

## CANONICAL TRANSLATION

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**Abstract:** The discussion about the status of the translated literary text and the position of the translator is ever-present in the field of Translation Studies. Sensitive issues such as authorship, authorship in translation and the position of the translated text within the receiving literary system keep theoreticians busy, as well as discussions about canon in literature and canon in translated literature. A less evident topic is the existence of canonical translations which are regarded as “definitive” in the receiving literary system or as a model for subsequent translations. I intend to show in this paper that the phenomenon I call canonical translation is neither an isolated phenomenon nor restricts itself to peripheral literary systems.

**Keywords:** Authorship; Canonical translation; Literature.

## TRADUÇÃO CANÔNICA

**Resumo:** A discussão sobre o status do texto literário traduzido e a posição do tradutor são uma constante na área dos Estudos da Tradução. Temas sensíveis como autoria, autoria do texto traduzido e a posição do texto traduzido no sistema literário de acolhida recebem muita atenção por parte dos pesquisadores, bem como discussões sobre o cânone literário e o cânone de literatura traduzida. Um tópico menos evidente é a existência de traduções canônicas que são consideradas «definitivas» no sistema literário de acolhida ou como modelo para traduções ulteriores. Neste artigo, pretendo demonstrar que o fenômeno que denomino tradução canônica não é um fenômeno isolado e tampouco está restrito a sistemas literários periféricos.

**Palavras-chave:** Autoria, Tradução canônica, Literatura.



Before dealing with translation and empirical translation, it is important to briefly revisit authorship and related themes such as the textual author and the empirical author.

One of the points of convergence between textual author and empirical author is copyright, which aims to protect both authorial legitimacy (the text itself) and the author's rights as a historical subject. The translator, who is dissolved in the authorship discussion, continues to be so is when it comes to copyright.

The text of the Universal Copyright Convention, signed at Geneva in 1952, sets out in its introduction the reasons which led the signatory countries to produce the document:

Les États contractants,

**Animés** du désir d'assurer dans tous les pays la protection du droit d'auteur sur les œuvres littéraires, scientifiques et artistiques,

[...]

**Persuadés** qu'un tel régime universel de protection des droits des auteurs rendra plus facile la diffusion des œuvres de l'esprit et contribuera à une meilleure compréhension internationale,

**Sont convenus** de ce qui suit :

[...]

The declared intention of facilitating the diffusion of cultural and scientific goods imposes limits that today, more than half a century after the entry into force of the convention and in the face

of changes in the forms and speed of circulation of information around the world, can be questioned. In the meantime, and in accordance with the proposal in this article, I shall confine myself to a brief analysis of the article of the convention dealing with translation, and more specifically, translation rights. In Article V, the Convention reads as follows:

1. Le droit d'auteur comprend le droit exclusif de faire, de publier et d'autoriser à faire et à publier la traduction des œuvres protégées aux termes de la présente convention.
2. Toutefois, chaque État contractant peut, par sa législation nationale, restreindre, pour les écrits, le droit de traduction, mais en se conformant aux dispositions suivantes :

[...] La législation nationale adoptera les mesures appropriées pour assurer au titulaire du droit de traduction une rémunération équitable et conforme aux usages internationaux, ainsi que le paiement et le transfert de cette rémunération, et pour garantir une traduction correcte de l'œuvre.

Le titre et le nom de l'auteur de l'œuvre originale doivent être également imprimés sur tous les exemplaires de la traduction publiée. [...]

Whoever acquires the rights of translation of a text is obliged, by virtue of the convention and the national laws that apply, to produce a “correct translation” of that text. The text of the convention does not, however, explain what a correct translation is. Perhaps it is the minimal intervention on the original in order to guarantee the absolute integrity of the intellectual production of the author, production in this case understood as solely dependent on his individuality, as if such a thing were possible. The “correct translation” advocated by the convention thus seems to reinforce the excessive subordination of the translated text to the original one,

depriving the translation of any creative possibility, as Gillespie (2005) argues.

“Correct translation” becomes even more difficult if we continue to seek theoretical answers to the role of the translator. Genette, for example, does not believe in the possibility of correct translation since it is fundamentally flawed: the translation is not the original text, nor was it written in the same language of the original. Thus, the translator has to be satisfied: « [I]e plus sage, pour le traducteur, serait sans doute d’admettre qu’il ne peut faire que mal, et de s’efforcer pourtant de faire aussi bien que possible, ce qui signifie souvent faire *autre chose*. » (1982, 297).

The author has the legal guarantee that his name will appear in the published work. As for the translator, no suggestion is made that his name be made known. In fact, the word “translator” is nowhere to be found in the convention. There always appears “translation,” as if it were not the result of the intellectual effort of an individual. Thus, the translator is denied the legal right of ownership over his text, and what I consider to be more serious, denies him the right to have his existence recognized. So if in literary theory and criticism there is still room for dispute over the author, the letter of the law seems to have settled any controversy over the translator: he does not exist. This, of course, has changed over time in some countries, but the letter of the Convention remains the same.

By law, the translator has little room for maneuver within the contemporary conception of authorship. He has little or almost no legal rights to the intellectual property of his text, since the text resulting from his translation is not “his”, belongs to another, and his intervention in this text does not, as a rule, characterize the right to claim authorship over this text.

The social and legal restriction of the authorship and authority of the translator on the translated text has roots that are deeper than the one-dimensional speculation on the text translated in the locutionary level of language, which Lefevere qualifies as only one of its instances of production. Lefevere argues that literary translation, as a rewriting of a work originally produced in a given

sociocultural circumstance, has the potential to subvert the receiving literary system and even the notion of authorship, provided that authority is negotiated over the translated text.

At this point in the discussion, I think it appropriate to recall the difference between theoretical considerations about literary work, which end up involving translation, albeit indirectly, and the discussion of translation as a social practice, regulated by values and beliefs, as I have just shown. They are both important for the discussion of authorship, text and translation, of course, but it is always worth remembering that the limits of the translator's action on the translated text is a historical construct that, like all human institutions, is subject to change. These changes result from implicit or explicit negotiation between the actors involved in the issue of production, distribution and consumption of texts. In this way, the translator moves forward or backward in his socially marked role depending on the negotiating margin he obtains from the other actors; in this case, the copyright holders: author and publisher. Hence space may emerge for its manifestation as a creative individual.

The translator can express individuality and creation in the paratext, which is the place where he can transcend the legal and culturally accepted limits of authorship and establish his authorship through the creation of a new text incorporated, albeit in peripheral form, to the text that he translates. It thus retakes the Western tradition up to the Middle Ages, of glossing texts, incorporating elements that complement, criticize or relate to other texts. The authorship of the translator, it seems, has not yet entered into modernity. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for the notion of authorship with which we are accustomed is being challenged by the worldwide circulation of information at a dizzying pace and by various means and as a consequence the difficulty in controlling the origin and authority of information (and of its originality and authorship). Translation, perhaps, will point the way to the redefinition of authorship in the 21st century.

One of the socially accepted ways of conferring differentiated status for a translation and for the translator is precisely what I call a canonical translation, which temporarily resolves, through authority (in the sense of acknowledging the translator as an author), the tension between author and translator as creative authority of the text that circulates in a given literary system. It is a phenomenon that, although presenting limitations, happens with a certain regularity and should receive more attention by scholars. However, this issue has been largely disregarded in translation studies, or touched on in a tangential way. Benjamin, in lecturing on “archetypal” translations, warns of the dangers of translations that tend to perpetuate themselves as a model, but does not discuss what is at the origin of these translations that he calls archetypal. The point is that some literary translations reach a canonical status, that is, they inhibit later translations or, in certain cases, become the measure by which the subsequent translations are produced and evaluated. I now want to outline some of the conditions that allow a translation to achieve such a status.

I use the expression “canonical translation” and not “classical” translation or “masterpiece” translation, which has already been used here and there in literary and translation studies, since the notion of classical as well as of masterpiece does not necessarily encompass the model dimension to be followed that the canon encompasses. While the canonical can be seen as the result of a dynamic set of inclusions and socially motivated exclusions, the classic and the masterpiece refer to the supposedly immanent qualities of the literary work. In the words of Compagnon,

Le classique transcende tous les paradoxes et toutes les tensions : entre l’individu et l’universel, entre l’actuel et l’éternel, entre le local et le global, entre la tradition et l’originalité, entre la forme et le contenu. Cette apologie du classique est parfaite, trop parfaite pour que ses coutures ne lâchent pas à l’usage. (1998, 279).

Berman (2007) mentions canonicity in translation, but to refer to a canonical conception of translation in the West, the syncretism which, according to him, is the result of the annexationist translation inherited from the Romans. It does not, therefore, touch on the question of whether the translation itself can be canonical, as I do in this paper.

To speak of canonical translation apparently goes against theoretical approaches that advocate the necessity of periodic retranslation of the literary work, since translations age and need to be updated from time to time. The need for periodic retranslation of the literary work can only be understood if we consider literary translation and criticism as derivative activities that give rise to a judgment of value on a particular literary work and that this value judgment survives for as long as the conditions that generated it last. Benjamin, considering the intention of the “derivative, last, ideational” translator (2001, p.205) and translation as the search for the true language, attaches considerable importance to the translation and retranslation of the literary work for the sake of the continuity of the intention of the original itself.

However, there are many examples of translations of literary works that resist the time and circumstances that made its existence possible and maintain its prestige unchanged in literary systems worldwide.

The canonical translation is ever-present in all discussions around what makes a translated text good. It exists in disguise, under other names: it may be the translation that “most faithfully” reproduces the original text or, at the other end of the spectrum, the most “authoritative” translation. Adorno, for example, in commenting on Rilke’s translations of Valéry’s work and which did not survive as an ideal model for later translations in German, resorts to fidelity to explain why the translations were not successful despite the authority of the translator. Fidelity would then be the guarantee of a potential canonical value attributed to the translation.

Speaking from a different perspective, we have Jorge Luis Borges who, as Waisman (2005) points out, thinks about translation from

the center-periphery perspective and discusses the role of translation in peripheral cultures. In his texts devoted to translation, Borges attributes to infidelity the power of literary creation that allows the work to be the same and to be another, or others, in its new literary system. The new or different text may become canonical precisely due to its independent life, or its infidelity towards the original.

The theories of translation generally have as their object the ideal translation. The deconstructivist conception goes on the opposite direction, but it does not escape the specter of the authorized translation. After all, in order to deny the existence of an author and an original text, it is first necessary to give these concepts some legitimacy in order to undermine this very same legitimacy. The conception of deconstruction for translation, like any human knowledge, does not arise in a vacuum; it is based on the previous reflections on translation accumulated by literate societies, even if its purpose is to deny these reflections.

The canonical translation achieves its status by meeting certain expectations. However, it is not my purpose to present the canonical translation as a definitive translation, since expectations, or translation norms as Toury (1995) puts it, change. The fact that it is a real translation originated from equally real circumstances does not make it an immutable object, nor is the literary canon or social structure immutable. I believe that it is not possible to give up either the concept of ideal translation or the analysis of real translations, for, as Nietzsche warns, the exaggerated search for the real (and I would add: by the explanation of the real by the real itself) “can lead us to the opposite pole of all idealism, that is, the region of the wax museums” (2007, 51).

The canonical translation represents the search for the authoritative voice, an echo of the authoritative voice that is attributed to the original, and this is the purpose of translation theories: the prescriptive ones intend to teach how to make “the definitive translation”; the descriptive ones aim to portray the translation in empirical terms, but pointing out in them the legitimating traits of its authority, or the lack thereof. The

deconstructive conception of translation, while denying notions as authorship and having palimpsest as a metaphor for translation, cannot escape the discussion of orthodox themes such as author, original, and translated text. Or even canon or canonical translation in the terms I propose in this paper.

A canonical translation, therefore, satisfies the need for authority, though not forever. It offers a momentary sense of finitude, a temporary end to the task of translating and retranslating. The canonical translation may become, for example, a pedagogical text, one of the attributes of a canonical work. To emphasize the pedagogical and authoritative function of canonical translation, I retrieve here the Greek term *kanon* both for its original meaning, reed-stick to establish measures, and therefore to evaluate the fairness and propriety of what is measured, as well as in its meaning more current in our day, of model to be followed.

Therefore, to discuss literary canon and its derivative, canonical literary translation, we must remember that:

“to think about a literary canon is to engage the cultural authority comprised in the structure of permissions and challenges that these authors came to represent. Then there are several interlocking relationships among texts which take on importance because of the historical role they play in the development of certain imaginative forms or in defining certain values. Here a good deal of change takes place, relative to the questions cultures ask and to the purposes that might govern certain pedagogical or artistic practices.” (Altieri 1991, 2)

As for the factors that can be defined for a translation to become canonical, I believe that the simultaneous occurrence of two or more of them is perfectly possible, both in hegemonic and peripheral cultures.

Among the factors that may contribute to making a translation become canonical is, of course, a matter of chronology; first

translations tend to be models for later translations. In fact, a current practice in retranslation is precisely to use an earlier translation as a guide to avoid what is considered failures and to keep what are considered virtues. Anyhow, new translations are always in dialogue with their predecessors in ways that can be more or less explicit. However, chronological order is not tantamount to primacy for it is not enough to assure the status of canonical translation; a later translation may overshadow the pioneer and become the new standard to be followed.

Besides the chronological question, there is a very powerful subjective factor that can produce a canonical translation: the author of the translation. Then we return to canon, to authority. If the translator is a respected author in his cultural environment, the translation tends to be seen as his authorial work, that is, it ceases to bear the stigma of intellectual work of lesser prestige and becomes a work of literary creation, not only derivative, therefore.

If Bloom's (1994) strict concept of the literary canon, according to which the aesthetic power is what allows a work to become canonical, is taken as reference for the canonical translation argument, only the creative authority of an author / translator enshrined in his literary system could cause a translation to become canonical. However, one must be aware of the fact that this conception of the canon has little to say in favor of translation as practice, for Bloom's aesthetic power is "constituted primarily of an amalgam: mastery of figurative language, **originality** (my emphasis), cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction" (1994, 29).

The originality defended by Bloom, polemic in literary studies, is hardly feasible in terms of translation studies. Alternative conceptions of the canon based on aesthetics, such as that of Kermode (2004), grant the canon a more dynamic character by recognizing that aesthetic pleasure alters our perception of what is worthy of preservation over time. His conception of the canon seems to be more suited to the analysis of canonical translations, since the canonicity of a translation, as I have said, has a dynamic relationship with textual and extra-textual elements.

It is necessary to make a distinction among literary canon, a canon established by translation (which is a subtype of the literary canon, for what enters the canon in the new literary system is the literary work, not the translation proper, which is substitutable) and canonical translation which I propose here. Although each has distinguishing characteristics, what the three types of canon do have in common is that they can be established by criteria that lie outside the text, including their distribution and consumption.

The formation of the canon via translation is at the very basis of universal literature since this concept emerged in the eighteenth century. With regard to the influence of translation on the formation of the English canon in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Gillespie shows how national literatures benefit from translation as a source of renewal of the literary making and resizing of the established canon:

[...] Dryden's work suggests three respects in which translations are constitutive of canons. Dryden's own translating activity has made him conceive differently from the literary canon, ancient as well as modern [...]. Second, because Dryden's translations, in *Fables* and elsewhere, breathe life into earlier poets, they have a similar effect on other people's perceptions in turn, potentially leading to widespread reorientations in views of the poetic canon [...]. And finally, this greatest of English translators, 'through his versions of Ovid, Homer, Chaucer, Lucretius, Juvenal, and Virgil, permanently changed the scope of English poetry itself' (Tomlinson 2003, 3). (2005, 13).

The inclusion of works from the most diverse origins into the Western canon has been made possible by the translation of those works, which made it possible to broaden the foundations of Western literature beyond classical literatures, which until then had been given the priority as far as the incorporation of genres and styles is concerned. The national literatures of Europe and other continents

began to contribute to the expansion of the classics. Works by authors such as Shakespeare, Cervantes, Dante and many others began to circulate beyond the borders of their countries through translation and have been granted a position within a supranational literary canon. The works of these authors have been translated and retranslated for centuries, retaining their classic status. What is yet to be seen is the contribution of peripheral translations to the supranational literary canon, or even if we will still talk about literature in terms of canon in the near future anyway.

If the works of canonical authors such as those mentioned above continue to circulate among us in their original language, the same does not happen with their translations, which have a limited useful life and are replaced by translations that adapt more to the translation horizon of subsequent epochs (Berman 2002). Those works may, however, also have canonical translations in some literary systems. Regarding retranslation, Ricoeur attributes the task of retranslating to dissatisfaction with existing translations:

[...] [J]e touche au problème plus général de la retraduction incessante es grandes oeuvres, des grands classiques de la culture mondiale, la Bible, Shakespeare, Dante, Cervantès, Molière. Il faut peut-être même dire que c'est dans la retraduction qu'on observe le mieux la pulsion de traduction entretenue par l'insatisfaction à l'égard des traductions existantes [...] (2004, 15)

Genette, from a perspective that focuses more on textual aspects and aesthetic issues, gives the literary translation importance as an element that allows transposition as a hypertextual practice. He says:

La forme de transposition la plus voyante, et à coup sûr la plus répandue, [...] c'est évidemment la *traduction*, dont l'importance littéraire n'est guère contestable, soit parce qu'il faut bien traduire les chefs-d'oeuvre, soit parce que

certaines traductions sont elles-mêmes des chefs-d'oeuvres : le *Quichotte* d'Oudin et Rosset, l'Edgar Poe de Baudelaire, les *Bucoliques* de Valéry, les Thomas Mann de Louise Servicen par exemple et pour ne citer que des traductions françaises [...] (1982, 294)

The conception of Genette's "masterpiece" is based on the same narrower conception of canon, that is, on value judgment. Although I have said above that translation as a masterpiece is different from the canonical translation proposal I present here, when Genette corroborates the existence of translations elevated to the condition of masterpieces, it reinforces the fact that some translations, for reasons that vary according to time and to the critical trend that examine them, reach a differentiated status, which is what I defend in this paper.

As I noted above, the canon is established by textual and extra-textual criteria. The canon may even have subdivisions based on hegemonic or center-periphery issues. Venuti (1998) proposes a curious subdivision of the American literary canon in these terms and presents, among other examples, the case of one hundred years of solitude, by Gabriel García Márquez. This example deserves a more focused reflection, so that we can observe that the movements of inclusion or exclusion of translations as canonical varies according to values which are, after all, local. It's all a matter of perspective.

Venuti writes about a supposed parallel canon in the United States, which would be formed by works of the periphery elevated to the condition of canonical ones by force of market interests. The so-called boom of Hispano-American literature would be embedded in this market movement, and the representative work of this new parallel canon for him is *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Gregory Rabassa's translation into English: "Gregory Rabassa's 1970 version of García Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was a remarkable success, a bestseller in paperback and ultimately a textbook adopted in colleges and universities [...]"

(1998, 169). Rabassa's translation is still considered the canonical translation for the work, and there is neither new translation nor critical studies that challenge its canonical position. In an article for a Canadian newspaper, Ilan Stavans, a professor of Latino and Latin American Studies at Amherst College in Massachusetts, goes so far as to say that the translation is better than the original. Rabassa's translation is thus elevated to the status of literary creation and allows the book to be included in the list of the 50 best books published in the aforementioned article. Even in articles in which the translation is commented, the maximum the authors dare to suggest is a few changes to the text of Rabassa, never the complete retranslation of the work.

What I intend to show is that the status of canonical translation is mutable and it varies greatly from literary system to literary system, from society to society. It is the result of a balance between textual and extra-textual aspects. The examples above show that canonical translation does not occur only in peripheral literary systems; it is also possible to find the presence of translations that have achieved the status of canonical in firmly established, central literary systems.

The literary canon is an abstract entity, a convention. It has no defined boundaries, and it is not possible to compile a list of all works considered canonical, since, as in any tacit agreement, there may be differences of interpretation. The canon is what we want - or accept - it to be. So is the canonical translation: as long as the conditions that justify its existence last, it remains so. Once these conditions, or conventions, have changed, it gives way to other translations.

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