

Notes of a translator in 2012

RUBENS FIGUEIREDO

1

I UNDERSTAND THAT the main concern in the translation of books such as Tolstoy's should be to maintain features of language and thought that seem strange to us, that do not match the patterns or habits prevailing among us. Some language preferences in the original text express a perspective, an angle from which to view life and society. A crucial part of the meaning of this type of work lies precisely in what sounds discrepant from what we expect of a "classic of literature."

It is necessary to at least suggest that underlying these linguistic concerns there is a different view of the world and of history, rooted in the society where that work took shape. This contrasts with today's strong pressure for widespread standardization. Also in this aspect - the appreciation of diversity - translation can make an important contribution.

2

In other words, the risk in translating Russian literature lies in assimilating those books from the perspective that prevails in our society. This includes reducing in the critical and questioning scope of the works. Strictly speaking, it is a colonizing translation that borrows the word from the original.

Without some level of critical notion of the context in which the work was written, of what was at stake at the time it was written, of the relationship between Russian literature and society at that time on the one hand and, on the other, between Russian literature and the concept of art that was boasted by Europe as a universal value, the translation of such books will necessarily lose a vital part of its meaning.

3

This assimilationist treatment of the translation of Russian works also reveals a certain fear: the fear of seeing, and showing, that there are other possible, viable forms of facing and organizing social life beyond that which prevails among and is accepted as universal. In other words, the fear of seeing and showing the underlying weaknesses of existing social forms.

That fear, or more specifically the object of that fear, is the very reason why those books attract us so much and have so much to tell us.

4

In the case of Tolstoy, there are repetitions of words, phrases and even whole syntactic structures. There are also multiple and crossed parallelisms, five or six of them concentrated in a single paragraph. Some sort of wild rhetoric. There is also attention to linguistic marks that distinguish the character's social class, cultural origin, gender and even age group. There is the extensive use of long sentences that include constructions with abrupt syntactic deviations. There is the almost ethnographic reproduction of the speech of soldiers and muzhiks, stressing its elliptical, extremely concise character. If the translator is aware of the meaning of these traits and that none of them are mere idiosyncrasy or virtuosity of style, but are related to the underlying questions contained in the book, he will try to find ways to preserve them in Portuguese. He will be able to distinguish what is relevant from what is secondary.

5

If the Russian text of War and Peace mentions "people's war" and "strength of the people", why translate it as "patriotic war" and "strength of the nation", as I found in the English and French translations that I have consulted? When Tolstoy uses the term people's war (*narodnaia voina*) he is referring to the forms of resistance that the Russian rural population began to show against Napoleon's troops. They burned the corn, killed the animals and destroyed the silos, leaving nothing for the invaders to eat. They sold no food to them. Or he refers to the military action of the irregular troops of the militia, or guerrillas. The term "patriotic war" is not justified. So why have so many translations in so many languages insisted on using "patriotic war"? Because the term "people's war" is very aggressive, very critical. It emphasizes social inequality. This perspective is not consistent with the notion of a "classic of world literature", in which Tolstoy had to be included .

6

And at the end of the book Tolstoy speaks of "strength of the people", and it was translated as "strength of the nation." And that is not all. The meaning of the words is in the dictionary, and still the translator can choose to interpret. And where does this interpretation come from? A translation depends heavily on the translator's critical view of both the work and the author, as well as on his understanding of how the work relates to its time, its society. If this critical view of the work, of the author, of the relation of the work to society is weak, shy, then the translation becomes liable to be influenced by dominant notions. This affects the translation. And the original meaning will be lost. The problem is not technical. It is a problem of critical understanding.

7

Translation should involve exchange, should be a vehicle for cultural exchange and mutual knowledge. But nowadays there is no exchange: translations

are almost exclusively from English into other languages. Inversely, production is statistically non-existent. Today, translation is a unilateral process. This denotes a relationship of domination and not of exchange. Unfortunately, the value of the translator among us seems to be largely the result of the pressure from a domination process of which we are the object.

8

For 22 years I have been translating contemporary American and English literature, and for ten, nineteenth and early twentieth century Russian literature. The contrast could not be more shocking and elucidating.

On the one hand is Russian literature, which is part of the controversies in progress in its time and in country; in which the works also discuss with each other in view of the historical options open to their society; in which authors strive to keep open a gateway to social dynamics, with all the explosive and uncertain aspects it entails. In this process, virtually everything is subjected to incisive questioning, to twists and turns of thought and position, the accumulation of which continually enriches and invigorates the works. The artistic options of each author refer to the historical options of the country and thus the works gain weight and strength that continue to draw attention, because the historical processes under way and the patterns of social relations then in rapid transformation can, to a not negligible extent, be recognized as the same currently in force, even if in a different guise.

On the other hand is contemporary English and American literature, a literature inserted in the market, which posits the book as a global product and commodity; a literature in which any concrete challenge to the social relations regime in force is neutralized at the source, as it would mean challenging the very production process of these works, in which a book is sold to thirty countries and labeled as of worldwide interest even before it has been completed, read and evaluated. It is a literature hardly aware of the process in which it is inserted and of the propagandistic role it plays. A literature in which the target of something similar to a critical vision are always “the others” (in particular societies which, in some way, in any way, have failed to adapt to capitalism, or even to a certain type of capitalism), but never the internal social relations and the forms of power existing in their own countries. At most, in this regard, they allow themselves complaints of moral content. These are works that benefit from unequal international relations, that do not question these relations. Instead, they strive, either directly or indirectly, to strengthen them.

9

Have you seen those old cartoons about Africa, in which the natives carry on their shoulders a sort of litter with an Englishman sitting on top, dressed in a safari outfit and with his hunting rifle on his lap? Well, when I translate these American, English books, I feel like that the guy carrying the litter. Nowadays

there is a colonialist element in this craft. Because I am also a writer, and perhaps when I could be writing I am carrying the guys on my back. For them to hunt readers in our territory. Of course I am paid to translate, I am a professional, as we say to comfort ourselves. I get a reward; it is different from those Africans.

Foto France Presse



Liev Tolstoy (1828-1910).

But from the standpoint of a writer, someone who, rightly or wrongly, assumes he has something to say to his country, to his society, and ends up being the forced spokesman of others, there is something weird. There is something that cannot go unchallenged.

10

I do not consider myself a co-author of the works I have translated. But I certainly am the author of my translations.

The craft of translating, however, is very similar to that of writing an original. When you write, you start from impressions, ideas, feelings, emotions, suggestions, concerns, ultimately, that do come out, in principle, in verbal language. And that even resist it. You have to transpose that to Portuguese written language. It is a translation. Strictly speaking, translation in this sense is an ability that we all use in our everyday experience.

Translation itself, that which we call translation, is similar but for the fact that you start from a text in another language. Which is, in principle, the consolidation of another person's experiences and ideas. Then you have to transpose that also to written Portuguese. Then there is a point where the two things intersect - writing your book and writing the translation. The difference is that translation comes from the experiences and ideas of others, which in most cases do not coincide with mine and even clash with them.

11

Translation enables a very specific reading - it leads us astray, it expands our perspective. For example, it is easier for me to realize my limitations as a writer in the deficiencies of the books that I translate than by rereading my own texts.

Abstract – The essay presents, in the form of notes, the thoughts and observations of a translator about his work, with regard both to his techniques and procedures, and to the influence of national and international social relations on his activities. Grounded on his experience of translating the works of 19th-century and early 20th-century Russian authors, as well as those of contemporary American and English writers, this essay attempts to establish a contrast between, and propose a critical perspective of, translation and literature in our time.

Keywords: Translation, Translator, Literature, International relations.

Rubens Figueiredo has a degree in Letters from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. He is a writer, a Portuguese professor and a translator from English, Spanish and Russian to Portuguese. He is the author of the novels *Passageiro do fim do dia* (2010) and *Barco a seco* (2001), and of the books of short stories *Contos de Pedro* (2006) and *Livro dos lobos* (2009), published by Companhia das Letras. He translated *War and Peace*, *Resurrection* and *Anna Karenina*, by Leo Tolstoy, Cosac Naify editions. He received the Translation Award of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 2012. @ – rubensfigueiredo@gmail.com

Received on 14 Aug. 2012 and accepted on 30 Aug 2012.

