

Comparative Literature and Translation: A Reading Framework

There are at least two ways to conceive the link between comparative literature and translation studies. Exchanging the terms in the framework of an inclusion relationship, it is possible to consider two differentiated series of questions and to assign different scopes to the link. This exchange appears basically related to the two possible answers to the question about the limits of these disciplines, which are traditionally linked: so, it is possible to consider translation studies as “one of the traditional areas of comparatism” (Gramuglio) or to support, as Susan Bassnett did more than a decade ago, the need for a reversal to happen to make translation studies stop constituting a minor field of comparative literature in order to be the major discipline that shelters it.

Beyond this ambiguity, what is important to underline is the existence of this consolidated link between two disciplines, or I should rather say, between the discipline of comparative literature(s) and the phenomenon of translation. In this sense, there is a spontaneous way of thinking about the link between comparative literature and translation: the one that defines translation as an event and a central practice for comparatism, since it locates itself at the meeting point of different languages, literatures and cultures. From this point of view, translation is the activity which is “synthetic” par excellence, the one that operates at the very intersection of languages and poetics, and the one that makes possible, because of its fulfilment, the fulfilment of other analytic approaches to the texts relating to each other.

Nevertheless, this has not always been this way. In an article devoted to the vicissitudes of this link, André Lefevere pointed out that, in the beginning, comparative literature had to face a double competence: the study of classical literatures and the study of national literatures, and that it chose to sacrifice translation. And, although translation became necessary for the discipline, it hardly tried to move beyond the comparison between European literatures, all the translations were made, criticized and judged, adopting the indefinable parameter of “accuracy”, that “corresponds to the use made of translation in education, of classical literatures as well as of national literatures” (Lefevere 4).

The critical thinking of the XXth century conferred translation the transcendence it had not had historically and postulated it as a clearly defined object of study. Although this emancipation was achieved already in the second half of the century, it is clear that there are crucial contemporary texts about practices previous to this period. In this sense, the preface by Walter Benjamin to his German translation of the *Tableaux Parisiens* by Charles Baudelaire, entitled “The Task of the Translator” (1923), constitutes an unavoidable contribution that, nevertheless, has not always been appraised. A lot has been said on this text –let’s remind the readings, canonical, by Paul De Man (1983) and by Jacques Derrida (1985)–, whose formulations were decisive for a conceptualization of translation the way it was presented some decades later by post-structuralism. Let’s recover, at least, one of the ideas that organize this document: “No translation would be possible if its supreme aspiration would be similarity with the original. Because in its survival –that should not be called this way unless it means the evolution and the renovation all living things have to go through– the original is modified” (Benjamin 81). Through this proposition, that can seem obvious to the contemporary reader, Benjamin emphasizes, in the twenties, the inevitable inventive nature of any translation and destroys

the conception of the translated text as a copy or a reproduction of the original, although without attacking the dichotomical pair original/translation, “distinction that Benjamin will never renounce nor devote some questions to” (Derrida, 1985).

A renunciation that will be carried out, as Lawrence Venuti points out, by the poststructuralist thought –especially deconstruction–, that again raised the question in a radical way of the traditional topics of the theory of translation through the dismantling of the hierarchical relationship between the “original” and the “translation” through notions such as “text”. In the poststructuralist thought “original” and “translation” become equals, they hold the same heterogeneous and unstable nature of any text, and they organize themselves from several linguistic and cultural materials that destabilize the work of signification (Venuti, 1992: 7). From this acknowledgment, we recover a synthetic Derridean formula: “There is nothing else but original text” (1997: 533).

Thus, translation stopped being an operation of transcription in order to be an operation of productive writing, of re-writing in which what is written is not anymore the weight of the foreign text as a monumental structure, but a representation of this text: that is, an invention. It is not anymore a question of transferring a linguistic and cultural configuration to another one with a stable meaning –as happens with the platonic and positivist conceptions of the meaning that, according to Maria Tymoczko, are still operating in the education and training of translators in the West (Tymoczko, 2008: 287-288)–, but a practice of creation that writes a reading, an ideological practice accomplished not only by the translator –that becomes now an active agent and not a mere “passer of sense” (Meschonnic, 2007)–, but by the whole machinery of importation that covers outlines, comments, preliminary studies, criticism, etc., and in which a variety of figures are involved.

In these new coordinates, translation can be defined as a practice that is “manipulative”, if it models an image of the authors and of the foreign texts from patterns of their own: “Translation is, of course, a rewriting of an original text. Any rewriting, whatever its intention, reflects a particular ideology and particular poetics, and as such, they manipulate literature in order to make it work in a particular society, in a particular way” (Lefevere and Bassnett in Gentzler IX). This quote reproduces the already famous assertion by Theo Hermans: “From the point of view of the target literature, any translation implies a degree of manipulation of the source text with a particular purpose. Besides, translation represents a crucial example of what happens in the relationship between different linguistic, literary and cultural codes” (11-12).

To assume the status that we have just conferred to translation implies to re-shape the link between this later and comparative literature. Because when it stops being defined in the restrictive terms of mediation or transfer of the stable meaning of an “original” text, and when it attains the autonomy of an act of rewriting of another text according to an ideology, a series of aesthetic guidelines and of representations on otherness, translation gives up its role of instrumental practice and appears as the privileged practice that condenses a rank of questions and problematic issues related to the articulations greater than what is national and transnational, vernacular and foreign. Translation becomes the event related to contrastive linguistics par excellence; the key practice of what Nicolás Rosa calls the “comparative semiosis”

NOTES

1 | Bassnett asserts that: “The field of comparative literature has always claimed the studies on translation as a subfield, but now, when the last ones are establishing themselves, for their part, firmly as a discipline based on the intercultural study, offering as well a methodology of a certain rigor, both in connection with the theoretical work and with the descriptive one, the moment has come in which comparative literature has not such an appearance to be a discipline on its own, but rather to constitute a branch of something else” (Bassnett 101).

2 | “In order to establish the right to its own academic territory, comparative literature abdicated the study of what it should have been, precisely, an important part of its effort” (Lefevere 3).

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