

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION: TWO ARGENTINEAN VERSIONS OF THE BAUDELAIREAN SPLEEN

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Abstract || The link between Comparative Literature and translation creates a new reading framework that challenges the classic approach to translation, and allows the widening of the scope of the translated text. This paper explores this relationship through the analysis of two versions of Charles Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* published in Argentina during the 20th century, stressing the nature of translation as an act of rewriting.

Keywords || Comparative literature | Translation | Rewriting | Charles Baudelaire

0. 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, that are traditionally linked: so, it is possible to consider translation studies as “one of the traditional areas of comparatism” (Gramuglio, 2006) or to support, as Susan Bassnett did more than a decade ago (1993), the need for a reversal to happen –similar to the one Roland Barthes established between semiology and linguistics–, to make translation studies stop constituting a minor field of comparative literature in order to be the major discipline that shelters it (solution through which Bassnett tried to put an end to what he defined as the “unfinished long debate” on the status of the discipline of comparative literature, empowered by the criticism blow that René Wellek gave to the discipline in 1958)¹.

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 –which, on the other hand, defined itself as the object of a specific discipline barely some decades ago–. 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 “on the altar of academic respectability, as it was defined at the moment of its origin”². 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

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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, 1998: 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, 1995: 3).

national literatures” (Lefevere, 1995: 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, 2007: 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 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 a 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 Gentzer, 1993: 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” (1985: 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”:

La relación entre lo nacional y lo transnacional, y la implicación subversiva entre lo local y lo global pasa por un contacto de lenguas, y por ende, por el fenómeno de la traducción en sus formas de transliteración, transcripción y reformulación de «lenguas» y «estilos». La traducción, en todas sus formas, de signo a signo, de las relaciones inter-signos, o de universo de discurso a universo de discurso es el fenómeno más relevante de lo que podríamos llamar una «semiosis comparativa» (Rosa, 2006: 60-61).

1. Two Argentinean versions of the *spleen* by Baudelaire

Once the approach to translation that we favour in this work is specified, what we intend now is to reflect on the particular case of

the Argentinean translations of *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) by Charles Baudelaire. We will focus on two comprehensive translations of *Les fleurs du mal*, and two very different publications: the one that can be defined as the inaugural translation of Baudelaire in Argentina, carried out by the female poet Nydia Lamarque –published by the publishing house Losada in 1948 and reprinted numerous times to date–, and the one signed by Américo Cristófalo for the *Colihue Clásica* collection from the publishing house Colihue, published originally in 2006, and that appears as the last link of the chain of Argentinean translations.

The difference between the date of publication of the translation by Nydia Lamarque –belated, if we take into account that a first translation to Spanish, incomplete, came out in 1905³– and the one by Américo Cristófalo, reports the currency of the name of Charles Baudelaire along the lines of translations of French poetry in Argentina; name that, next to the names of Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud – the founder triad of modern French poetry– survives through different decades⁴.

What interests us now is to try out a cross-reading of the poems by Baudelaire and the rewritings by Nydia Lamarque and Américo Cristófalo. We will not use the comparison according to the frequent use that has been given to it in the study of translations, that is, as a method to reveal a collection of translation strategies implemented in each case with the purpose of identifying “diversions” with regard to the original. As André Lefevere has pointed out, to think about a new relationship between comparative literature and translation implies to set aside the approach with regulations, the one that pretends to differentiate between “good” translations and “bad” translations, to concentrate on other questions, such as the search of the reasons that make some translations having been or being very influential in the development of certain cultures and literatures (Lefevere, 1995: 9). In this sense, what we intend is to read the sequence of these texts, with the purpose of demonstrating dissimilar ways of articulation with the Baudelairean poetics, two rewritings that take shape as different forms of literary writing in which the vernacular and the foreign are linked, and that are backed up by an ideology.

In order to do this, we are going to confine our analysis to one of the poems entitled “Spleen” that is included in one of the five sections that structure *Les fleurs du mal*: “Spleen and Ideal”.

Walter Benjamin pointed out that the Baudelairean *spleen* “shows life experience in its nakedness. The melancholic sees with terror that the earth relapses into a merely natural state. It does not exhale any halo of prehistory. Nor any aura” (1999: 160). In this sense, the *spleen* marks the death of the character of idealism “either of enlightened or

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3 | We are talking about the translation by the Spaniard Eduardo Marquina, a version marked by modernist aesthetic conventions. As Antonio Bueno García has pointed out, the translation of the works by Charles Baudelaire in Spain is a fact that takes place belatedly, not due to ignorance of the writers of that period –for whom Baudelaire was a recognized influence– but for “the censorship problems of the second half of the XIXth century”. García gets even to declare that, over and above the translation by Marquina at the beginning of the XXth century and two more versions published in the forties, “the restoration of Baudelaire’s spirit and therefore of his works does not take place until after the Second World War, and in Spain until well into the seventies” (Bueno García, 1995).

4 | Besides the two translations that we tackle in this work, we can take again the prose translation of *Las flores del mal* signed by Ulises Petit de Murat (1961) and the presence of Baudelaire in anthologies like *Poetas franceses contemporáneos* (Ediciones Buenos Aires: Librerías Fausto, 1974) or *Poesía francesa del siglo XIX: Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rimbaud* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1978), both of them prepared by the poet Raúl Gustavo Aguirre.

lyrical and romantic education” (Cristófaló in Baudelaire, 2005: 15), and exposes him to emptiness. In the framework of Baudelairean poetics, *ideal* and *spleen* appear as two values which ubiquity has a profound impact both on the sphere of an ideology of poetry, and on the verbalization and the textual organization –as long as both have a clear linguistic scope–: “Sometimes he believes, and sometimes he does not; sometimes he rises with the *ideal*, and sometimes he falls to pieces into the *spleen* [...] It is easy to observe the poems that come from these two opposite perspectives” (Balakian, 1967: 50). In the chain of the poem, ideal and spleen mark, respectively, the victory of what Bonnefoy calls “poetic alchemy”, of its dynamics, of its operation, but also the movement of its withdrawal or its retreat, the contradiction of the poetic rhetoric with what is perceived further away: it is the meeting of poetry with nothingness, that happens, nevertheless, inside the corroborated possibility of the poem –there is no material failure of poetry in Baudelaire–. De Campos points out that:

el rasgo estilísticamente revolucionario de esos poemas estaría en el dispositivo de choque engendrado por el uso de la palabra prosaica y urbana [...] en fin, por el desenmascaramiento crítico que señala la «sensación de modernidad» como pérdida de la «aureola» del poeta, «disolución del aura en la vivencia del choque» (De Campos, 2000: 36).

So, the usual lyrical vocabulary faces up to unusual “allegorical” quotes, which burst in the text in the style of an “act of violence” (2000: 36). *Ideal* and *spleen* mark the comparison of the consonant and the dissonance, of the romantic poetical rhetoric, of its power of evocation and transcendence, with a more austere rhetoric, of prosaic nature, that undermines the poetization through the imposition in the text of another movement, negative (the negative is read in terms of the contesting of a consolidated representation of the poetic).

A first reading of the translations by Nydia Lamarque and Américo Cristófaló makes it possible to observe that we are talking about writings ruled by two completely different “poetic rhetorics”⁵, which in the translation framework are based on a combination of decisions that determine the rewriting of the source-language text. These rhetorics are assumed and stated explicitly by each of the translators in this paratextual mechanism that is relevant to any translation, set up in order to justify what has been carried out, to try and specify its exact sense, to protect it: the introduction.

So, in her introduction, Nydia Lamarque, in order to explain her actions, turns to two masters: Hölderlin and Chateaubriand. From the second one –translator of *Paradise Lost* by Milton into French–, the female translator extracts her translation methodology, that she summarizes in one precise formula: “To trace Baudelaire’s poems

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5 | As Noé Jitrik points out, the poem is a place, a material support on which certain operations are carried out that are “governed by rhetoric, in both a limited sense of rhetoric –strict rules and conventions– as in a wide sense –the obedience to or the subversion to the rules– and even pretensions or attempts of “non-rhetoric”, which effect, operatively speaking, is, nevertheless, the identification of a text as a poem” (Jitrik, 2008: 63).

on a glass” (in Baudelaire, 1947: 39), which implies the search for an isomorphism between the original and the translation, the lexical, syntactic, metrical isomorphism. More than a half century later, after the pioneering translation by Lamarque, Américo Cristófaló builds an academic reading and develops more complex hypotheses. He maintains that his translation is built up on the basis of two conjectures: the first one, that metrics and rhyme “are not strictly bearers of sense” (Cristófaló in Baudelaire, 2006: XXVI) and the second one, the exposition of the double conflict about the Baudelairean rhythms:

Del lado del *Ideal*: la retórica poetizante, los mecanismos prosódicos, la desustanciación adjetiva, los hechizos de la lírica. Del lado del *Spleen*: tensión hacia la prosa, aliento sustantivo, una corriente baja, material, de choque crítico (2006: XXVII).

Taking into account these positions, we can get back the first verses of one of the poems of “Spleen” to know what we are talking about:

1. J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans.
2. Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,
3. De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,
4. Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances,
5. Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau.
6. C'est un pyramide, un immense caveau,
7. qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune.

(Charles Baudelaire)

1. Yo tengo más recuerdos que si tuviera mil años.
2. Un arcón atestado de papeles extraños,
3. de cartas de amor, versos, procesos y romances,
4. con pesados cabellos envueltos en balances,
5. menos secretos guarda que mi triste cabeza.
6. Es como una pirámide, como una enorme huesa,
7. con más muertos que la común fosa apetece.

(Nydia Lamarque)

1. Tengo más recuerdos que si hubiera vivido mil años.
2. Un gran mueble con cajones llenos de cuentas,
3. versos, cartitas de amor, procesos, romances,
4. sucios pelos enredados en recibos,
5. guarda menos secretos que mi triste cabeza.
6. Es una pirámide, una sepultura inmensa
7. que contiene más muertos que una fosa común.

(Américo Cristófaló)

The comparison allows us to notice the distinctive characteristics of each translation. In the case of Lamarque, the metrical imperative is conditional on all the other choices and has a direct impact on the intelligibility of the verses. The syntax gets more complicated – hyperbatons predominate–, the organization of the sense of the verse is compromised, new lexemes are added and some are suppressed in order to hold the rhyme patterns. We are not trying to cast a shadow on this translation –to which we have to admit its statute of inaugural work–, but we are interested in showing its contradiction, since the translation by Lamarque ends up obtaining quite the opposite of what he enunciated as his mandate: “Each word has to be respected and reproduced as things that do not belong to us” (Lamarque in Baudelaire, 1947: 39).

As far as he is concerned, Américo Cristófaló, who in the introduction to his translation goes through the previous versions –among them is the translation by Lamarque⁶–, gives up the rhyme, which allows him to carry out a work of rewriting closer to the French text: the verses are, syntactically, less complex than those in Lamarque version, clearer. Cristófaló builds a poem governed by another rhetoric, stripped of all those “processes of poetization” that appear in the translation by Lamarque, although someone could wonder if the elimination of rhyme in his translation does not imply, partly, the loss of this tension between ideal and spleen that characterizes Baudelairean poetics.

But in order to appreciate what Lamarque and Cristófaló do with the Baudelairean *spleen* (*tedium*, for Cristófaló; *weariness*, for Lamarque), it is enough to concentrate on only one of the aforementioned verses, the fourth one, which we mention now isolated:

- ...Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances (Baudelaire)
- ...con pesados cabellos envueltos en balances (Lamarque)
- ...sucios pelos enredados en recibos (Cristófaló)

A metonymic verse that with its minimum length shows the best of each translation. The lexical selection displays two completely different records: Lamarque produces a more solemn verse, leant

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6 | Cristófaló maintains that the translation by Nydia Lamarque resembles the one by Eduardo Marquina, whom she condemns: “Lamarque [...] bitterly complains about the unfaithfulness of Marquina, who chooses symmetrical poetic measures –otherwise he thinks he would not respect the original–, she says she maintains the prosody, the rhyme, she says she is scrupulous about the adjectivation. However, the effect of pomp, of conceit and affectation in the tone is the same, the same dominion of procedures of poetization, and of confused articulation of a meaning” (Cristófaló in Baudelaire, 2006: XXV).

on a delicate, subtle image, a verse with a modernist flavour (“heavy hair wrapped in accounts”); whereas Cristófaló destroys any effect of poeticity in this direction. He simplifies the lexical selection (“dirty hairs” instead of “heavy hair”) and he builds a harsher image, in a realist style. Both translations strengthen the Baudelairean image, but in opposite directions: Lamarque leads it towards a lyrical intensity, Cristófaló makes it more prosaic.

There are other questions that can be appreciated in the cross-reading of these poems, for example the presence of a repeated pattern in the version by Lamarque, *boudoir*, (that Cristófaló translates as *tocador* or *dressing table*), which expresses a whole attitude towards the foreign language; we see the same contrast in the lexical choices, that apart from being bound to the aesthetic reconstruction of the poem, marks re-elaborations that are different from the Baudelairean images, as in the case of this verse:

- ...un granit entouré d’une vague épouvante (Baudelaire)
- ...una granito rodeado de un espanto inconsciente (Lamarque)
- ...una piedra rodeada por una ola de espanto (Cristófaló)

Here, Nydia Lamarque and Américo Cristófaló carry out a grammatical reading that is different from the alliance “vague épouvante”: Lamarque inclines herself towards an abstract image (she interprets *vague* as an adjective of *épouvante*), whereas the image on which Cristófaló bases himself has something of a maritime snapshot (he interprets *vague* as a noun: *wave*), it is more referential.

Both these works of rewriting grant to the Baudelairean text a different scope; they assemble two images by Baudelaire that respond to conventions and aesthetic values that are also differentiated. In this way, they do nothing but demonstrating the true nature of the translative act. Even if it is true and undeniable that we are talking, all the time, about the translation of a previous text, pre-existing –of an “original”–, it is also true and undeniable that translation is a deeply critical and creative practice, that exceeds the borders of the reproduction of a text –its forms move from appropriation to subversion–, a practice that in the passage of a text to another shows all the thickness of its power.

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