



Traducir en Portugal en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX: el concepto de traducción y el contexto sociocultural y literario de la época.

Este artículo tiene como objetivo describir de forma concisa el contexto sociocultural y literario en el que aparecen las traducciones portuguesas en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. Esta caracterización se ilustra preferentemente con comentarios de importantes intelectuales y escritores de la época. Además, ofrecemos una visión general del concepto de traducción y de la actividad traductora que imperaba en estos momentos de los que existen perspectivas opuestas bien documentadas.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Contexto sociocultural, concepto de traducción, actividad traductora.

Translating in Portugal in the second half of 19th century: The sociocultural and literary context and the existent concept of translation at that time

Vivina Almeida Carreira
*Escola Superior Agrária/
Instituto Politécnico de Coimbra*

This article aims to describe briefly the sociocultural and literary context which witnessed the appearance of Portuguese translations in the second half of the nineteenth century. This characterization is preferably illustrated by statements of prominent intellectuals and writers of the time. At the same time, it offers an overview of the concepts of translation and translating activity held at the time for which there are well documented opposing perspectives.

KEY WORDS: social and cultural context, translation concept, translation activity.



I. INTRODUCTION

Romanticism witnessed the Portuguese intellectuals' first efforts to enlarge the reading public and this enlargement was one of the several changes in the sociocultural and literary field that had more serious repercussions later on in relation to the creation of new literary genres and the sociocultural role that writers came to hold.

The concern of intellectuals in creating an enlarged reading public has found an ally in a social situation in which certain groups were eager to raise their sociocultural literacy level which was required for an adjustment to a new way of being in society. It was essential to be aware of what was happening, and the reading of newspapers, magazines and the novels that were talked about was strongly encouraged.

To these new habits of reading much contributed the reading cabinets that proliferated throughout the nineteenth century, which distributed catalogs and rented, by very low prices, sentimental novels and romances, novels of adventure, civility and etiquette manuals, what today is called by subliterate or literature for the masses.

The reading cabinets complemented the popular circuit of the book market, to where a flood of serialized literature, generally translated or adapted, was caused to converge. The production costs were the lowest possible (paper, presentation and translation of poor quality) and the risk mitigated by a strategy that is known today as prototype reproduction, which consists in exploring to exhaustion the successful original» (Santos, 1997a: 443).¹

¹ The English translation of direct and indirect quotations in this article is mine.

As reading or book renting shops, the reading cabinets allowed for the increasing of the reading public. At the same time, the increasing growth of the number of public libraries also shows a turn of the Portuguese society towards progress in order to keep up with the other European countries. The edition of cheap collections that were to be sold or rented and a quicker book circulation played an important role in the process of expanding popular education and democratizing reading. But the large scale spread of culture and literature was mainly due to periodical press.

2. THE PERIODICAL PRESS AND THE FEUILLETON

The beginning of the nineteenth century was the time of the creation and dissemination of the periodical press, which held a great responsibility in developing the taste for reading. Self-described «journals of recreation and education,» these newspapers combined a piece of news with the literary or scientific article with the didactic text in order to catch the interest of a most heterogeneous and broad reading public.

Thus, in the mid-nineteenth century, the newspaper had already proven its supremacy over the book in terms of its ability to attract a wider and more heterogeneous audience. Consequently, the expansion of the periodical press generated great expectations regarding its role as a creator of new readers and promoter of new cultural habits in the urban daily life. (Santos, 1997b: 191)

By the middle of the century, a regular section of a newspaper, called *feuilleton*, began to assume great importance. This part of the newspaper was originally devoted to reviews, articles of general interest, entertainment and

cultural issues, and chronicle of activities. But the term soon became to indicate the instalment of a serial story or novel printed in one part of a newspaper.

The *feuilleton-roman* was more directed to the general public in search of fun and evasion, being constructed on a daily basis until the curiosity of the public was exhausted. Instalment fiction did not commit to the literary or aesthetic function or to serious philosophical reflection. Entertainment was an end in itself. Therefore, the *feuilleton-roman* used easy melodrama, sensationalism and stereotype to please a new public without intellectual tradition.

We can say that these long or short stories published in chapters in strategic location on the page of the newspaper — to be cut, collected, reread, possibly bound — were the first mass fictional narratives.

The *feuilleton-roman* was then a strategy to capture and hold the attention of a gradually expanding public, including the female layer. At the same time, it was used as a marketing strategy, to keep readers faithful to this or that newspaper. To this end, the writers sought to please groups of little educated readers, by the easy way, that is, allowing for some «bad taste» and falling into excesses, which some writers and intellectuals denounced even in their own literary works, as was the case of Almeida Garrett, a noted novelist and playwright (Garrett, 2002: 54).

Camilo Castelo Branco also criticized the sensationalism that characterized this popular literature, although in certain stages of his life, and for reasons of survival, he had also produced them.

On the pages of the same newspapers, many intellectuals and writers expressed their opinions about this practice and some were very

harsh against the profusion of periodical issues throughout the country and their propensity to publish instalment fiction.

It is therefore a literary genre which gained a bad reputation due to the use of easy linguistic and literary devices and the lack of accuracy, both in original productions and in translations, setting up as a vehicle of entertainment and escape. Translators imitated or adapted the authors they translated to take advantage of the successes achieved. As a measure of precaution, because the market was growing, but still was not large, publishers had to protect their enterprises and the safest way to do so was by publishing translations of works/authors that were already enjoying some popularity in their countries of origin or other.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the short story was a literary genre claiming its right as a literary specimen in the period of Romanticism, in which it was widely practiced and underwent formal accuracy, a fact that is not, as already mentioned, alien to the development of the periodical press. The rise of an increasingly broad reading public and their taste for the periodical press and serialized literature is not unrelated to the development of the short story and, to some extent, this development is the result of the access of the bourgeois masses to literature.

3. PUBLICATIONS IN BOOK

With the exception of popular literature, the book remained, unlike the *feuilleton*, accessible to a more literate and more restricted reading public. However, this period — the second half of the nineteenth century — witnessed the emergence of various initiatives, both private and public, for the dissemination of contemporary Portuguese and foreign authors





on economic publications, as was, for example, the case of the Economic Library Collection and through instalment subscribing at very low prices.

These works that were launched in the popular circuit included mostly translations of foreign authors, mostly French, who enjoyed in Portugal, and elsewhere in Europe, a remarkable acceptance and diffusion. The translations were usually of poor quality, made by anonymous translators, by the publishers or by people at their service who worked at a pace that was not compatible with quality.

The authors of the imported works were, just for that, often considered commercial, of low quality or immoral by the most famous writers who wanted to distance themselves from that popular literature of foreign origin that spread in the domestic market. One may think whether this attitude of condemnation over the imported literature is not a sign of weakness and stagnation that the national literary system was going through.

Within the more literate circles, however, the translations were more careful, displayed the name of the translator and the activity of translating could be prestigious and function as a preparatory test for the future writer or even as a further element confirming the talent of an already known writer.

Some scholars devoting their studies to this period say that translations of French romantic writers were very abundant in Portugal, not only in volume but also in newspapers and literary magazines (Machado, 1997: 555).

There were also translations of English works, although they came later and, according to Flor (1997: 557), often mediated by the French culture. The same scholar claims that, at the expense of important and already canonical texts in English literature, the preference of our

reading public privileged other works of less merit, to prove that in the Romantic period and within the system of translated literature in Portuguese, those texts of non-canonical character tend to prevail as they match better the expectations of the reading public.

The increase in the number of translations that took place mainly from 1840 onwards can not be ignored when considering the phenomenon of the book market expansion and the development of the publishing sector. Furthermore, the dissemination of literature of foreign origin is unthinkable without the expansion of the reading public, of which a distinction has to be made between literate public and popular audience — a distinction that originates, in its turn, at the level of differentiating instances of production and distribution: book, volume or *feuilleton*, careful or economic issues, anonymous or signed translations, etc.

4. THE CURRENT CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION

Judging from what can be read in the Anthology organized by Carlos Castilho Pais (Pais, 1997), and other sources cited below, although it may seem reductive, it seems legitimate to say that until the last quarter of the nineteenth century, translation was considered a subordinate activity, but a variety of concepts and attitudes can also be seen.

For some, the translation should not attempt to go beyond mere paraphrase and phonetic imitation, as the apprehension of the original meaning was not considered as important as a good imitation of the «sound of sentences» (cf. Pais, 1997: 111). The same author, Filinto Elísio, argued that being poor and of harsh pronunciation, the Portuguese language could benefit

from being enriched and smoothed with numerous French words (ib.: 113).

Others considered that it was legitimate to alter the original texts in such way as to «adorn» and «decorate», compensate for the «lack of imagination» of the original author and, above all, correct the inconsistencies (ib.: 117).

A Society in Charge of Translating and Improving the Art of Printing and Binding was created in 1821, under the auspices of the State Congress. The first paragraph of its constitution text reads that «the Portuguese versions of the works written by the wise men of other countries, can do much to enlarge human knowledge as the more educated nations can set the example...» (ib.: 118).

Formed by at least six men of letters, as the same text states, the Society aimed to translate into Portuguese those foreign works that seemed useful to the nation and that had gained the esteem of educated people; to print translations made by its members or translations made by other translators provided that they had their approval; to reprint our original classics whose editions were rare or very imperfect (ib.: 119).

Although it was apparently not very successful in its objectives, this Society attests to the concern for accuracy and correctness, having among its members an appointed «reviewer» whose task was «to confront the various editions, to examine the translations, comparing them with the originals so as to, in agreement with the translator, make the necessary corrections» (ibidem).

The just quoted paragraph expresses an attitude that shows respect for the translator. It is also worth to highlight the fact that this Society made an effort to involve the Government in this editorial project, expecting, among other things, that the Government sponsored the

Society, by exempting it from some taxes, and by giving it priority to print their works in the National Printing Company.

A text by José da Silva Mendes Leal written in 1848, gives witness to how the activity of translating was seen in Portugal: easy, badly paid and little prestigious and even less honourable (ib.: 132).

To Teófilo Braga, a literary historian, the activity of translating is of a minor order or character and the ultimate cause of the relative unimportance of Portuguese literature, referring to the translator as the one who has «the need to go by the hand of those who first took the job of thinking» (Braga, s / d: 347).

In a text by Manuel Bernardes Branco, written in 1861, about the non-existence of Portuguese translations of classical Antiquity writers, he states that the activity of translating was considered despicable and unworthy. But, in addition, he affirms something very crucial for a change of attitude in this domain: he says that good translations will emerge only and when the Portuguese Government calls upon itself the responsibility of appointing, and paying, a literate person to execute the translations, someone who will dedicate exclusively all his time and talent to that activity, considering this kind of activity a lifelong task (Pais, 1997: 135).

This is clearly an explicit reference to the need to turn the activity of translating into a committed and dignified profession.

It is, as already mentioned, a time when there is much translation work being done: for newspapers, for publishers, for the theatre. They include texts of various genres and formats and there are many people involved in the task of translating: from well known writers and intellectuals to those that translate to survive with no time or preparation to perform a work with quality.





The original starts to gain respect and sometimes translated versions keep words and phrases in the original language (and the original language was almost inevitably the French). The main source of originals was France and the Portuguese culture depended excessively on the French cultural referents.

That was a complaint that some Portuguese writers and intellectuals didn't refrain from presenting. Alexandre Herculano, a well known poet and novelist at the time, wrote that the excessive reading of French books often has corrupted our language in the sense that French words and syntax have crawled into the Portuguese discourse. And, besides, by learning the lesson of the French authors' one has forgotten the lesson of the Portuguese authors' (cf. Pais, 1997: 124).

Almeida Garrett firmly believed that the habit of translating everything represented a serious and almost fatal blow in the development of the Portuguese literature, in the sense that bad translations distorted the literary taste of the public in such a way that the Portuguese readers not only do not like the Portuguese originals but they do not understand them (Apud Braga, s/d: 110).

In the case of the theatre — and it is worthwhile to remember that Almeida Garrett was the General Inspector for the Theaters and Director of the National School of Arts, and was committed to improve the taste of the public, to put an end to the absurd translations and to produce a «truly Portuguese» theatre — the problem of adaptation was general and did not involve only the translations made from the French.

The practice of adaptation, in the case of dramatic texts, can be understood as a norm of the Portuguese importing system, which consists in creating and adapting situations more

in accordance to the Portuguese taste, verisimilitude or even with deliberate intention to intervene in the nineteenth century social and cultural fabric.

António Feliciano de Castilho, a renowned writer and translator, argues that the same should happen in other literary forms (narrative and lyrical): according to his concept of translation, the texts should be translated taking into account the needs and characteristics of the culture of the reader of the translated text. The most important for Castilho, «is whether the translator expressed well in his readers' language, that is, with purity, clarity, wisdom and the possible elegance, the ideas and emotions of the author he is translating» (cf. Pais, 1997: 153).

In absolute contrast to this domesticating concept of translation, another, foreignizing, appears, defended by the voice of Antero de Quental who believed that any work of art (referring to lyrical poetry) is unique and singular and its translation almost impossible to accomplish (cf. Pais, 1997: 137).

5. CONCLUSION

In short, throughout the nineteenth century, there is a coexistence of attitudes: first, there is a need for innovation and openness to the foreign, on the other hand, and characterizing Romanticism, there is a tendency to enhance the historical, what is national and popular.

Regarding the existent concept of translation, as we have just seen, there are also detectable voices of opposite sign. However, in the second half of the 19th century the subordinate position and devaluation of the translating activity in Portuguese culture is well documented. The dominant paradigm was based on respect for the original text and the original

authors. Translation itself was an activity considered little prestigious and somewhat lessened. Among other data supporting this idea which have already been presented, there is another fact that attests to this clearly well: the fact that in most cases in which the translations were prefaced the author of the preface was not the translator, but a third person, possibly a personality with literary or cultural prestige and credibility in the receiving polysystem.

The translating activity is made invisible: in most cases, the authors do not sign their translations, using only initials or pseudonyms. In the same way, the histories of Portuguese Literature also silence the work of translators.

RECIBIDO EN MAYO DE 2009

ACEPTADO EN JUNIO DE 2009

VERSIÓN FINAL DE AGOSTO DE 2009

REFERENCES

- Braga, T. (s/d). *História da Literatura Portuguesa*. Mem Martins. Publicações Europa-América, vol. V: O Romantismo.
- Flor, J. A. (1997). «Traduções de Inglaterra». In Helena Carvalhão Buescu (coord.). *Dicionário do Romantismo Literário Português*. Lisboa: Caminho.
- Garrett, A. (2002) [1846]. *Viagens na Minha Terra*. Lisboa: Editora Ulisseia.
- Machado, A. M. (1997). «Traduções de França». In Helena Carvalhão Buescu (coord.). *Dicionário do Romantismo Literário Português*. Lisboa: Caminho.
- Pais, C. C. (org.) (1997). *Teoria Diacrónica da Tradução Portuguesa*. Antologia (Séc. XV-XX). Lisboa: Universidade Aberta.
- Santos, M. de L. C. L. dos (1997a). «Público-leitor». In Helena C. B. (coord.). *Dicionário do Romantismo Literário Português*. Lisboa: Caminho.
- Santos, M. de L. C. L. dos (1997b). «Folhetim literário». In Helena C. B. (coord.). *Dicionário do Romantismo Literário Português*. Lisboa: Caminho.

