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The bilingual (English and Portuguese) book *The translator's word: Reflections on Translation by Brazilian Translators*, edited by Andréia Guerini and Márcia Martins (2018), sets forth “non-systematized reflections which were produced in different historical contexts spanning over two hundred years, from the end of the 18th century until the present day” (13), regarding the translation universe of our national literary system. In the introduction, Else R. P. Vieira draws readers' attention to the broad spam of the selection, ranging from colonial Brazil to the contemporary scenery. The relevance of such compilation is undeniable, for a series of reasons. The most obvious one concerns the fact that considerably peripheral nations (such as Brazil) are often forgotten in translation historiographies, which tend to focus on more hegemonic and already established traditions (German, French, U.K. U.S. etc.). Besides that, the book brings together a panoply of insights from historically renown Brazilian translators and their precursors, who deserve better attention and whose writings were so far considerably disorganised in the research records of the field. It is high time one endeavoured to restore such rich history, but, it is worth mentioning, not without scavenging in search for the contributions of some of our women translators – who have already been sufficiently ignored, but who are recollected by the book in question.

Written by Manoel Jacinto Nogueira da Gama, and translated



into English by Rebecca Frances Atkinson, “Discourse of the translator” (1798) emphasises the contradictory impossibility plus necessity of translation, taken as something useful, but “inappropriate” at the very same time. According to Gama, even though “they are not an appropriate artifice for overcoming the inconvenience and difficulty caused by the diversity of languages” (78), if not for translations “we would effectively be barred access to the treasures contained in ancient and modern languages alike, from which we would lose great riches and gems in the different literary realms” (79). Interestingly, regarding these treasures and great riches emerging from varied literary contexts, Gama alleges that translations alone are not enough to make the difference, but must be supported and nourished by the government. After all, if translations open the doors of science, literary establishments of Brazil must be motivated to embrace them, with due investment. Translated by Paulo Henriques Britto, the following “Prologue” (1863) discloses, especially, Odorico Mendes’ idea that, although we are often worried about how well a translator knows the source language, s/he must “must have a command of one’s own tongue twice or thrice as good as one’s command of the language of the original” (87). Reflecting upon his own translation of Homer’s *Iliad*, Mendes alleges that, prior to that undertaking, studying the Portuguese language in depth was of paramount importance.

Followingly, we encounter the extracts of some letters written by Monteiro Lobato (1863) about the issue of translation – and Rebecca Frances Atkinson is, again, the translator. His deconstructed view on the process of translation is evident, as, in his opinion, a project that completely alters the original is no problem at all. That can be inferred from one of his ideas: “to garb the old fables by Aesop and La Fontaine in national dress, using only prose and reworking the morals [...]. Fables like that would be a first step in the literature that we lack” (97). To rework the morals of Aesop and La Fontaine depending on the translation project “in national dress” would indeed be a rather innovative idea for that time – at least to do

that as overtly as he proposes. Later, he gives a seemingly unusual suggestion: “Rangel, do not be in a hurry with Michelet. Take your time. I think it is a great book, even if it is quite big. We could abridge it by cutting the introduction. If you put some alum in the ink, you could shorten it by some fifty pages in the translation” (98). This is also no big deal for Lobato, who would often get rid of great chunks of text in his “translations” – which, regardless, are still called translations and not adaptations or abridged versions. Any excerpts that, in his reading, seemed to him of no use, would be simply discarded. This tendency to diminish the size of the text has to do with Lobato’s own perception regarding literature, manifesting how much of his relationship to the text interferes in his work – and he does not seem to have any problem with that, why would he? Translating, for him, is ultimately taken as a stylistic journey into the fictional worlds of originals: “As for translating Kipling, what fun! How heady! What joy to remodel a work of art in another language [...]. I love London, with his Alaska snows, his Klondike, and his wonderful huskies” (100).

We get now to Clarice Lispector’s “Translating seeking not to betray” (1968), translated by Janine Pimentel. Describing her experience with translation as an endless activity, with the successive rereading and revision associated with it, Lispector contradicts herself to some extent when she poses that “there is the necessary fidelity to the author’s text and the fact that certain typical American expressions do not translate into Portuguese easily, thus requiring a free adaptation”. What she calls “free adaptations” move against the idea of fidelity to the author’s text, an idea that she does not seem to endorse throughout the development of the text. As a matter of fact, the very notion that one can truly grasp the style of the author’s text – even the author him/herself – would be later questioned by her. Mentioning the preface of Gregory Rabassa’s translation of Lispector’s *The Apple in the Dark* (1961), she remembers he considered her syntax to be more difficult to translate than that of Guimarães Rosa. Impressed,

she replies: “I fully respect grammar and intend to never deal with it consciously. As far as good writing is concerned, I write more or less by ear, intuitively, because the right thing always sounds better” (109). Aware that her approach to syntax as a writer is completely unconscious, she ends up signalling the relevance of a likewise somehow unconscious translator. Intuition, instinct, the “drive” seem all to be the key; and Lispector associates the fictional experience of writing and reading with that of translating:

I experienced a peculiar pleasure when I translated one condensed book by Agatha Christie, a translation that was commissioned by Tito Leite, the director of *Seleções*. Instead of reading the manuscript from the beginning until the end, as I always do, my reading progressed at the speed of my translation. It was a whodunit and I did not know who the murderer was. So I translated the book at full speed because I could not but appease my curiosity. The book sold out quickly. (LISPECTOR, 108)

This experience of reading and translating “at the same speed”, sharing the fluidity of shaping and re-shaping the fictional milieu, can be put in parallel with Haroldo de Campos’ “Mephistofaustian transluciferation” (1981), translated by Paulo Henrique Britto: “Every creative translation is a deliberate case of usurping mistranslation. Through this deflection, radical translation liberates the semiotic form hidden in the original, even as it apparently moves away from its surface” (113). The translated work would, in this sense, be analogous to a vampire, as the translation feeds on the original and becomes immortal within a distinct body – autonomous and dependent at the same time. As such, “the essential fact is often disregarded that translation is not impelled by homologation only: in many cases what moves it is rupture, rift, discontinuity, desecration by a perverse reading” (114). This is why translation becomes a synonym to “transluciferation”: the fall of the original angel, demonised by creative translation – brought to the world by the physical body it essentially and inevitably requires. Lucifer,

therefore, serves as the perfect metaphor of this translation of the heavenly angel into the earthly sinner. Silviano Santiago, on his turn, defines translation as “an interpretative decision made by the translator” (121). Translated by Rebecca Frances Atkinson, his “Introduction” (1985) focuses on the differences and similarities of translation and critical reading: if the translator needs to analyse critically the literary material of the original, s/he cannot, at the same time, unveil the results of such analysis in his/her translation. “The translator safeguards for the other the potential polysemy of interpretation that exists in all poems. That is why the translator’s most faithful friend is the reader. It is to him – and only to him – that the translation exists” (121). Beyond such faithfulness to the reader, in Santiago’s view everything else is but hypothesis.

Paulo Henriques Britto, in his “Afterword” (1989), does not seem to share such an opinion. Curiously (and in my view contradictorily), judging his translation of Lord Byron’s work to be semantically faithful to and as witty as the original, he explains that translating poetry may sometimes mean an attempt at finding “as many ingenious rhymes in the translation as there were in the original, even if not in the very same places” (129). I find therein a contradiction because, at least the way I see it, if the places are not the same, perhaps “faithfulness” is indeed not a good term for us to think of Britto’s methodology. He highlights the rhythmic difficulty of translating poetry from English into Portuguese, and vice versa, given the issue of poetic syllables – if, to the former, the iambic and trochaic meters reign, to the latter they are almost impracticable (at least with comparable dexterity). Followingly, Britto proves to be more worried with faithfulness to the reader rather than to the original “text” or “author”. Because Byron used the colloquial English of his social/temporal context, in his version Britto “made no attempt to re-create nineteenth-century Portuguese. Instead, I have opted for an essentially contemporary and semi-colloquial variety of Brazilian Portuguese” (131). While many translators would prefer mimicking nineteenth-century

semantic and syntactic choices (like a sort of time traveller Pierre Menard), the formal tone resulting from such questionable method would indeed be simply and totally contrary to the tone of the original when published.

Millôr Fernandes is probably of the same opinion. In “On translation” (2007), translated by Alexander Martin Gross, he concludes that, everything considered, translating can be taken as “more difficult than to create originals, although of course not as important” (133). Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that an original work “is already there”, recreating such work may prove to be much more intellectually time-consuming and challenging, precisely because it has this overt bond to a prior source. Regarding their relation to such source, Fernandes believes that “translations have about as much in common with the original as a daughter has with her father or a son with his mother” (134). The metaphor is adequate. Even though a child does undoubtedly come directly from the parents, s/he also comes indirectly from many other “sources” (grandparents etc.) and, nonetheless, grows into a unique, incomparable being depending on life events, choices, and things or people s/he touches during the span of his/her existence. Children share traces with their parents, as translations with originals, but both eventually develop autonomous personalities and original characteristics of their own. Regarding the translators, Fernandes lists the attributes that directly influence their work, consciously or unconsciously – e.g. philosophy on the translated subject, cultural locus, linguistic and intellectual competence, ethics, creativity, intuition. In his preface for the translation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (2018), Fernandes suggests that sometimes translators work so hard on finding solutions for a translation challenge that the result ends up actually being better than the original (whose author had probably not been as careful as the translator). Overtly foreignising and domesticating indistinctively, he does not seem to see a problem in using translation notes to explain some of his choices while he is also creatively adapting parts of the original text for the sake

of linguistic effect (even though he is not happy to see the word “adaptation” associated with his idea of translation, given its pejorative use). A rigid translation, fixed to the original, would be incongruous with the work of Shakespeare, who used to frequently “adapt” his texts depending on each performative case, also relying on the most varied sources without even mentioning them.

In his text “Suffering in translation” (1990), João Ubaldo Ribeiro poses that people usually make the mistake of thinking he enjoys translating his own work when the truth is he finds translation “an impossibility and too often a very thankless task” (147). Having said that, he manifests his wish never to translate again, regardless of the rewards – such as when he is able to “relish the rich, musical, supple, expressive rhythms and sounds of English, and feel quietly contented that I enjoy at least some degree of intimacy with a language I have always loved so much” (150). Explaining some of his choices, Ribeiro justifies why he refrained from using notes or a glossary to disclose contextual references present in the original. The reason is simple: different from those who pick up a novel in the source language, readers of translations tend to be somehow desperate to know and understand everything and the task of the translator is manifold – but if there is something translators should not do is endorse such obsession. Literature, and the literary experience, has much to do with the void, the silences, the empty spaces – filling in the blanks with a vast amount of meaning is detrimental to the readers’ incursion within the narrative, which should also inform the world s/he is reading about. Furthermore, it is also true that there is no reason for us to think glossaries and notes are more relevant in the translation than they would be in the original, after all “Brazilians themselves are not so keen on their own history” (149), but this configures no obstacle for them to feel interested in the narrative and keep up with it until the end. There are, however, no right or wrong choices, as no decision can be considered an ultimate one. In “Translator’s introduction” (1999), translated by Alexander Martin Gross, William Angel de Mello calls

the most literal type of translation a “direct translation” (145) – one which would supposedly preserve lexical purity and conceptual accuracy, to the detriment of poetic elements such as sound and rhythm. I myself think that this idea of “literal meaning” is per se amenable to be questioned, as well as Mello’s excessive respect to the invisible wishes of the original author, emerging throughout his text: “The translator has to imbue himself with the spiritual state of the artist in the act of creation. He has to thoroughly acquaint himself with the artist’s personality, life, work, and era; that is to say, to absorb as many facts about the poet as possible” (145). Exploring places related to the author’s private life would seemingly be essential for undertaking the task: an experimental journey – similar to an actor’s preparation for the performance of a play.

I myself see no benefit whatsoever in facing the process of translation so “spiritually”, as if the translator were haunted by the phantom of an original essence long gone and forgotten. This experimental journey is nothing but an idealisation, a romantic and equivocated idea that “stalking” an original essence would be enough for capturing such essence. The experience of the original could never be mirrored or re-encountered: it is and shall always be unique. Barbara Heliodora, in “My reasons for translating Shakespeare” (1999), provides us with a much more pragmatic approach on the matter. In her words, before judging how a translation should better be done, one must first have in mind what sort of text s/he is dealing with. Is it merely informative? Or should we be worried with “the elegance of the language itself” (162)? That question may indeed be considered the first step: the means for acknowledging the locus of the original work as well as construing an effective translation project thereafter. In Heliodora’s case, she is dealing with a dramatic text and, therefore, “the two specific aspects that bring the greatest difficulties are: a) the economy of the dramatic form, and b) the need for immediate understanding on the part of the audience” (163). No translations of plays can ever take such issues for granted, as they express the very existence of this

textual genre produced for a live collective performance – and not for an isolated reading. For that reason, Heliadora assumes she feels “unable to take seriously the idea that there are two different possible translations of Shakespeare, one meant to be read, which would be concerned mostly with literary qualities, and another to be staged” (168). What defines drama is performance and, as such, academic or not, any translation should bear in mind that the stylistic frontiers of the text are drawn by such aspect (analogous to sound and rhythm in the case of poetic translations, for instance). By the end of her text, Heliadora admits nonetheless that her critical tone towards other manners of translating Shakespeare is actually based on a reason more personal than we may think: “it is quite possible that I have avoided a very academic form because I have been fighting all my life against the idea that Shakespeare is a ‘very difficult’ author accessible only to the privileged few” (174). Her worries make sense, and the effort of bringing Shakespeare back to the popular world is, in my view, completely justifiable – that is the world his plays talk to and about.

“On the path of *Crime and punishment*” (2001), translated by Alexander Martin Gross, discloses Paulo Bezerra’s insights resulting from his experience when translating such novel: “I tried to follow closely the manner in which each character expresses her/himself, maintaining the rhythm of her/his speech and its syntax, translating rather than describing” (202). It is not clear to the reader what exactly Bezerra considers a direct and/or indirect translation; but, concerning the opposition translating versus describing, it has probably to do with his criticism against those translators who tend to “describe” Dostoyevsky’s language – i.e. to turn it into something more elegant and fluid than the original, which “would mean undermining the originality of an author whose principal distinguishing feature is the break from traditional patterns of thought and their forms of expression” (202). This is the reason why translators must have a deep understanding of the cultural universe encompassing an original work, as well as of the literary system whereto such work is being

taken. His/her professional honesty would consist then in the ethical commitment to the word and world of “the other”. If the translator is committed, then there is nothing for us to question. “Every translation is the best possible translation; the act of translation, particularly of fiction, entails a fair amount of healthy illusion, as we honestly believe that we are translating what is in the text” (200). Doing our best, we, translators, translate facing the challenge as well as we can, choosing the options we believe to be the best ones (decision that, overnight, may often change). Constantly re-interpreting the signs that surround us, nothing in our task, one that rely so much on re-interpretation, rewriting, and recreation, can never be deemed decisive, ultimate, or fixed. My idea of translation is thus coherent to Bezerra’s conclusion: “we cannot confront a literary text pretending that ‘two plus two equals four’, as we are facing literary language with all its polysemic power” (200). Two plus two does not equal four because, ultimately, the translation shall never get readers to the same mathematical result, as all numbers are eventually altered for good.

References

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