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THE TRANSLATOR'S TASK WHEN FACING LITERARY UNIFORMITY

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Summary || The role of the translator can in many cases be determinant to and have consequences on the literary fame of a certain work. Literary theory and comparative literature try to analyse and systematise these, emphasizing the importance of the study of the relevance of translation for a literary system. This article deals with the balances and imbalances that take place in a cultural and literary context, caused by decisions that justify the need for a certain translation, by analysing the relations between the Scandinavian and Catalan fields.

Keywords || Translation | Role of the translator | Scandinavian literature | *Weltliteratur*.

0. Introduction

Whether by vocation, stylistic affinity, or for monetary or professional reasons, translation requires a prior position regarding the text to be translated and the translator's task, which in many cases is crucial, and may have consequences on the literary fate of the work. Literary Theory and Comparative Literature try to analyse and systematise them, going deep into the study of the importance of translation in the literary establishment. This article reflects on the balances and imbalances that arise in a cultural and literary context and that are caused by decisions that justify an eventual translation.

On August 17th 1894, August Strindberg landed in Paris with a bunch of articles written in French under his arm, with the idea of publishing them in the Parisian press. Being 45 years old and unable to maintain his family, he put all his hopes in the great city of Paris. Both *Fröken Julie (Miss Julia)*, under the direction of André Antoine at the Théâtre Libre, and *Fördringsägare (Creditors)* at the Théâtre de L'Œuvre had been released the previous year. Strindberg could see that many doors were being opened in the capital of France, and he knew very well what his literary conquest meant. Conquering Paris meant conquering Europe. But while he was in the big city, he only managed to publish some of those articles that were meant to shake French intellectuality. Despite this, it was just the beginning of his triumphal march: in Autumn that year, publisher Albert Languen released *Le plaidoyer d'un fou*, written directly in French, and his great triumph would come with the première of *Fadren (The father)* at Théâtre de L'Œuvre in December that same year.

Despite everything, that was the end of his heroic feat and what was known as the “*Inferno* crisis” began, which arrived to completion with the release of a novel with the same title three years later. Strindberg wrote *Inferno* directly in French as well, although the Swedish translation was released earlier¹. However, the fact that Strindberg wrote *Inferno* in Lund instead of in Paris and that he did it in French is not an insignificant detail. We know that the Swedish writer had the intention of writing a play in French and then translating it into Swedish; that is, he was aware that if he wanted his literary work to be visible in Europe, he had to write it in a “dominant language”, in the words of Pascale Casanova (2002: 7-20), and this could only be French. This was supposed to help him in the global fight for the consecration that defines the international literary area of Casanova. French as a literary language of a universal literature was supposed to provide to Strindberg's work the universal position he desired in order to later win the battle inside Swedish national borders, that is, to acquire consecration at home. In this sense, being translated into French or written directly in French was supposed to give visibility

NOTES

1 | The Swedish translation of *Inferno* came out on November 1897 and the original version in French on July 1898.

to a peripheral writer in the international literary arena and grant a literary status to his work.

1. The case of *Inferno*, by Strindberg

Inferno is a good example of this process: Strindberg not only conceived the same novel in two different languages, but was convinced at the same time that the two versions had to follow different narrative strategies as they were aimed at two different audiences, that is, two different reception fields, Swedish and French literary contexts in particular. According to the theories of Pierre Bourdieu in “Les conditions sociales de la circulation internationale des idées” (2002: 8), Strindberg was aware of the determinant role that the reception field has in the transmission of literature and thoughts. Reading a foreign piece in a specific reception field is not spontaneous but rather deliberate and selfish; it can lead to misunderstanding or distorted reading, especially when circulation is made without the context of the origin or production fields. And furthermore, it is also the cause of internal tensions in the reception field between national forms, which try to preserve the power they have on the current literary situation, and foreign forms, which try to break through by using the crucial task of translation that writers, publishers, critics and translators subversively attempt to carry out.

When Strindberg wrote *Inferno* in French and ordered its translation into Swedish he knew, in reality, that he was dealing with two different novels, written in two different literary languages that were intended for two different reading audiences, which also belonged in turn to two different literary traditions. *Inferno* would be presented in France as an occult novel but as a religious conversion one in Sweden. They differed as well in the internal disposal of the novel. But we must keep in mind that the idea was not only to get as many readers as possible. In fact, the real battle was fought in Sweden. Strindberg’s goal, since the release of *Röda rummet* (*The Red room*, 1879), was to create a new Swedish literary language, to discover new forms and to reform genres based on foreign models as well, especially the French prose of Balzac and Flaubert. Here we have an example of the internal tensions, exposed by Bourdieu, between the self and the other which make possible the transformation of the national narrative. And it is because he succeeded, because he re-founded the Swedish literary language in narrative and theatre that Strindberg became an acclaimed author not only in Scandinavia, but also abroad. It is at this point that we can start talking about the internationalisation of Strindberg, about the universalisation of the northern periphery.

The struggle over the power of literary value was produced in the opposite direction too: theatre works by the Swedish author were translated and staged in French in Paris in the same way that Ibsen and J. P. Jacobsen plays succeeded beyond Norwegian and Danish boundaries respectively. The change of the century in Europe and the Modernity project were built on the atmosphere of radicalism and rupture that was felt at that time and that impregnated all of Strindberg's works, as well as those of Ibsen, Hamsun and Kierkegaard. But this phenomenon cannot be described simply as an exchange between central and peripheral literatures, but rather, as Michel Espagne states (2006: 5-8), it is more a common European-Universal space created on the transfer of culture and ideas. It is not a place of battles for literary value, but rather of thought created by the very circulation of ideas.

Joan Maragall wrote at the time that "Light always comes to us from the North". It is easy to guess what he meant by those words: Catalan writers were looking to northern countries with the intention of importing the social and literary revolution that Ibsen and Strindberg had championed. Foreign models were used to fight national ones, and to make the changes that new times demanded if they did not want to be excluded from the process of transformation that Modernity entailed. It was, in essence, the same need to "demolish to let air and light in" that Strindberg exclaimed in his poem "Esplanadsystemet". Catalan writers sought in the work of foreign writers the opportunity to shake the prevailing social and literary status quo. Ibsen and Strindberg's works were translated with the same cry: "A èpoques noves, formes noves", wrote Jaume Brossa in 1892 (20).

Strindberg and Ibsen did not come directly from Stockholm or Kristiania but rather, once again, Paris imposed itself as the crossroads where Catalan and Northern cultures met. Once more, French was the language of communication. Paris was the capital where Modernity was assembled and French the language that expressed in literature this modernity and its new vision and representation of the world. French literature decisively influenced Catalan writers to the point that what we know today as our Catalan classics are often defined as a branch of French literature. But the truth is that Strindberg's "French style" work today forms the backbone of Catalan literature. But also the theatre of Ibsen and Strindberg did have an influence on Catalan modernism.

It was also during this period that a whole new task of translating foreign literature began with the aim of adding European classics to Catalonia's own literature, and in this way try to get closer to what would be called a Universal Literature. Translation was not only decisive but occupied a crucial position in Catalan literature, especially in the first half of the twentieth century. This phenomenon

would fit with what Itamar Even-Zohar or Pascale Casanova point out with their theories when they grant translation a determinant role in a literary system or in the international literary space. But it would also fit with the internal tensions of Bourdieu: why were Ibsen and Strindberg only partially imported –theatre pieces only– but Strindberg’s novels were dismissed, like *Inferno*? Why not J.P. Jacobsen’s novels as well? Needless to say that some decisions were taken within the context of Catalan literature and that if you want to analyse modernist Catalan literature it is obvious you have to look at what was translated; but what is more you have to find an answer as to why certain options were chosen, what were the criteria and circumstances for the selection, and how selected pieces were read and Catalan writers related to them.

2. The Mankell and Larsson case

A hundred years later we are immersed in the second literary wave coming from Northern countries: bookshops are full of Scandinavian crime fiction novels. We are witnessing Catalonia looking again towards the North, and if the book’s blurb says “northern crime novel” we will buy it without a second thought. Northern literature has come back onto the scene through a process of internationalisation and it has taken its position in the world literary arena by transforming and refunding the crime genre. Catalan readers and publishers are hungry for crime novels and Mankell and Stieg Larsson have shown us a Swedish society that is far from the image full of prejudices and stereotypes that we have been maintaining for decades. It could also be that now that Catalan society has started to approach some kind of welfare state, readers are beginning to see, with a sort of baffled complacency, that the iconic and legendary Swedish model has its flaws too: either they are not that perfect or we are not that bad... This is one conclusion that is reached if we consider that it is the characters of Kurt Wallander and Lisbeth Salander, and Swedish society in general, rather than the criminal plot that attract the Catalan reader most.

But something has changed since the early twentieth century. Actors in this literary system do not look for new literary forms anymore; with the task of discoverer done by the publisher, the writer and the translator has been greatly relativised because now more than ever it is profitability and economical benefit that prevail. Publishers purchase everything coming from the North but they do not actively choose, they buy with indiscriminately just because the author is Scandinavian and the Scandinavian crime novel sells extremely well in Europe (there is not even any distinction made between the different Scandinavian languages and literatures!) In short:

commercial interest prevails at the expense of aesthetic value.

This is the reason why editors from major publishing groups subjected to the tyranny of big runs of books go out in pursuit of a formula that is elastic enough to be able to translate a novel with these characteristics into as many European languages as possible and to grow sales by expanding the number of readers. That is what Bourdieu claimed when he said that elastic writers circulate and cross national borders fluidly. As such, we can establish an analogy between genres, which form pre-established formulas that work equally well everywhere. The phenomenon itself demands that this kind of novel be sold to as many foreign publishers as possible so that it may be translated simultaneously to as many different languages as possible so that they can be released into their respective markets at the same time. One conclusion is that these editors consider all readers alike, regardless of the literary language they read or to which literature that language belongs.

At this point we could perhaps find an explanation as to why in Catalonia the trilogy by Stieg Larsson has not been translated from Swedish but rather from a communication or dominant language like English or French. It is amazing that after investing time and money during the past few decades into promoting direct translation (without underestimating the work done during the first half of the twentieth century) and after a great effort to acquire a well-known corpus of foreign translated literature, as well as the fact that we are starting to see trained and competent translators in Scandinavian languages and literature, those publishers have decided to use a communicative language again. It is obvious that French no longer has the consecratory power it had by the end of the nineteenth century and that now economic reasons are the only ones supporting this decision. Certainly, the inevitable question is whether it is worth wasting time and money translating from Swedish to Catalan especially if the editor ignores the aesthetic value of this kind of literature. A Scandinavian crime novel publisher may ask himself if being rigorous, faithful and careful with the translation wouldn't be a waste of time and money...

On the other hand we could justify the situation by attributing the phenomenon to the dynamics of the *bestseller* and, taking it further, we could even say that Catalonia could take this opportunity to become familiar with northern literatures and start reading what they have to offer us: Scandinavian literature, in particular Norwegian and Danish literatures but also Icelandic, has picked up momentum in recent years by exploring the limits of what has been its traditional characteristics: the art of storytelling, the fantastic and fable characters, and the concern for the tense relationship between mankind and the structures of the social organisation, traits that

define much of the medieval Icelandic saga as a literary genre.

But it is not that easy: few Scandinavian writers have succeeded among Catalan readers. There is always a breach that is difficult to overcome; the problem is not the cultural gap, but the fact we have few actors, that is, critics, teachers and publishers who have a good and firsthand knowledge of these literatures which allows them to introduce them into the Catalan literary field, *i. e.*, to be able to explain and describe the origin field. And the few existing ones, especially translators, have lost their role as discoverers. When you are not familiar with another literature which was raised with a different vision of the world, and, most importantly, which both explores different ways of expression, different patterns, and which has a different concept of the art, you risk reading in a biased or distorted manner (which is not always necessarily negative) or feeling that you have not fully understood its meaning. In this case, what is beyond our understanding is precisely what is specifically Nordic and, at the same time, we miss the opportunity to acquire European literature through Scandinavian tradition, that is, to understand what is Universal through the local. It is in this sense that it is “dangerous” that, out of everything offered by Nordic literatures today, only crime novels are translated.

To make matters worse, Catalan publishers seem to have lost their power of decision-making: foreign works hit the shelves with publishing schedules parallel to that of the Spanish translation to reduce costs and risks. We are bound hand and foot, they claim. But this is just another proof of the fact that economic reasons are behind every decision.

It is almost a paradox that now that it seems easier than ever for works to reach more people from a wider range of languages, and that it seems easier than ever to translate to and from more languages, of every size; and now that the process of consecration does not depend so much on being translated or not into a language of communication, specifically English (even though Casanova still insists that it is French), but rather the number of languages into which a piece is translated is one of the determining factors in an author's consecration on the international literary scene; and now that for the past few decades Translation Studies have occupied an increasingly important position in Theory of the Literature and Comparative Literature such that all efforts to revive and re-found Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* assume the essential role of translation in the literary system; now, it seems that universal literature tends to be written in a unique literary language, one that is elastic enough to cross national borders and reach more readers, and that translation, at the same time, is losing the position and value it had obtained. We may even add that the literature is leaning towards a kind of uniformity, one that

Erich Auerbach already feared in his “Philologie der Weltliteratur” in 1952 (translated into English in 1969 by Edward and Marie Said in Centennial Review as ‘Philology and Weltliteratur’) when he warned: “Our earth, the domain of Weltliteratur [world literature], is growing smaller and losing diversity. Yet Weltliteratur does not merely refer to what is generically common and human; rather it considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse between its members”.

In other words: literary circulation is built on misunderstandings and profit-seeking interpretations of foreign literature, which in turn contribute to the process of conformation of the national literature of the country. Therefore, it is by working for the future of one’s own literature starting from that of the other, that we will approach what Goethe termed *Weltliteratur*.

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