Roux & Rouanet, 2004) was carried out on the bibliographies of 318 PhD dissertations, defended in the period 1980–2005, at Swedish departments of literary studies (*litteraturvetenskap*). The analysis of citational choices showed only an insignificant increase in the reliance on foreign sources in this period. The GDA revealed how these privileged references were distributed in a tripolar opposition, reflecting fundamentally different conceptions of literature, interpreted in this study as the three poles of textual singularity, secular particularity and anthropological universality. The analysis of supplementary variables shows that these oppositions are subtended by different geolinguistic orientations and that they correlate strongly with gender, which is overwhelmingly in evidence as one moves from the male-dominated textual pole to the strongly feminist and female social pole of the first axis. The lack of increasing internationalization measured by citations is attributed to the “national cultural mission” of these departments.

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1. Introduction: The translocal production and reproduction of the literary

This article takes the case of Sweden and asks, does the citational practices of literary scholars in a semi-peripheral national field change in significant ways in a period marked by increasing internationalization and globalization? Nuances, specifications and qualifications are in order, but the fundamental components of this question are: literary scholars (PhD dissertation authors), the practice of citing other authors (references to non-Swedish authorities in dissertation bibliographies), the national and “provincial” delimitation (Sweden), periodization (1980–2005) and a problematic condition (“globalization”). Mapping citational choices reveals underlying structures of this scholarly field. Thus, a second question arises: what were the main investments in foreign theoretical and critical resources made by Swedish literary scholars between 1980 and 2005? And from that question, others: Can the pattern of these investments be interpreted as

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reflecting deep-seated differences of the field? In short, can we give an outline of the principles of vision and division within this semi-peripheral intellectual field in the late 20th and early 21st century, based on the choices among all the resources that make up this period's "traveling theory"?¹

Such an analysis of a citational space is not an analysis of a scholarly field—much more data of different kinds would be required—but it contributes to the larger project of Bourdieusian field theory by showing how different agents within a field make use of intellectual resources available to them in ways that reflect struggles over legitimate critical perspectives within the field. In the present case, these resources are to a significant extent foreign, which points to a certain degree of "academic dependence" on the part of Swedish scholars (see [Alatas, 2003](#)), in the sense that changes in the theoretical discourse are conditioned by changes in that discourse in the core sites of theory production: the US, Britain, France, and Germany.² At the same time, these scholars' object of study is overwhelmingly national (roughly 80% of the dissertations analyzed focused on Swedish authorships) and, as we shall see, their citations include a large proportion of the "locally embedded references" that more dependent producers would forego ([Mosbah-Natanson & Gingras, 2014](#)). In short, when Swedish literary scholars cite the world, it is part of a nationally determined practice that is transnationally conditioned to a certain degree. Thus, the present study also contributes to a transnational sociology (and history) of the humanities, but it does so not by focusing on exchange or mobility (see [Heilbron, Guilhot, & Jeanpierre, 2008](#)) but on the way that non-domestic resources are employed for the reproduction of the literary within a national framework. As Pierre Bourdieu notes with regard to the international circulation of ideas, it is often the case with foreign authors, that it is not what they say that counts, but what they can be made to say ([2002](#)). The present analysis gives another turn to the screw, assuming that the very fact that a foreign author is cited says something, regardless of what that author says or is made to say.

This citational practice is one small but interesting part of the larger production and reproduction of the literary, a collective labor that has both symbolic and material dimensions ([de Nooy, 1991](#); [van Rees & Dorleijn, 2001](#)). In sheer quantity—time and numbers—the predominant form of reproduction is that of individual readers reading texts as literature, but greater social visibility, and social puissance, is claimed by the reproduction that takes place in public spheres: literary criticism, reviews, marketing copy, new editions with new paratexts, television interviews and literary discussion programs, screen adaptations, and more recently digital arenas for discussion.³ One of the most important institutional and public sites for the symbolic production and reproduction of literature, for conceptions of literature and the *conscience collective* of "the literary," is the one formed by the various disciplines in the academy that deal with literary texts.⁴ This space is not isolated from the rest of the literary field: in the course of my research on critics, translators and literary scholars in Sweden, I found that of the 465 most prominent literary critics/reviewers in the period 1980–2005, 23% also had a PhD in literature, and many of the active scholars were also critics and reviewers. There is clearly traffic between the two domains of literary reproduction, and, all other things being equal, it seems safe to assume that the formation of conceptions of literature will to some extent take place in the academy, which not only "plays a major role in the canonization of literary works" ([Sapiro, Pacouret, & Picaud, 2015, 10](#)), but is also a site that specializes in the meta-discourse on literature, making concepts, periodizations, and genre distinctions available for further elaboration and canonization.⁵

Given the academic producers' particular role in the division of labor within the production of the literary, it is of some interest to gauge changes in that domain in the period of the discourse of globalization and the emergence of "world literature." [Johan Heilbron \(2014, 686\)](#) argues that globalization generally entails "the growing dependency of local settings on transnational structures" within an overall structure of unequally distributed symbolic and material resources. Even as literary scholars in Sweden are concerned with the making of a particular, local world of literature and address themselves mainly to a nationally delimited audience, they routinely draw on non-local references in the making of that local world. While focusing on the national literature, they constantly negotiate the relationship between the semi-peripheral literary field and the core of world literary space. In this negotiation, mastery of the conceptions of literature produced in the core is essential for the semi-peripheral actors, whether they perform the work of cultural transmitters (in the sense developed by [Petra Broomans et al. \(2009, 13\)](#)) or not. As we will see, this negotiation depends on the linguistic and intellectual resources of the scholars in the target domain.

¹ See [Sapiro and Heilbron \(2008\)](#) for a discussion of the status of different languages (and by implication, national fields) in a global circulation of books. Sapiro and Heilbron both identify Swedish as holding a semi-peripheral position (29). Their discussion is based on [Heilbron \(1999\)](#). The place of Sweden in the social sciences and humanities is identified as among the "more peripheral" in Europe, alongside Finland, Norway and the Netherlands, in [Gingras and Heilbron \(2009\)](#) (379). In a recent essay, Yvonne Lindquist argues for the semi-peripheral position of Sweden in what she calls the "global translation field," noting its "centrality in the [Scandinavian] periphery" ([Lindquist, 2015, 184](#)). The phrase "traveling theory" is taken from Edward Said's essay with that title ([Said, 1983](#)), but the present analysis is not primarily concerned with Said's problem of "what happens to a theory when it moves from one place to another" but instead with the kind of space that is constituted by the choices of such portable intellectual property at their destination (230).

² Thus, the academic dependence in this case is restricted to the first of the six dimensions listed by Alatas, the dependence on ideas ([2003, 6](#)).

³ This opposition between what Richard Peterson calls "auto-production" and institutionalized production is not meant as a general and static relationship, but in this case and for this period the greater weight of the institutional practices can hardly be disputed ([Peterson, 2000](#)). For a useful summary of the "production of culture perspective," see [Peterson and Anand \(2004\)](#).

⁴ The perspective afforded by the term "conception of literature" is one that avoids or at least postpones an allegiance to any particular theory of literature or poetics. Instead, it treats particular theories as institutional conventions that must be studied as objects in their own right. It was first introduced by C. J. van Rees and Hugo Verdaasdonk in the early 1980s, and elaborated in a number of articles by them and other scholars over the years ([van Rees, 1981, 1984, 1994](#); [van Rees & Dorleijn, 2001](#); [Verdaasdonk, 1982](#)).

⁵ The centrality of universities for various legitimating functions related to the arts and literature is broadly recognized. As Baumann notes, "literature departments serve to sustain the place of fiction and poetry among the arts" ([Baumann, 2007, 56](#)).

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