Translating peripheral literature: Norwegian literature

FRANCIS HENRIK AUBERT

> "If there is a universal tragedy established by Shakespeare, Ibsen and O'Neill, Nelson included in it the Brazilian man. And if the world does not understand Portuguese to marvel at it, too bad for the world."
>
> (Ruy Castro, "*Pior para o mundo*", *Folha de S. Paulo*, 25 Aug. 2012, p.2)

IN RUY CASTRO'S text containing the epigraph to this essay, the author discusses whether Nelson Rodrigues would be (a) universally recognized if he had written in English or Spanish; and (b) even if he were recognized, if he would have been the same Nelson Rodrigues. And exploring the alternative of translation, he says that Nelson had been translated several times, but with questionable results, not because of any difficulty that the linguistic transposition of his texts might entail, "but because Nelson is so outrageously Brazilian."

Whatever the author's intention - perhaps to pay one more tribute to the playwright on the centenary of his birth – the truth is that the text published by *Folha de São Paulo* is quite provocative in view of the issue facing any translator when dealing with authors who are not part of the mainstream of the global literary canon (such as Nelson Rodrigues) or who, even when part of it (like Ibsen), do not do it in its original linguistic-textual context.

Where is the difficulty? Certainly in multiple places. It is expressed in the poetic function, which is so dependent on the phonological, morphosyntactic and syntactic-semantic specifics of each language and of each stage of a language; it lies in the referential universes - natural, material, social, ideological – typical of each human group in each geocultural, geopolitical and historical space; it is enmeshed in the web of textualities and intertextualities that make up the heritage of each community and each of its subgroups; and, of all places, it resurfaces with full intensity in the extremely personal space of the translator-co-author, with its idiosyncrasies that distinguish all the previous *loci*.

Among these various factors - all of them relevant and all mutually intertwined - it is interesting that Ruy Castro should mention the language issue as the less central factor. Even assuming the relativity of the success of any transla-

tional endeavor, Brazilian Portuguese is not less translatable into English, Spanish, French, etc. than these languages are among themselves or to/from any other language. The linguistic challenges represented by the various forms of manifestation of the poetic function (Jakobson, 1969) and of syntax-semantics (see, *inter alia*, Aubert, 2006a) are well known: over more than two millennia of reflections on translation and more than a century and a half of linguistic reflections, these obstacles - and the ways to overcome them, even if partially – have been very well mapped.

The difficulty pointed out is certainly of a different nature. The phrase "outrageously Brazilian" refers, first of all, to the anthropological dimension, in the sense of the cultural behaviors portrayed in a text. They are obviously critical factors for the success of translation, largely because (i) in many texts - particularly literary texts – these factors are implicit, and (ii) the cultural behaviors of the reception space work - almost inevitably - as keys for reading the translated text (see the convincing illustration of this phenomenon in Bohannon, 1971). However, another variable should be added to the specific cultural issue: translating a text of any nature - literary or otherwise - also involves removing it from its original polysystem and reinserting it in another polysystem. This is a delicate operation, and on which our accumulated knowledge still does not provide a sufficiently solid basis for generating a minimum set of certainties (see Toury, 1995).

The favorable reception of a text (or as in the example given in the previous paragraph, of an entire textual genre) is obviously a desideratum for the operators of insertion (the translator, the editor, the sponsor).1

It is questionable, however, whether a successful reception by itself meets the set of expectations that moves a translation. The qualitative issues that underlie these expectations involve not only the pure and simple insertion of the translated text into the cultural and literary polysystem of the reception space, but at least to some extent the recovery of the meaning of the work in its source polysystem.

When the translational operation is performed between language/culture complexes with an intense and lasting reciprocal interaction, fragments more or less extensive of the source literary polysystem (or cultural polysystem in the broad sense) are already in motion in the target polysystem. In the translation of an English text into German, a French text into Spanish, a Russian text into Italian, the resulting work will find, in the space of reception, welcoming spaces previously visited by other works and other authors of the source language/culture. Allusions to Othello, Faust, Pantagruel, the Orlando Furioso, the Knight of the Sad Countenance, and Ana Karenina are intelligible and evocative in almost the entire space of euro-centered culture; they transcend, to a large extent, their spaces of origin; and incorporate a canon that also includes the Holy Scriptures, which are clearly and intentionally translinguistic and transcultural.

In a space so expanded, the critical fortune of the translated work does not reverberate in multifaceted reception spaces alone, but directly or indirectly returns – or at least can return – to gestation space, embellished and enriched by new readings and new developments within a broader literary polysystem.

If, however, the translational operation occurs from a slightly more peripheral language/culture space and, a fortiori, between two peripheral languages/cultures, the existing heritage of translated works, which somehow could enable a recreation of the source literary polysystem in the reception space will be often limited, insufficient, to ensure some (re)reading of the intertextual meanings established in that polysystem (Even-Zohar, 2001).

To consider, for the sake of argument, a rather extreme case, let us take the translation of a text from contemporary Ethiopian literature rendered by Hama Tuma,2 originally written in Amharic. Despite the existence of a *History of Ethiopia* by the Jesuit Pedro Páez, written in Castilian in 1620 and containing, among other texts, several translations of tales of Ethiopian literary tradition, in the Iberian literary polysystems there are no previous elements to, say, prepare the absorption of a cotemporary Ethiopian text. Tuma's work, in its hypothetical rewriting in Portuguese, would come unaccompanied, separated from its source polysystem, and without any certainty as to its possible anchoring in the Luso-Brazilian literary polysystem.

In such conditions, with regard to the translation strategy to be adopted, between the extremes of assimilative or matrix translation (domesticating or foreignizing, according to Venuti (1998); communicative or semantic translation, as proposed by Newmark (1981); "leave the author alone as much as possible and bring the reader to him; or leave the reader alone as much as possible and bring the author to him,"3 in the view of Schleiermacher, 2001), the most prudent choice would fall on the first alternative: given the virtual impossibility of recovering the reading keys given by the source polysystem, the best chance of success would rest in the search – however (re)creative – for connections with the target literary polysystem. According to the opposite alternative, the translation would have to be philological and, between footnotes and hypertexts, it would seek to rescue elements from the source polysystem, a solution usually accepted by critics and scholars, but of little appeal and effectiveness to the general public.

In the translational relationship between Norwegian literature and Brazilian reception, we come across a situation that is closer to the Ethiopian hypothesis than to the so-called euro-centered situation.

Until recently, with one or two exceptions,4 the - few - existing translations of texts of Scandinavian literature in general and Norwegian literature in particular, were explicitly or implicitly rendered through the mediation of a central language-culture center (initially French and more recently English).

Thus, Silva (2007) lists from the 1910s until 1990, 34 translations of

Henrik Ibsen's plays, of which only one5 claims to be a direct translation from Norwegian. Even among the nine listed as of 1990, only four have been unquestionably translated from Norwegian.6 Finally, between 2006 and 2008 twelve of Ibsen's plays were translated from Norwegian into Portuguese, but in the European variant.7

It is true that translating Ibsen's work may not have the intention of recovering the readings – whether potential or actual - of its source space/polysystem. Especially in his contemporary plays (1877-1899), the translations of Ibsen's work tend to seek to recover the elements of social and ethical criticism that gave it fame and renown in Europe in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, without a deliberate effort to retrieve the elements of "Norwegianness." What one gets, thus, by way of translation, is a European, an international Ibsen, a member of the collective heritage of world literature. If, however, we go back to Ibsen's previous production and consider its historical plays - *Lady Inger of Østeraad* (1855), *The Celebration in Solhaug* (1856), *The Vikings of Helgeland* (1857), *The Pretenders* (1866) - and during a transition period, *Peer Gynt* (1867), the content of Norwegian history, culture, folklore and literary polysystem is particularly remarkable.8

Albeit in different ways, the works of other writers that make up modern Norwegian literature - Henrik Wergeland (1808-1845); Johan Sebastian Welhaven (1807-1873); Camila Collett (1813-1895); Ivar Aasen (1813-1896); Aasmund Vinje (1818-1870); Alexander Kielland (1849-1906); Jonas Lie (1833-1908); Vinje, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-1910); Olav Duun (1876-1939); Knut Hamsun (1859-1952); Sigrid Undset (1882-1949); Sigurd Hoel (1890-1960); Nordahl Grieg (1902-1943); Johan Falkberget (1879-1967); and Tarjei Vesaas (1897-1970), to mention only the authors of more canonical relevance between the mid nineteenth and mid-twentieth century - besides the work of the folklorists Per Christen Asbjørnsen (1812-1885) and Jørgen Moe (1813-1882), whose work, in Norway, is comparable to that of the Grimm brothers in Germany, also contain the mentioned traces of multiple "Norwegianness" (linguistic, regional, diachronic, political), which are a relevant part of the reading keys for a deeper understanding of their production.9 Together they make up the Norwegian literary polysystem in which contemporary production in inserted and articulated.

In a previous reflection (Aubert, 1995) inspired by the translation of a set of Norwegian folk tales from the collection of Asbjørnsen and Moe,10 it was suggested that the use of a hybrid set of matrix, assimilative and creative procedures could overcome, albeit partially, the barriers to recovering the specifics of the source cultural-linguistic space.

Photo by France Press

Johan Ibsen (1828-1906).

In this sense, it was said that the use of matrix procedures would lead to mirroring and literalness solutions (Aubert 2006b), as opposed to assimilative resources, which usually correspond to modulations and adaptations. Matrix resources generate foreigneizing effects. Assimilative resources bring the text closer to the source language/culture and ultimately take on a cannibalistic face. They also enhance the so-called creative resources, which represent the most visible contribution of the translator himself, i.e., that in which the translator assumes the co-authorship, expressing in the translation his interpretation, his experience, his sensitivity. As a product, the text creatively translated resembles, largely, the text translated from the assimilative perspective, without, however, submitting to the standards and uses, to the routine, ultimately, of the target language/culture. It will be, first and foremost, a new text, a fully autonomous text, a text produced by a co-author. In practice, it is through deliberately eclectic procedures that one can aspire, at one and the same time, "to bring the text to the reader," while "bringing the reader to the text."

Although, as in the concrete case of the translation of folktales, it was possible to insert a translator's preface and, equally importantly, to reproduce most of the "classic" illustrations of the originals, there is no way - at least in the two-dimensional structure of traditional writing (printed) – to recover the literary polysystem itself in the translation of a single work of that polysystem. For

this recovery - always relative – to occur, one should necessarily move beyond more immediate editorial interests (centenary of an author's death, promotion of a newly awarded book and events of the like) and devise a more ambitious and systematic plan for the translation of representative works of different authors, over a timeline that, in the Norwegian case and given the historical vicissitudes of the country, extends at least from the end of Danish rule (turn of the eighteenth century).

This is the meaning - or one of the main meanings – of the translation of Norwegian folktales. These are not limited to being a mere historical-literary-political monument. On the contrary, they are part of daily contemporary life, as an accurate portrayal of Nordic sites; they appeal, to date, to the same sensitivity before nature; they live in the iconography of everyday life and in the linguistic expression of an entire society. They mark, to this date, a considerable part of the national identity and of the identification of each individual as a member of the community. In short, they are an integral and living part of the cultural and referential heritage of the five million inhabitants of the country in homes, schools, decoration, jewelry, parks, literature, painting, music, political caricature, popular sayings, catchphrases and other peculiarities of speech. They are, in fact, more current, more present, more rooted and more widespread than the representations of the Viking sagas and epics.

The folkloristic work of Asbjørnsen and Moe also resulted in several accounts describing the situations in which the stories were collected. One of them owes its greater relevance to the fact that it contains the "case" of Peer Gynt the hunter,11 the text that inspired Ibsen's homonymous play. Thus, another key piece of the Norwegian literary polysystem becomes available in Portuguese. Others are in preparation. The foregoing list of authors of the Norwegian literary canon is, thus, more than just an informative roster: it represents a long and medium term work program; the recovery not only of texts deemed representative, but first and foremost a deliberate experiment of access to an entire web of intertextuality.

Notes

1 I refer here to public and private entities (e.g., the Gulbenkian Foundation in Portugal, NORLA in Norway, the Ministry of Culture in Brazil) that promote the dissemination of their respective literatures through financial support for translation, the distribution of grants, the organization of seminars, awards, etc.

2 Born in 1949. Poet and writer, polemicist, opponent of several dictatorial governments in his home country.

3 *Entweder der uebersezer lä t den Schriftsteller möglichst in ruhe und bewegt den Leser ihm entgegen; oder er lä t den leser möglichst in ruhe und bewedgt den Scnhriftsteller ihm entgegen*. For a slightly different translation, see *Clássicos da teoria da tradução*. Volume 1 - German-Portuguese. Florianópolis: UFSC, 2001. p.42-3.

4 As far as I know, the only translation that was certainly rendered directly from Norwegian into Brazilian Portuguese until the 1990s was that of Trygve Gulbranssen's work - *Og bakom synger skogene*. Translated into Portuguese with the name of *Além cantam os bosques* (Boa Leitura Publisher, 1960).

5 *Inimigo do Povo*. Translation by James Colby (?), no date (apud SBAT-RJ records).

6 All by the Dane Karl-Erik Schollhammer, a professor of literary theory at PUC-RJ.

7 Of these, four were translated by Prof. Schollhammer and two by this author. This is a rather peculiar situation in which more than half the texts were translated by Nordic translators or translators with strong family ties with Scandinavia, and in which half the texts had initially a Brazilian face, and then were adjusted/rewritten under the European Portuguese filter. It is also peculiar due to the fact that Danish can be understood as sharing the nature of "original language" with Norwegian (back in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was common to refer to *Riksmål* - the cultural standard of the Norwegian of that time - as *Dane-Norwegian*).

8 Perhaps not surprisingly, except for *Peer Gynt* Silva's survey (2007) does not include any indication that these plays have been translated, either directly or indirectly, into Portuguese.

9 Again, except for Knut Hamsun, all others remain untranslated in Portuguese.

10 See *Askeladden e outras aventuras* (Edusp, 1993). *Novas aventuras de Askeladden* (Edusp, 1995).

11 The Adventures of Peer Gynt - extracted from the 2nd edition of *Norske Huldre--eventyr og Folkesagn, by* P. Ch Asbjørnsen. Translation by Y. Fabri and F. H. Aubert (*Cadernos de Literatura em tradução*, in press).

References

AUBERT, F. H. Desafios da tradução cultural (as aventuras tradutórias do Askeladden). *Tradterm*, São Paulo, v.2, p.31-44, 1995.

_____. Indagações acerca dos marcadores culturais na tradução. *Revista de Estudos Orientais*, São Paulo, v.5, p.23-36, 2006a.

_____. Em busca das refrações na literatura brasileira traduzida: revendo a ferramenta de análise. *Literatura e Sociedade*, São Paulo, v.9, p.60-9, 2006b.

BOHANNON, L. Shakespeare in the bush. In: SPRADLEY, J. P.; McCURDY, J. P. *conformity and conflict*: Readings in Cultural Anthropology. Boston: Little Brown & Co. 1971 [see bilingual version by L. R. Esteves and F. H. Aubert (2008). Available at: <http://sare.unianhanguera.edu.br/index.php/rtcom/article/view/153/152>].

EVEN-ZOHAR, I. The position of translated literature within the literary polysystem. In: VENUTI, L. *The translation studies reade*r. London: Routledge, 2001. p.192-7.

JAKOBSON, R. Aspectos linguísticos da tradução. In: . *Linguística e comunicação*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1969.

NEWMARK, P. *Approaches to translation*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981.

NIDA, E. Linguistics and ethnology in translation problems. *Word i,* p.194-208, 1945.

SCHLEIERMACHER, F. Sobre os diferentes métodos de tradução. In: *clássicos da*

teoria da tradução. Florianópolis: UFSC, 2001. v.1 – German-Portuguese.

SILVA, J. P. *Ibsen no Brasil*. Historiografia, seleção de textos críticos e catálogo bibliográfico. 2007. Dissertation (Master's Degree) – School of Philosophy, Letters and Humanities, University of São Paulo. São Paulo, 2007.

TOURY, G. *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995.

VENUTI, L. *The Scandals of Translation*. Towards an ethics of difference. London: Routledge, 1998.

Abstract – Literary translations from peripheral languages/cultures tend to be sporadic, and, as such, are more likely to attempt to become a part of the target literary polysystem, and to abandon the links between the original work and its source polysystem. In order to achieve this, the assimilative (or domesticating, as Venuti (1998) would have it) approach will be close to inevitable. This essay, taking as an example the actual and potential translations of works of Norwegian literature into Brazilian Portuguese, claims that a different approach could be adopted, seeking to reproduce – albeit partially – the source polysystem (or relevant fragments thereof). This approach will require more than an effective translation effort: an intercultural strategy will be involved, planning over time the translation of a multiplicity of significant works – and thus set up an *imitatio* of the source polysystem in the Brazilian spaces of reception.

Keywords: Literary translation, Peripheral literatures, Norwegian literature.

Francis Henrik Aubert holds a degree in Arts and Humanities from the University of Oslo (1968) and a Ph.D. in General Linguistics and Semiotics from the University of São Paulo (1975). He is currently a professor at the University of São Paulo, working especially in the following areas: translation studies, professional practices of translation, contrastive terminology and linguistics @ – fhaubert@usp.br / citrat@usp.br

Received on 11 Sept. 2012 and accepted on 21 Sept. 2012.