

Translation within literary history: a sistematic study of the Catalan case

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When studying the translations of foreign works published in Catalan during the first thirty years of this century, compared with those published in Spanish at the same time, either in Barcelona or in the rest of Spain, we can notice very interesting aspects that would deserve a thorough analysis. First of all the corpus of translations is quite different in those two languages. Besides, some authors were never published as a book in Catalan, in spite of their pretty important presence in Spanish. Moreover, during these years, the reception of those foreign authors varies according to the literary fashions and tendencies, butt it changes differently in Spanish than in Catalan. One notices, for instance, an important inflexion about 1910-1915, as far as the Catalan literary field is concerned and, above all, a very different behaviour in translation tendencies, in relation to the literary genres.

Let us consider some examples of what we have just exposed: Zola, for instance, presents about 30 translations into Spanish during this period, most of them published in Barcelona, which is the center of the Catalan area, but none of his narrative works were translated into Catalan. Flalubert was known in Barcelona at the early time of 1901 with his more significant novels (*Hérodias*, *Madame Bovary*, *Salammbô*, and *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*), but it was only read in Spanish. Dumas – both father and son – could only be read in Catalan in 1924, when *La Dame aux Camélias* was first published. That was more or less the case of Théophile Gautier (18 translations, but none into Catalan), Huysmans, Nietzsche, Fogazzaro, D'Annunzio (as a novelist, although he was well known in Spanish since 1900), Schopenhauer, Baudelaire (first published in Catalan as a book at the end of the twenties), Maupassant (about 45 translations in book, but none into Catalan until 1930), Chejov, Pierre Louys, Hérédia, Laforgue, Leconte de l'Isle, Anatole France (unknwon in Catalan until 1925, when *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* was first published), Maurice Barrès, Balzac (53 translations into Spanish, either in Madrid or Barcelona, but only one into Catalan, *Le Lys dans la vallée*, probably of the

twenties), Dickens, Dostoievsky, etc. Some of these writers were first published in Catalan at that late time of the twenties, so we can state that their Catalan reception is quite belated compared with their Spanish one, although most of these Spanish translations were done in Barcelona, that is to say in a Catalan geographic area.

The dimension of this phenomenon is so great that its analysis leads us to some important conclusions. To start with, the differences noticed in both reception processes cannot be understood as a result of the ignorance of these writers in the Catalan area but as a consequence of other factors which depend on the fact that there is a Catalan literary system, with its own rules and internal dynamics, with its own limitations and tensions. Our purpose is to display it from the singular though very useful point of view of translation studies when applied to the literary history.

In that sense, first of all we would like to point out two important aspects that will help us enormously to describe this system during that period of time: its internal evolution (proved by the inflexion of 1910-1915) and the incidence of literary genres in the reception process.

It will be pretty obvious for whoever studies Catalan literature of the beginning of this century that there is a scarcity of translations of novels into Catalan, in spite of the copious production of translations of the same kind in Spanish. It occurs differently for the dramatic works. Moreover, theater and secondly poetry seem to be the favorite genres for being translated into Catalan in those years, in a way that has no correlation at all in the Spanish influence area, and that is one of the distinctive characteristics and peculiarities of the Catalan literary system at that time.

This situation will remain unchanged until the twenties. There are two main reasons that explain it. One is of a socioliterary kind: novel requires generally a book to be published, that is to say a pretty bigger expense that the limitations of the Catalan reading audience at this early time made it unprofitable, specially when all Catalan readers could read Spanish perfectly well. The market for this kind of publications seems quite inexistent in Catalan, but pretty large in Spanish at the beginning of the XX Century. That phenomenon is related to the scarcity of Catalan narrative production during that time. For reception and production there are two literary aspects which are closely interrelated: they both obey to the rules controlling a literary system, either when respecting them or opposing them in a provocative way that could eventually open a possibility of change within the same system.

Is the narrative production really scarce in Catalan, or is it only ignored and disregarded? All literary systems have a canon, as we know: they actually favour a certain tendency, certain works, certain authors... a certain kind of

values. The fact is that the novel had not found its own prestigious space in the Catalan repertoire at the beginning of this century, in spite of the fact that an excellent foreign narrative production was becoming to be known in Spanish. Obviously, language has been an obstacle for its diffusion in the Catalan area, building a wall as a true boundary between those two audiences and systems: between two repertoires, two canons and two different cultural fields.

This scarcity of translations of foreign novel affects not only the great authors of the universal repertoire, but even the most commercial production books of adventures and love stories. While translations of both Dumas – father and son –, of Jules Verne and Edmundo de Amicis, or even the popular collections of books which sometimes include very important authors, like Zola, who has been sometimes considered as a newspaper serial writer, were proliferating in the Spanish area, nothing of this kind could be found in Catalan at that time. Literary translations seemed to be directed towards a very different audience: to a cultural élite, to the very small and closed social scope of the literary cenacles where one could skim assiduously through the copious literary reviews, journals and magazines of that time, and where one could comment, not without a certain dose of snobbery, on any book and new tendency coming from abroad. This was the atmosphere of the Catalan literary gathering and cercles, where sometime their participants used to dream of a kind of *bohème*, similar to that of Paris at the very beginning of the XX Century. The Catalan literary Modernism was socially restricted, closed within its own sociocultural boundaries, and undoubtedly distant from the big audience, to which it had only addressed – and only in a very unefficient way – when trying a dramatic production, that is between 1908-1910. A commercial literary production in Catalan had no sense, and this phenomenon had an obvious effect on the publishers political decisions, when considering foreign works.

Even though, as time passed by, the situation started to change. One notices a firm will to fulfill the existent gaps in the universal repertoire in Catalan, and even so to supply, with the help of translations, the lacunes in the own literary repertoire. That is the reason why we can find a copious production of translations into Catalan in the twenties. They usually do not obey to a certain literary fashion – that is – to a genuine interest in the new tendencies coming from abroad –, but to an effort to set up a literary repertoire in Catalan, either with foreign works and the own production. They respond, then, to a clear institutional volition, that has converted into «classics», at long last, even the contemporary authors. By this operation, those works have been appropriated, incorporated to the own system – a process that always implies necessarily a kind of detraction – at the very time that they were «canonized» and thoroughly devoided of any subversive contents.

By contrast, either for the language that has been used or the canonical tendency that these late translations of the twenties tend to show, one can outline the persistence of a certain social movement, which stresses a double-faced social reality: on one hand, there is an *élite* which has slowly consolidated itself as a cultural *élite*, established in power, and therefore trying to set up and spread its own cultural values and literary canon; on the other hand, there is the basis of the social pyramide, which is mainly distant from the culturalisation and catalanisation process, and without any connection with the *élite*. This situation, which has persisted during all the first half of this century, has been even reinforced by the Spanish Civil War, and it is determinant of the special socioliterary moment governing the contemporary Catalan literary system.

Besides this interesting phenomenon, that explains to a large extend the scarcity of either Catalan narrative and commercial literature in Catalan, there are some other aspects we would like to take into account in the present study. One of those is the fact that the Catalan literary production of the beginning of the XX Century shows a clear unbalanced situation in favour of poetry, which tends to be even larger if one considers the huge experimentation in a kind of poetic prose or *prose d'art*, which dominates the narrative production at this early time, to the detriment of a much more accessible prose that would respect the communicative criteria. The reason is of a «poetical» order, which concerns the notion and formulation of a certain vision of art and literature that has its effects on their function. The idealist trend that was dominant at the end of the XX Century, together with the echo of the French Symbolist school, so important in Catalonia at the very beginning of this century, fed the hope in the possibility of a transformation of the World only by the action of the poetical Verb, in which one settled his heart, in a way that connected directly with Mallarmé and his postulates. From this point of view, the poet was the one who, acting only from language, had to enhance the «fouled» reality, the one responsible for purifying the world of the «triviality» and «coarseness» that were suffocating it, and for cleaning it of the «degradation» that the new industrial society had carried with it. That is one of the reasons why poetry has had such a great prestige at that time, much more prestige than narrative, which was seen only from the point of view of its prosaic and ordinary condition. Therefore, narrative had to be beautified, that is dignified and sublimized, to reach the condition of *prose d'art* or poetical prose, according to the dichotomy Poetry/Prose equivalent to Beauty/Hideousness, Purity/Degradation or Ideal/Material, that was articulating the world at that time.

On the other hand, one can observe a certain new tendency, pretty important in the Catalan area at about 1908-1910. It refers to the translations of foreign dramatic works, both in the line of the Ibsenian and Mäeterlinckian

drama and the classical tragedies that D'Annunzio made fashionable since 1898. Besides, that is the origin of his good welcoming in Catalonia at the beginning of the XX Century, since he was seen as a master of the new dramatical tendency in fashion. Both this kind of rather «poetical» theater and the revival of tragedy were regarded as a way for the retrieval of the Sublim in the new industrial society, which was to them degraded and crawled, in a sort of action that we must consider of a «poetical» kind – in the sense we have specified above –, showing a clear will of intervention over the historical reality. This position has derived into an intellectual messianism, trying to spread from the literary field to the social order. At that time, the interest shown for the foreign dramatic works obeyed to the will of creation of a national dramatic repertoire presented as an answer, both aesthetical and social, to the needs of the modern Catalan society. In the context of the tragic events of Summer 1909, namely the anarchist riot that shook Barcelona, this kind of «poetical» and «national» dramatic production has been considered as a real weapon in a messianic action over the social body in revolt: an instrument of a greater achievement than poetry, when trying to agglutinate the crowd in a common social project. The great number of translations of foreign dramatic works, comparatively speaking, shows its true importance in the historical analysis of this period.

This article has very often outlined that a change of taste occurred during these years, as for as translations are concerned, determining an inflexion in the scene of the Catalan literary repertoire. Sometimes we have to speak of literary fashions, as an echo of the new tendencies dominating the Paris cultural environments, for instance. That was the case of D'Annunzio at about 1898 – when he presented *La Ville morte* –, as we have seen, or even of Ruskin (who was capital for understanding the pre-Raphaelite influence in Catalonia), and of Ibsen, Huysmans or Nietzsche. Even though, that is not only a result of fashion, since the reception of the foreign writers shows some directions that have to be explained in other ways. At about 1910-1915, there is a change in the Catalan cultural paradigm, obeying to a replacement in the cultural groups in power. In fact, it responds to a banishment of the «old» modernist tendency and to a substitution of the «old» values by other ones presented as the «new» ones, that is to say: the ones of the XX Century. This change hides a real fight for the cultural hegemony in Catalonia, in a way that includes also violence and has wretched consequences, for instance, the passing over an important literary production without any notice, and even the exile of many relevant writers of the immediate past. It obeys undoubtedly to ideological reasons, with political implications – at least of a cultural kind –, and has an echo in the Catalan literary repertoire of that time. In fact, during these years, one can see a clear will of creating a true universal

repertoire in Catalan for the first time, concealing the many existent gaps, as well as outstanding over certain foreign writers – or only certain aspects of these foreign writers –, which are presented as «classics» and no more as «modernists», or as catholics, instead of radicals, in a way that it looks quite obvious that they have suffered in general a very strong canonization process. When the new cultural group sets up in power – both cultural and political –, that process of creation and consolidation of a Catalan literary repertoire starts to be boost by the cultural institutions themselves. It is only then when we can find translations of the most important works and authors of the universal repertoire, some of them being unknown in Catalan until then. The reason for that is obvious: to conceal the existent gaps on one hand, in order to promote, on the other, the Catalan narrative production. Meanwhile, a change in the sociological conditions is occurring, favouring the enlargement of the market for the book in Catalan. But, even so, we cannot forget that this phenomenon obeys to a political will, and is a reaction against the weakness of the own literary system with regard to the Spanish one, trying to achieve sometime, in future, a non-dependent situation, that is to say, a certain «normality» in this field.