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TRANSLATING HISTORY AND SELF-TRANSLATION: JOÃO UBALDO RIBEIRO'S *VIVA O POVO BRASILEIRO*

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Romance histórico que focaliza os habitantes de Itaparica, Bahia, do século XVII aos anos 70, *Viva o povo brasileiro*, de João Ubaldo Ribeiro, é introduzido por sua epígrafe – "O segredo da Verdade é o seguinte: não existem fatos, só existem histórias" – como um arquivo de histórias orais não oficiais do Brasil que solapam a autoridade da historiografia oficial. Contudo, visto que João Ubaldo traduziu o romance para o inglês, as duas versões da história brasileira que produziu são lidas lado a lado numa tentativa de mostrar que, apesar de adotar uma teoria contingencial da verdade histórica, sua concepção de tradução como processo de transcrição literal revela uma visão análoga de historiografia, na qual a ficção é entendida como meio privilegiado de apresentação da verdade histórica.

The history of Portuguese-language writing may also be seen as a history of multilingual writing practices and translation. Camões, for example, wrote extensively in Castillan, sometimes interweaving it into predominantly Portuguese texts, and his epic, *Os Lusíadas*, owes its international status to English and Spanish translations. Fernando Pessoa, who was both a poet and a translator, wrote his earliest poems in his first language, English, and also achieved canonical status through translation. To choose but one among many contemporary examples, the Brazilian poet and critic Haroldo de Campos offers translation as both a theory of literary criticism and a paradigm of literary innovation.

Those who have written in Portuguese have, of historical, political and literary necessity, been faced with the predicament of being multilingual readers and writers, and, as Silviano Santiago indicates, the texts they have produced have self-consciously been re-readings and re-writings. Translation has been a crucial issue in Latin America, especially for Portuguese-language writers, as Antonio Cândido notes, both as a means of access to dominant literatures and as a means to achieve a wider audience. The translator has historically served as an indispensable cultural arbiter for the Portuguese-language writer. Translations into English and other languages – which are, of course, themselves re-writings – have produced new readings, such as Helen Caldwell's reassessment of Capitu's status as an adulteress in *Dom Casmurro*. For Portuguese-language writers, this tradition of translation, re-reading, re-writing and multilingualism has inevitably entailed an awareness of the contingency of language as language that converges with much contemporary literary critical theory. Contingency, as Richard Rorty defines it, entails both the denial of the existence of self-subsistent facts and the recognition that truth is exclusively a function of language. As Rorty writes:

> We need to make a distinction between the claim that the world is out there and the claim that truth is out there. . . Truth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind – because sentences cannot exist out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – can not. (4,5)

João Ubaldo Ribeiro's 1984 novel *Viva o povo brasileiro*, a history of Brazil from the 17th century to the 1970s, focusing on the inhabitants of Itaparica island in Bahia, is written not only in various historical styles of Portuguese – including what might be termed a form or Black or Bahian Portuguese – but also in French, Dutch, Spanish, Latin and "Portunhol". Within the text are dialogues about the attributes of various languages and ways of speaking, focusing especially on Dutch, French, English and Continental Portuguese as the languages of those who colonized Brazil. According to João Ubaldo, he constructed his history, in part, from oral stories of the people who live on Itaparica, where he was born and where he wrote the novel, and from stories told to him by his grandfather Manoel Ribeiro, who he describes as "a historian of sorts" and to whom he dedicates the book. The apparently radical contingency of the history he constructs – as opposed to official written histories – is underscored by his epigraph: "O segredo da Verdade é o seguinte: não existem fatos, só existem histórias".

This vision of historical truth in the novel as ostensibly conditional or changeable is further complicated by the existence of two versions of the text written by João Ubaldo, the Portuguese-language one described above, and a version published in English, in the U.S.A., in 1989, with the title *An Invincible Memory*. Put more simply, João Ubaldo, who studied political science in the U.S.A. and speaks and writes English, translated his own book. And it is apparently this supposedly less problematic definition of translation as transcription – *versus*

translation as re-writing – that João Ubaldo prefers to describe his undertaking. In an interview with the newspaper *O Globo*, he was asked: "A intimidade com o texto criou algum tipo de embaraço?" His response was: "Pelo contrário: a intimidade até facilita. O texto já existia em português. E você não pode tentar reescrever ao traduzi-lo". He nonetheless admits that "É um fenômeno especial. . . uma questão complicada, porque envolve vários tipos de problema. O fato de o próprio autor traduzir o livro e a convivência do autor-tradutor com as duas línguas com que ele lida são uma coisa complicada. Não é simples" (*Manchete*). João Ubaldo's theory of translation resembles the one described by Lowery Nelson, who distinguishes translation from adaptation, retelling, imitation and parody by asserting that "translation indicates a far closer resemblance between the original and the derivative" because there is "an inspectable source" (17).

There are, however, other self-translators whose texts and theories offer counterpoints to those of João Ubaldo. Pessoa, Conrad and Nabokov wrote in their second or third languages, thus leaving no inspectable source texts. Samuel Beckett, although he was Irish, chose to write many of his plays in French and translate them into English. Jorge Luis Borges, for whom writing and translation seem all but indistinguishable, collaborated on the English translation of the story *El Informe de Brodie*. Both Beckett and Borges interrogate the notion of a source text by emphasizing the existence of two originals written by the same author in different languages.

Although João Ubaldo's translation of *Viva o povo brasileiro* – which according to him took longer that the writing of the Portuguese version – is in most respects what could be termed a literal rendering of the Portuguese text, the English version is nonetheless a re-writing. Not only is the title of the English version different, but the date of Chapter 10 has been "corrected". French remains in French, Latin in Latin, Spanish mostly in Spanish, Dutch sometimes in Dutch, but the section in "Portunhol" is rendered in Spanglish and "Black" Portuguese is rendered in a form of "Black" English. According to João Ubaldo, he chose to translate the novel "porque seria difícil fazê-la com americanos que não conhecessem a linguagem semidialetal" (*Manchete*). As Nelson notes, however, "[t]he modern *stylus humilis* presents great interlingual difficulties because so often its subject matter is local, provincial, and temporally and culturally bound" (23). To prove his point, he offers French translations of Faulkner.

History-writing may, of course, also be thought of as a form of translation. Sir Walter Scott, for example, describes the process of constructing his paradigmatic texts of historical fiction as "translating into the manners as well as the language of the age we live in" (cited in Lukács, 68). Hayden White offers a more fully elaborated theoretical model of historiography as a tropological process of emplotment built on metaphor, metonym, synechdoche and irony. This theoretical description of historiography is virtually indistinguishable from similar theoretical considerations of translation, especially when one considers that the historical opposition in theories of translation – between the literal and verifiable and the fictional or interpretive – is identical to the historical opposition one finds in theories of historiography.

The previously cited epigraph of *Viva o povo brasileiro* frames João Ubaldo's historiography as a radically contingent fictional interpretation of Brazilian history that denies the existence of self-subsistent facts. As Luiz Valente points out, the epigraph is an inversion of the truth claims made in epigraphs of 19th century Brazilian naturalistic novels such as Aluísio Azevedo's *O cortiço*. Through a process of parody and inversion of the forms of proto-scientific discourses of ethnicity, nation, religion, etc. that have historically been used in Brazilian texts to construct historiographies, João Ubaldo exposes the inherent fictionality of the truth claims made in these texts. Valente inscribes this parodic process within a Bakhtinian esthetic model of carnavalization. As in many contemporary Latin American historical novels, the object of this parodic process is not only historical or supposedly factual texts but also fictional texts such as José de Alencar's *Iracema*. To take but one example that Valente mentions, João Ubaldo traces Brazilian history as a genealogical process, but instead of presenting this genealogy as the myth of benign miscegenation of indigenous peoples and Europeans, it is presented as a series of violent rapes by white male slave owners of black female slaves. In *Viva o povo brasileiro* one also finds many of the conventions used in other

contemporary Latin American texts to reinforce their own fictionality. The execution death of Lieutenant Brandão Galvão that opens the text is seen in a painting. This framing not only exposes the description as artifice, but the scene itself inevitably evokes one of the best-known contemporary texts of Latin American fiction, *Cien años de soledad*. The explanation of "alminhas" who come to inhabit various characters in the text is constructed from a rhetoric that is both as plausible and absurd as the rhetoric of 19th century Brazilian positivist texts. There are references to found texts – the trunk with the secrets of the "Irmandade" that Dandão gives to Budião and the story of the Baron de Pirapuama's murder of the slave Inocêncio. There are also inscriptions within the text of what Roberto González Echevarría refers to as archivists – such as Dadinha, Maria da Fé and the blind Faustino – who interpret the text's own version of Brazilian history. This process of rearticulation and reinterpretation might, at least initially, be read as reinforcing the text's status as but one version among many of Brazilian history by disclosing its own fictionality.

The episode in which Feliciano tells Budião the story of how the Baron of Pirapuama became a war hero and thus gained his position as patriarch and progenitor of Itaparica is a revealing example of how this apparently metafictional process functions in the text. Feliciano, whose tongue has been cut out, communicates through a form of sign language that, writes João Ubaldo, "Budião. . . entendia como se falada. Fora mesmo através dele que todos souberam em pormenores como morrera Inocêncio. . . e souberam como tinha sido cortada a língua de Feliciano" (158). This process of communication between Budião and Feliciano is explicitly described as "traduzindo gestos" (158). According to Valente, the cutting of Feliciano's tongue represents "a tentativa de suprimir o discurso dos socialmente mais fracos" (64), and he notes that the future Baron of Pirapuama "não consegue impedir que a história de sua cruel e vil ação seja transmitida para a comunidade negra" (64).

The appearance of found texts in *Viva o povo brasileiro* and the reference to Budião as a translator also inevitably evoke the found text in *Don Quijote* and the assertion of the narrator in Cervantes' novel that he is not the author but the translator of an unreliable Arabic text. This episode, like the episode in *Quijote*

of the burning of a "false" book of history along with the novelas de *caballeria*, has the effect of undermining the authority of the author and the truth-bearing status of the text we are reading. Hayden White describes this process in historiographic writing as "a self-conscious discourse [that] mirrors or replicates the phases through which consciousness itself must pass in its progress from a naive (metaphorical) to a self-critical (ironic) comprehension of itself" (19).

To translate is to re-write just as to re-read in translation is inevitably to reinterpret. One result of reading the English version of *Viva o povo brasileiro* is to see the episode of Budião's translation as an inscription of the author in the text, especially since Budião is the same character who later receives the trunk with the secrets of the Irmandade. Not only is Budião simultaneously the figure of the autor, translator and historian within the text, but the stories he tells and/or translates concerning both Feliciano and the Irmandade are not contested at other points in the text. Feliciano's story simply reinforces or corroborates the previous version of the same incidente offered by the narrator. Although Maria da Fé does express doubts about the exact form of the Irmandade, she asserts repeatedly that it does exist and her assertion goes unchallenged. In translation, the rhetoric of these two episodes takes the form of truth-claims, pointing to self-subsistent facts. That Feliciano's text is a silenced version of an oral history simply reinforces its claim to bearing some extra-textual truth since oral versions of history are repeatedly valued over written ones in *Viva o povo brasileiro*.

In various reviews and articles that appeared shortly after the publication of the first Brazilian editon of *Viva o povo brasileiro*, one finds a series of implicit and explicit truth claims concerning the novel. João Ubaldo relates to various interviewers that he wrote the Portuguese version of the novel on Itaparica. According to a 1984 article in *Veja*, one of the characters, Nego Leléu, is based on João Ubaldo's childhood acquaintance with a local fisherman named José de Honorina (Conti, 110). In an interview in *Leia*, João Ubaldo indicates that although the artifice of the "alminhas" is constructed from "uma série de teses e informações pseudo-espíritas que são tiradas da minha cabeça" (Serra, 10), he adds that since the novel was completed he has discovered that Amoreiras, the place where the "alminhas"

congregate, is "um lugar misteriosíssimo que tem o famoso culto dos eguns, o culto dos mortos único no Brasil" (10).

This portrayal of the author as participant-observer is reminiscent of similar claims to ethnographic authority based on fieldwork made by authors of the so-called *novelas de la tierra*, such as Gallegos, Carpentier and Rivera. Such extra-textual framing might be dismissed as so much publication hype were it not for João Ubaldo's own far more explicit claims. He says, "[f]iz esse livro para tentar mostrar como o povo vê" (Castello, 48), and describes the book as "uma história de um possível surgimento de consciência de nacionalidade no Brasil" (Serra, 10). Elsewhere he describes the text as "um romance sobre o povinho anônimo do Recôncavo, que serve de símbolo para todo o povo brasileiro" (Conti, 109). Following White's model for constructing historiographies, the text as described by João Ubaldo, at least as it regards the figuration of "o povo", is a progression from metaphor to synechdoche but without the irony that reveals its own fictionality.

More importantly, in the text itself one encounters precisely the same kind of unironic essentializing of abstract concepts such as "o povo". On the third page of João Ubaldo's translation – one hesitates to call it a mistranslation since, like the English version in general, it is unerringly precise, a literal translation and a construction repeated several times in the text – one encounters the phrase, "The Brazilian people *was* rising" [my emphasis]. It is the literal correctness of the translation that reveals the problematic reification in both the Portuguese and English versions of the text of the term "o povo", which is posited throughout as something good, authentic and a source of genuine knowledge. The critique offered here is similar to the one Flora Sussekind makes of a number of Brazilizan texts written in the 1970s, in *Tal Brasil, Qual Romance*. Speaking of João Antônio, for example, she writes, "em nenhum momento põe em dúvida a existência de uma unidade a que chama 'povo' ou 'terra' brasileiros"(93). In *Literatura e vida literária* she chastises *Viva o povo brasileiro* for ethnic essentializing, but her main objections to the novel seem to be its popularity and its author's antipathy to literary criticism.

In a 1990 interview, João Ubaldo himself says that, "[a] maior parte dos romancistas de cuja linhagem modestamente

faço parte – Dumas, Dickens, Sir Walter Scott – todos escreviam por dinheiro" (Marinho). In spite of its superficial resemblance to so-called magical realist texts and its seeming filiation with the post-modern esthetics of the contemporary Latin American novel, *Viva o povo brasileiro* is very much a popular historical novel within the mold of Sir Walter Scott. When one strips away its apparently metafictional artifice, one finds an array of formal and thematic similarities between the texts of Scott and that of João Ubaldo: civil wars, authenticating found texts, the construction of a mythical national past in a medieval setting and the romantic valuation of common folk. As Lukács writes of *Ivanhoe:*

> The interaction between above and below, the sum of which constitutes the totality of popular life, is thus manifested in the fact that, while on the whole the historical tendencies above receive a more distinct and generalized expression, we find the true heroes with which the historical antagonisms are fought out, with few exceptions, below (52).

For João Ubaldo, as for Scott, "the people are the heroes of history".

According to Lukács, Scott's texts, like various Enlightenment historiographies, served to "demonstrate the necessity for transforming the unreasonable society of feudal absolutism" (17). The popularity among Brazilian readers of *Viva o povo brasileiro*, written during the period of abertura, on the eve of the end of twenty years of military dictatorship, owes something to their response to it as a dramatization of Brazilian history as a persistence of feudal absolutism, of a society of lords and serfs, oppressors and oppressed, João Ubaldo's readers, mostly from Brazil's dwindling middle-class, obviously believe they share with the author the same definition of this oppressed "povo" – blacks, Indians, manual laborers, the disenfranchised and themselves. This complicity between writer and reader appears most starkly in translation when, for example, "Viva nós" is alternately translated as "Long live the Brazilian people" and "Long live we".

As appealing as this shared definition of "the people" may be, its appeal and this shared belief do not make it true. .The problematic nature of João Ubaldo's rendering of Brazilian history is that he apparently shares Lukács' belief in the transparency of language and the privileged status of fiction as a truth-bearing medium. As Rorty observes, however, "anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed," and we are unable to redescribe anything through language since we cannot "step outside our language in order to compare it with something else" (75).

Although by serving as his own translator João Ubaldo has resolved the predicament of gaining a wider audience for a Portuguese-language writer without the necessity of an intermediary, the English text he has produced reveals a vision of Brazilian history as something as literal as his own translation.

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