

Censorship(s) and contradictions: the “draw” (1971/72) of Witkiewicz’s play *The Mother*.

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The theme here discussed, based on the relations between translation and censorship within the scope of Translation Studies, proposes an extension of the traditional study of translation (as a *text*) into more complex fields of knowledge, and involving deeper content. The association of the two items here analyzed is indeed a stimulating challenge for any expert in the area. Starting with the definitions, we must decide what *translation* means and what we refer to when we use the word *censorship*. We are aware that the search for a unanimous definition of the concept of translation remains inconclusive. As for censorship, as an institutionalized rule in a certain kind of society, besides the historical and contextual variance of its conception, it often occurs, in its practical use, surrounded by contradiction and incoherence, as we are about to demonstrate.

The case study in question simply aims at raising issues regarding this last characteristic (also mentioned in our title), particularly in relation to the interaction between translation and censorship as cultural practices (Pym 2006) belonging to the society into which the translation is imported, more precisely in the Portuguese theatrical life of the 1970s. It consists of the aborted project of performing the play *The Mother*, in March 1972, at the Teatro Municipal de São Luís, in Lisbon, by the Pole Witkiewicz, which had been chosen for the season of 1971-72 by the appointed director, Luíz Francisco Rebello (LFR)¹. Selected and imported into the national theatrical repertoire during the peculiar context of the so called *marcelist* period, in which censorship – although loosening up – was still framed in an institutionalized juridical and political context, the play was published in that same year, in its Portuguese translation, together with the documents concerning the prohibition of its performance and the subsequent cancellation of the production as well as the corresponding reactions. Denied theatrical performance, the translation was presented to the reading public (not to an audience) by Prelo publishers, as number 9 in the collection entitled “Repertory for an up-to-date theatre”, directed by the dramatist

¹ This case is mentioned by Rebello as “in a certain way illustrative of the situation of the Portuguese theatre under fascism”, in *Combate por um teatro de combate*, Lisbon, Seara Nova, 1977, p.33, n.7.

LFR, who was also in charge, as we have seen, of the Teatro Municipal. Significantly, the book has a subtitle on its cover: *The mother – stanislas witkiewicz and the process of the cancelled show*. The effects of censorship on the theatre could not have been more explicit: to censor clearly means to *ban* or, in a more euphemistic and also ironic way, to *cancel* a project.

At first sight, the publication might reveal a first contradiction of a system that allows, in the same year of 1972, a text to be published despite the cancellation/prohibition of the production it had been designed for. However, such peculiarity consists, as is well known today, of a characteristic of the system, which created a specific way of applying censorship to theatrical performances, always restricted by the dictatorial opinion / dictate of the Commission for the Examination and Classification of Theatrical Performances (see attachment). In this case, the prohibition of the text had been applied during the rehearsals for the play, a month before the compulsory rehearsal for the Commission of Censorship – the inevitable “censorship rehearsal” –, during which several attempts to arrive at a “solution of the problem” (Rebello 1932:133) had been carried out, all them unsuccessful. A second peculiarity must be noted: the text had been previously presented to the censors in September 1971, in its French translation, with inconclusive results, since the voting had ended up in a “draw’ with 4 votes in favour and 4 against”². Nevertheless, quoting Rebello, “it predicted further approval”³. The play’s Portuguese translation by José Palla e Carmo, presented to the censors in December, was submitted to a second evaluation which would lead to its suspension in February the following year (by a majority)⁴ and to the final ban, in March, of the production that had been the reason for its importation into the national theatrical repertoire. Another contradiction? In fact, in translational terms, according to Lefevere (1992), it is the agent himself sponsoring the import (Lefevere calls him “patronage”) who finds himself implicated in an incoherent strategy: the prohibition of the production is due to its dissidence with the moral and ideological values followed by the regime, as shown by a note by the Superintendence for Popular Culture and Shows, which had “especially taken into account the problem of drug use and its ideological implications”⁵, more precisely the

² Luís Francisco Rebello, *A Mãe – Stanislas Witkiewicz e o espectáculo anulado*, Repertório para um teatro actual, coll. Directed by Luiz Francisco Rebello, Lisbon, Prelo, 1972, p.132.

³ Ibid., p.132.

⁴ Ibid., p.133.

⁵ Ibid., p.162.

resemblance between “the ideas supporting it (and those) which had dominated the struggle of the movements of May 1968, in France”⁶.

However, the text was brought to light in the context of a political openness to innovation, concretised by the import of the play (already accepted in several translations by different literary and theatrical systems, such as the French) into the programme for the 1971-72 season. This fact, in its turn, was in accordance with the appointment of Rebello as director of the theatre, following an invitation by the Mayor of Lisbon. The season, proposed by the director and approved by the Mayor, was innovatory and included José Régio’s *A Salvação do Mundo*, Stanislas Witkiewicz’s *The Mother*, Gomes de Amorim’s *Figados de Tigre* and Anton Tchekov’s *Platonov*. The non-progressive nature of Portuguese theatrical life and the need for updating the repertoire are issues frequently remarked on by the cultural discourse of that time, which is quite patent, for instance, in the historiography of the Portuguese theatre. Such justification can be found, of course, in *História do teatro português*, by the same Rebello⁷, who, during a conference with the Secretary of State for Information, and already as the director of the Teatro Municipal, had “shown the need for changing the censorship criteria, which had impeded the indispensable renewal of (...) theatre”⁸. We shall nevertheless see that the invitation to, as well as the acceptance of, the job by a dramatist attached to a progressive view of theatre, and also to the opposition to the regime, will eventually be subjected to a kind of moral censorship by certain voices close to the political power as well as by some opponents to the regime. As if doubling the administrative censorious process, these are positions that, once again, reveal the complexity of the phenomenon of censorship and its application.

A third aspect may attract the interest of the translator. Despite the minor relevance of this study’s comparative text analysis, one should underline the fact – undeniably revealing, in sociological terms – that this is an indirect translation, made, as often happened in Portugal, from the previous French version, therefore coming from a culture traditionally admired by the receiving society. But should such

⁶ Ibid., p.158.

⁷ Expressions such as “update of the Portuguese theatre”, “revelation of new authors”, “renovation of the repertoire” appear throughout the chapter dedicated to the post-war period, pointing out censorship as the main obstacle to performing Portuguese authors’ theatrical works (Rebello, *História do Teatro português*, 4th ed. reviewed and enlarged, Lisbon, Europa-América, 1989, pp.131-146). See also the section “Fases de um combate” in Rebello 1977.

⁸ Rebello, 1972, p.132.

admiration not precisely have favoured the import of the text? This matter raises the issue of the cause-effect relationship in the interpretation or explanation of the phenomenon of translation. In our present attempt to understand this translation of *The Mother*, we are brought to re-evaluate the use of the so-called “cultural” explanation regarding the specific case of the importation and translation of this play, which, coming from the French cultural system, was meant to play an innovatory role in the Portuguese system, ending up, though, by producing the opposite effect and by being rejected because of the same factor... We realize that the inter-literary relations as an explanatory cultural factor are not a homogeneous fact, especially in censorship contexts in which social factors (here represented by the agents involved) might struggle against and contradict the cultural factors.

Let us now focus on the description of the way in which the published work presents and promotes the previously mentioned *process*, which is reported throughout the debates which such prohibition had given rise to among many sections of Portuguese society between March and April. Such a tendency seems to disregard the very publication of the translation. In fact, a first reading shows that the text itself only fills 82 of the total 242 pages, that is, a third of the total amount. Such a proportion illustrates, however, the importance the author gives to the space dedicated to the *corpus* of texts that compose an anthology of the arguments made by the main protagonists, which seem to us to be good examples of the consequences, not only direct but also indirect, of censorship on the whole cultural life it fell upon. Actually, the peculiar interest of the published book consists of the documented broadcasting of the whole case, from the selection of the work to its reception – or to its theatrical non-reception and to its correspondent (and controversial) marginalisation from cultural life. With responsibility assumed by the main protagonist in the case from the introduction of the piece into the receiving culture, the publication (and publicity) of this case imposes itself on all reported facts, thus becoming a *text* as a whole, moving from the literary or theatrical field into the ideological or political one.

Let us now look at the organization of the published work, which, as we have just mentioned, since it consists of a published translation, clearly moves away from standard patterns by means of the importance given to the paratextual display. The book comprises the translated text, presented together with its context of production and reception – which we shall here consider as a *macrotext* (Pym 2006) – and provides the reader with factual data concerning the selection, importation and

publication of the work, at the same time adding other facts related to the actions integrating a previous process of communication within the field of theatre, now interrupted and *cancelled*. Considering this as a whole, we can distinguish the compiled texts according to three corresponding actions: the translation – a way of rewriting as a linguistic and textual practice, subject to the correspondent censorship/prohibition – of a play proposed for a theatrical repertoire. Now published, it was previously included (*selected* according to Toury's patterns) in a municipal theatre's cultural programme, under the responsibility of a political entity represented by the local power (see above); the production of a show – a way of rewriting as an artistic practice, constructed with non-textual components (staging, set and costumes) – with a view to its performance, which will be prohibited by censorship after the compulsory rehearsal before the Censorship Commission (Rebello 1972:133); the book's publication – uncensored – as a work comprising the publication of the translation and a significant number of documents organized on a chronological basis, either prior to or following the cancellation of the production, and expressed in both texts published in the press and texts still unpublished.

In accordance with the presentation of this case, as is reported by the published work, in sociological terms it is possible to point out the specificity of the roles played by the authors of the texts according to each one's position and function as intervening agents in the process. Thus, the relevance of Rebello's position must be underlined: as editor of the collection, he is responsible for the selection and organization of the texts for the book's publication, and, as director of the Teatro de São Luís, he is responsible for the selection of the play for the season of 1972. In fact, this is highly relevant to the matter: besides introducing a problem that is specifically theatrical, in which the translation of a play is based on its eventual performance, it links two ways of receiving the same text, although publication is the response to the cancellation of the show, with its corresponding effects on theatrical life. Thus, as editor of the collection, LFR writes two introductory texts: an "Introduction to Witkiewicz" (p.9 to 20) and a "Chronology of Witkiewicz's theatre" (p. 21 to 24), followed by the play's translation (p. 25 to 107). LFR's introduction starts with a question: "What is a repertoire for an updated theatre supposed to mean?", an expression that provides the title for the Prelo collection and that characterizes the anthological ensemble, in which are included contemporary authors: Sastre, Pinter, Tone Brulin, authors from the modern Portuguese theatre, and also Shakespeare and

Gorki. The word “updated” does not refer here to the simple chronological situation of works, but to the opposition between an “ephemeral” present time and a “permanent” present time of texts which, like the one by Witkiewicz, Rebello considers as “master work(s) of a permanently updated theatre” (p.20). The explicit reference to Vito Pandolfi’s history of theatre (p.18), still recent at that time, enables an erudite and international consecration, under the sign of theoretical and methodological modernity in theatrical historiography, in accordance with the position of the collection’s author regarding the proposed selection. However, according to Rebello, “updated” means first of all “innovatory”. As proof, there is the inclusion of extensive references to texts such as Witkiewicz’ essay, from 1920, published in 1923: *Introduction to the Theory of Pure Form in Theatre*, which points out the violent tone used by the dramatist when he proposes “to strangle all spectators” (p.15). Innovatory at its time, the play *The Mother*, written in 1924, will be published only in 1962, two years before its first public presentation in Poland. Its aesthetics corresponds to the anti-naturalist reaction in the 20th century theatre, but for Rebello, “it came up too soon”, the writer of the preface associating it with the theses of Artaud (p.15) and Brecht (p.16, n.2). These are data that allow the establishment of a comparison between the anti-innovation reaction in Portugal, underlining the fact that the play is “presented to the Portuguese public in its literary form – thus unilaterally –⁹, and in post-1945 Poland, pointing out the “aesthetic rigidity (and not only this...) of the Stalinist period (which) did not encourage the rediscovery of the theatre of this fascinating inventor.” On the contrary, the writer of the preface tells the reader that that same work had already been translated and performed in several countries: Poland, Germany, Belgium, France, Italy and Brazil. Witkiewicz’s play, according to this text, was included in the publication programme of the collection before being chosen as an integral part of the repertoire for the 1972 season of the Teatro Municipal de São Luís along with Tchekov, Régio and Gomes de Amorim. Here, the preface writer speaks as a programme-maker and explains his goal, as he speaks of the “updating (each day more necessary – and each day more difficult) of our theatre”, that is, the “innovation” that had become impossible in the theatre, on stage – thus legitimising the publication of the dossier on how and why that prohibition took place.

⁹ Ibid., p.9

Next, there is a second group of texts by agents associated with the problem of the staging of the text which, extending his job as a theatre director by committing himself to the production of the show, LFR introduces as four documents concerned with the show's staging, giving voice or visibility to the artists involved. After a "list of credits" with the names of the performers (p. 109 to 110), more appropriate to a theatre programme, there are some "Notes for the staging of *The Mother*" (p. 111 to 114) signed by Artur Ramos, who, as the stage manager, presents the general guidelines – "The starting point" – for his work which will follow the "compromise" between the respect for an avant-garde text, though written in 1924, and its updating. Written after the prohibition, the text on "The sets and costumes for the play *The Mother*" (p. 115 to 117) by Maurício de Vasconcelos, mentions the "frustration" caused by the fact that the work "fulfil its aim – to communicate with the public", again taking up the theme already referred to by Rebello (see above), and, finally, closes the dossier on the "cancelled" show with photographs of rehearsals, a model of the set and drawings of the costumes (p. 119-129). The remaining pages of the book, from 131 to 247, narrate the episodes of the "process" from May 1971 to April 1972, opening precisely with "Chronology of the events" (p. 131 to 135), unsigned, in which emphasis is put on LFR's personal journey, his appointment as director of the theatre section of the Teatro Municipal de São Luís after the Mayor's invitation in August 1971, his resignation in March 1972, and the different reactions it caused, as revealed in the documents that were published afterwards. Belonging to many different categories (interviews, letters, articles, official notes, interventions by deputies in the National Assembly), they represent three textual and discursive sub-groups. The first one, with texts written by the stage manager, by the director of the Teatro Municipal de São Luís and by the President of the Portuguese League for Mental Health, includes the transcription of the "nuclear part" of "An interview" (p. 137 to 139) given by Artur Ramos in January 1972, "which gave rise to controversial and abusive interpretations"; the facsimile of a handwritten letter by João Fragoso Mendes (JFM), from the Portuguese League for Mental Health, entitled "Declaration" (p.141 to 142) and Letters to the Mayor by Luís Francisco Rebello (LFR) and Artur Ramos (AR). A second group, reproducing the news of the prohibition of *The Mother*, published in the press (p.151 to 201), presents opposing arguments on censorship, with "Two notes by the Superintendence of Shows and three letters", by LFR, JFM and AR (p.157 to 164) and "Comments on the prohibition of *The Mother*"(p. 165 to

192) with texts published in the national and foreign press and others, unpublished at that time (like the article by Artur Ramos (p. 175 to 180) for the magazine *Seara Nova*). But, most of all, it exposes, in critical terms, the issue of the relations between creators and power in the context of that time, in which the “censored” suffers a double punishment: (“Some difficulties” – p. 181 to 186). The inclusion of “A marginal incident”, despite eventual marginalisation as far as the author is concerned, widens the distance between the case of *The Mother* and certain positions adopted by other creators (p. 193 to 201). The last group gathers, from page 203 to page 247, the testimony of the consequences of this case for national political life with the “Debate at the National Assembly of April 14th 1972”(p.203 to 220), “Consequences of the assembly debate and a protest” (p. 221 to 237) and a petition “Concerning a campaign” (p. 239 to 247), from which we underline the commitment of the regime’s politicians in defending censorship as a “carrier of culture, at the service of Performances in general and the Theatre in particular”¹⁰.

From the texts we have just mentioned, the importation and prohibition of *The Mother* in relation to the repertoire of the Teatro de São Luís in 1972 is not a linear story in its progression through the Portuguese cultural system. No further should we need to go but to consider the initial delay in the censorship which was to be applied to the text, which unfolded as two different versions – one in French, the other in Portuguese – together with the complexity of the ideological debate the case generated concerning the problems of the intervention of creators in Portuguese theatrical life (particularly through the acceptance of official positions); concerning the rules of the game such cooperation represents; or still, following Alexandre Babo’s essay, concerning the very use of censorship in “exceptional cases”, an expression that would be taken up again in astonishment by the author of the publication. The core of our analysis, although not arising from a comparative study of the play’s translation, has found in the documents collected and published some elements that help the understanding of the relations between translation and censorship. According to the contextual factors involved, the interpretation of the position and procedures of the intervening agents revealed the ambiguity of the effects of the pseudo-opening and liberalization of a political-cultural system of totalitarian inspiration, the “Primavera marcelista”. In this analysis, which has

¹⁰ Rebello, 1972, p.239.

proposed a social and cultural approach to the relations between translation and censorship, we gave the word *cultural* a meaning that strictly concerns the discursive production that can be seen in the Portuguese political-ideological system of the 1970s. In sociological terms, we considered the group of the agents involved, who were in charge of certain functions within the theatrical system, and their behaviour towards the interferences of the political system – namely through the intervention of censorship, which, as we have seen, was at the origin of contradictory debates in many areas of society at that time, from the literary, editorial, theatrical, cultural, journalistic, to the religious, medical and parliamentary areas.

Thus, our goal was to describe and attempt to interpret the thematic and ideological content of the publication that provided the reading public, in the same year, both with the translated text, the facts considered relevant by the author of the publication, and the reactions caused by the censorial decision to ban the production, also selected by the person responsible for the collection. Through the proposed articulation between factual data and discursive positions, we believe a second action– which derives from the production of the translation within the theatrical system and now transferred to the literary system – may be considered as being a significant part of the whole *process* of the censorial action. Because of its peculiarity in the ensemble of the editorial production regarding theatre at the time of the prohibition of the performance of *The Mother – repulsive comedy in two acts and an epilogue*, the edition of the book presents features whose relevance will allow – in further analysis – the conditions of theatrical translation and creation in Portugal to be shown when considering the intervention of censorship in Portuguese social and cultural life during the period preceding its extinction in 1974, and also to reveal, from the analysis of the actions of the *process* caused by the failed importation of a play that became available only to a potential reader, the tension and contradictions that characterize the society of the time.

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