

João Ferreira Duarte

Universidade de Lisboa

Rewriting the Gospels into Genre: The Case of José Saramago's *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

“Distracted by these reflections, which are not entirely irrelevant to the gospel we have been telling, we forgot, to our shame, to accompany Joseph’s son on the last leg of his journey to Jerusalem, where he is just now arriving, penniless but safe” (Saramago, 1994: 162-63). This is a passage from the book *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* written by the Portuguese Nobel Prize winner José Saramago, first published in 1991 and translated into English by Giovanni Pontiero in 1994. Apparently there is nothing exceptional or worthy of special critical attention in it. It matches similar statements scattered throughout the book, such as: “we have no way of seeing into the future, apart from an occasional presentiment or intuition, as we find in this gospel” (110), or “Just think how little the main characters of this gospel know about one another” (167). Any student of literature can recognize here easily enough the classic metafictional gesture by which the narrative refers to itself, thus playing with the conventions of mimesis in the act of foregrounding the material nature of representation. On second thoughts, however, these passages do raise what promises to be the interesting problem of a book that describes itself not as a “story” or a “novel” but as a *gospel*, a problem whose theoretical implications my paper intends to pursue.

Of course Saramago’s book already makes its first self-referential move in the title, informing the reader that he/she is most probably about to come across a version of the life of Christ like so many others, notably in recent times *Live from Golgotha: The Gospel According to Gore Vidal*, of 1992 and Norman Mailer’s *The Gospel According to the Son*, of 1997. In other and crucial words, we are offered a *rewriting* of the Gospels (see Costa, 1996), not a minor fact indeed considering

the cultural status of the source text. In what follows I will not go into any comparative description and interpretation of Saramago's *Gospel*. Rather, my focus will be precisely on the concept of rewriting, how it can be (re)constructed and what new light it sheds on texts such as Saramago's, Vidal's and Mailer's, which self-consciously proclaim themselves "gospels". In so doing, I would like to make a small contribution to setting up a general theory of rewriting, which in my view is much needed to illuminate a host of phenomena that take place no longer on the margins of literary studies.

Let me ask then what is rewriting? Instead of a fully-fledged definition, it may be more enlightening to look at a number of concrete instances that can be brought under the category, and to this end it is certainly worth quoting at length from André Lefevere, who first put the concept on the scholarly agenda:

Rewriters have always been with us, from the Greek slave who put together anthologies of the Greek classics to teach the children of his Roman masters, to the Renaissance scholar who collated various manuscripts and scraps of manuscripts to publish a more or less reliable edition of a Greek or Roman classic; from the seventeenth-century compilers of the first histories of Greek and Latin literature not to be written in either Greek or Latin, to the nineteenth-century critic expounding the sweetness and the light contained in works of classical or modern literature to an increasingly uninterested audience; from the twentieth-century translator trying to "bring the original across" cultures, as so many generations of translators tried before, to the twentieth-century compiler of "Reader's Guides" that provide quick reference to the authors and books that should have been read as part of the education of the non-professional reader (...). (1992: 2)

Rewriting thus covers a wide range of facts and activities: anthologising, summarising, editing, translation, criticism, as well as, if we take trans-semiotic aspects into account, illustration, ekphrasis, film adaptation, novelisation, and so on. Altogether it gives rise to an impressive diversity of texts, the sheer bulk of which in contemporary culture amply supports Lefevere's claim that "rewriting in all its forms occupies a dominant position" (1992, 2).

Such diversity, however, should set us wondering what, say, *The Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century Verse* has in common with Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet* or which features are shared by John Tenniel's drawings for the *Alice* books and the *Reader's Digest*. An obvious answer will be that in all these cases we are dealing with the relationship between source texts and target texts through which a reading of the former manifests itself in the latter. Or, to put it differently, the target text constitutes a transformation of a source text and, as such, it writes it anew in the process of constructing its meaning. Having said that, though, a few qualifying comments must be added. First, one should be cautious about seeing source and target as poles of a non-reversible binary opposition, for the simple reason that, on the one hand, writing and rewriting often overlap, as in parody, for example, and, on the other hand, any piece of rewriting can in its turn be rewritten, as in indirect translation. So, rather than coping with polarities, we are basically operating with a totally different model: a web or network of relationships not at all dissimilar to the definition of textuality put forward by Roland Barthes in essays such as "The Death of the Author" and "From Work to Text" (1977). This goes a long way to explain, as I will attempt to show, what Saramago is doing in *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. Secondly, and most importantly, it is perhaps inevitable to infer that, against this context of use, the term "rewriting" has to be taken, first and foremost, as a figural construct that allows us to perceive similarity in difference, in short, a conceptual metaphor.

As is well-known, since the pioneer work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), cognitive linguistics has highlighted in detail the structure of the metaphors that pervade the experience and expression of our everyday life. We perceive the world through a conceptual apparatus that joins separate domains of reality into a metaphorical whole, from the simplest to the most complex thought processes. Lakoff and Johnson provide a typology of conceptual metaphors consisting of three categories: 1) structural metaphors of the type "argument is war", in which one concept is configured in terms of another concept; 2) orientational metaphors such as "happy is up; sad is down", which are rooted in our experience of space, and 3) ontological metaphors, when we treat physical objects as if they were

discrete entities and substances endowed with boundaries, of which personification stands out as a clear-cut instance. Crucial to keep in mind here is the fact that, while the conceptual system that governs our perception seems part of nature, it is actually culture-specific: metaphors that we live by in our culture may be meaningless in cultures that map the world differently. Philip Eubanks, in his article “The Story of Conceptual Metaphor”, goes a little further than Lakoff and Johnson when he claims that “Conceptual metaphors are inseparable from the circumstances in which they are uttered, and thus they are always inflected by discursive conventions and ideological commitments” (1999: 422).

The point I want to make now is that, say, “criticism is rewriting”, “translation is rewriting” or “illustration is rewriting” meet the basic criterion to be regarded as conceptual metaphors: in all these and other cases, a conceptual domain is defined in terms of another, thus building up a structure of relationships that enable us to perceive a piece of reality as complex and meaningful. However, as soon as one arrives at this hypothesis, it becomes apparent that the logic underlying such a metaphorical system functions like a second order of perception, that is to say, it relies chiefly on a kind of first-order figure conveyed by the notion of *writing*.

When we refer to a literary work as “writing”, we are again understanding one concept in terms of another, in the sense that the sum total of factors, procedures and events that go into making an artwork are represented by only one of its aspects. The part taken for the whole is the classic definition of synecdoche, which Lakoff and Johnson chose to treat as a special case of metonymy. In the brief chapter where the authors discuss metonymy (1980: 35-40), they make it clear that metonymical concepts behave pretty much in the same cognitive way as metaphors: they provide understanding of the world out there. Two specific characteristics, however, set metonymies apart. First, since there are always many parts that could possibly be used to replace the whole, the one we actually pick out acquires a particularly relevant meaning, hence metonymies’ potential for rendering cultural and religious symbolism. Second, given its primarily referential function, metonymy is even more grounded in physical experience than metaphor.

Now, if we ask which type of experience is the concept of writing grounded on, we will certainly come up with a straightforward answer: it is grounded on the experience of using script to communicate, that is, of inscribing characters on a surface in order to transcribe words and sentences. Seen in this light, writing betrays both its physical and cultural basis, very much in tune with Lakoff and Johnson's argumentation. On the one hand, the time-bound nature of language, which works along a linear flow of sounds subject to a before and an after, is spacialized when converted into a script technology. On the other, the picture that is conjured up by the concept of writing is unfailingly that of a phonetic alphabet with its linear orientation, rather than, for instance, the kind of iconic script in use in pre-Columbian, Mesoamerican cultures (see Brotherston, 2002). The result is that writing is caught up in a representation that privileges one-way, non-reversible linearity, also replicated by reductive models of communication operating with the sender→message→receiver scheme.

The consequences of such an experience of language and writing are indeed significant for the discussion I have set in motion in this paper. It underpins, for example, what Derrida (1967) has famously called the logocentrism of Western metaphysics, which links up the site of origin to the manifestation of the presence of Being itself and the production of Truth by the voice that utters meaningful sounds. Likewise the honorific status awarded by post-Cartesian culture to originals and originality as against writing-that-comes-after hints at the intricate symbolic system that ultimately can be seen to emerge out of the experience of linear script. It is then against this backdrop here only very perfunctorily sketched out that the importance of the concept of rewriting may be gauged: in suggesting that "rewriting is writing", it provides us with a critical tool that helps question the symbolism (powerfully entrenched in our culture) attached to the opposition before/after that stems from the use of phonetic alphabet. Commentary, editing, translation, adaptation, etc., traditionally viewed as derivative, second-rate products as compared with the highly prized originals, can thereby be reconceptualized and revalued in their own right and not merely as late-comers. But something else is also crucially accomplished by this conceptual metaphor, something that affects the

self-enclosed sovereignty of writing as *container* of originality, to adapt one type of Lakoff and Johnson's ontological metaphors.

In order to elucidate what I am driving at, I would like to briefly look at a well-known passage from Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator". For Benjamin, "translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife [Überleben]", because, although translation "comes later than the original", it marks its "stage of continued life [Fortleben]" (1970: 71). This passage can be taken to signify the key role played by translation in the canonization of a source text, which is certainly a plausible reading, but one that misses the difference between "Überleben" and "Fortleben". To put it as plainly as possible, the difference, in my view, concerns a conception of the relationship between original and translation signalled by a fundamental gap figured as *death* and an opposing conception of the relationship between original and translation where no such gap occurs. Eschewing the notion of life after death, "Fortleben" points to an unbroken continuum in time where original and translation live forever intertwined, a situation which, Benjamin adds, "should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity" (1970: 71). A few paragraphs later, though, Benjamin goes even further in deconstructing death, that is, the symbolic slash of all hierarchical oppositions, when he claims that "in its afterlife [Fortleben] ... the original undergoes a change" (1970: 73).

We will have a clearer insight into what is at stake here if we read this statement against the background of the prestige of formalist representations of artworks, precisely those that govern their ideological status and circulation throughout society. Formalism, in all its guises, thrives on the belief that a work of art possesses specific properties that distinguish it from non-art and identify it as a self-sufficient entity, frozen for all eternity within the shining halo of its fixedness. A work of art is supposed to be, therefore, a totally reified object, indeed a well-wrought urn! It is true that literary theory has long provided alternative approaches to formalism. In 1930, for instance, Roman Ingarden (1973), drawing on Husserl's phenomenology, proposed that we conceive of the literary work as a schematised structure that calls for the response of the reader in realizing ("konkretisieren") it. In this manner, the work is

made up of a never fully determined text plus its ever-shifting readings or individual acts of *Konkretisation*, which fill up the textual “gaps” always in a different way, thus disclosing the heteronomous nature of the literary work (see Iser, 1987). In 1934 Jan Mukařovský (1976), building on Saussurian linguistics, splits the work of art into an external artefact or signifier and the corresponding aesthetic object, a signified that exists only in the collective consciousness and is thus subject to historical contingency. Systemic theories of literature and culture such as those put forward by Pierre Bourdieu and Siegfried Schmidt, among others, constitute perhaps the most elaborate and far-reaching challenge to reified views of writing. They emphasize the fact that the very existence of a work recognized as literary cannot be dissociated from the set of practices, institutions and agents that operate in a concerted way to make it possible the social production and transmission of literature, and this in a quite “unmetaphorical objectivity”. The writing & rewriting pair, which shore up the conceptual layout of this paper, must be set squarely within the same paradigm. For André Lefevere, who upholds his own version of a literary system,

[L]iterary theory would try to explain how both the writing and rewriting of literature are subject to certain constraints, and how the interaction of writing and rewriting is ultimately responsible, not just for the canonization of specific authors or specific works and the rejection of others, but also for the evolution of a given literature, since rewritings are often designed precisely to push a given literature in a certain direction. (185: 219)

It is time now to get back to where I started out. My purpose is not to engage in any detailed study of literary theories, systemic or otherwise, but – let me remind you – to try to understand what happens when Saramago claims that he is writing a gospel, on the assumption, of course, that something worth investigating is really happening. To this end I need to get rid of formalist notions of the hallowed integrity of an “original” work, as well as to recuperate Walter Benjamin’s insight that an original lives on in transformation and thus is never fully identical to itself. If to this scenario we add the solidarity effect engendered by the

metaphor “rewriting is writing”, then we are, I trust, in a good position to reach a conclusion.

It goes without saying that, like any other sacred writings, the Gospels cannot be replicated, they can only be interpreted and by those who are institutionally entitled to do so. A piece of writing is declared sacred, and used accordingly, because it is supposed to be the bearer of divine Truth uniquely imparted to humankind; once its final format is established, it admits of no changes or additions, which are severely censured by the institution whose function is to protect the uniqueness of the sacred writing in order to guarantee the truthfulness of God’s words. As everybody knows, there is no lack of historical evidence of what lays in store for those who dare interpret sacred writings in unauthorized ways.

José Saramago, however, does not claim to come up with another interpretation of the Gospels but rather with a gospel in its own right, and one, moreover, that plays with the point of view, since it is offered as a third-person narrative that places the narrator, like the Apostles, in an eye-witness situation but, unlike them, makes him capable of becoming the reliable biographer of Christ’s life. The Gospels are thus wrenched away from their canonical sacredness and launched into the iterative drift of *genre*. Rewriting the Gospels into genre constitutes then a transgressive act of laicization by dint of which “the original undergoes a change”. Truth becomes fiction, which correlates with Saramago’s characters, including God and the Devil, becoming wholly humanized and miracles being therefore accounted for as devices of magical realism. Rewriting is made to reshape writing, in a reversal of roles nicely allegorized when, at the end of the gospel, the dying protagonist on the cross is depicted as crying out “Men, forgive Him, for He knows not what He has done” (1994: 377).

To sum up, in the light of the argumentation I have just unfolded, one gets the impression that what ultimately infuriated the Catholic right wing in Portugal at the time of the book’s publication was less the storyline – which Saramago follows rather closely – and character design than the dessacralizing act of treating the Gospels as a mere genre, of writing a “pseudo-gospel”, an “anti-gospel” or a “fake gospel”, as he was charged with by representatives of the Church (see Leon Machado,

1994). “I write a gospel”: that is what all the self-referential statements in Saramago’s book really add up to. We can hardly fail to recognize the *performative*, which, as is well known, does things with words.

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