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Report on the dissertation “Ideology, Censorship, Indirect Translations and Non-Translation: Czech Literature in 20th - century Portugal”, by Mgr. Jaroslav Špírk

As the author of this Statement of Opinion, over the last few years I have been able to follow up the work done by Mgr. Jaroslav Špírk and which is now being presented, and I would like to express my great pleasure in seeing it finished.

Without any doubt, the topic he has chosen is a novelty as much in Translation Studies and as in Reception Studies owing to the fact that it deals with the literary relations, by means of translation, between two peripheral or semi-peripheral European languages and cultures (and not, as is frequently the case, between two languages and cultures of equal standing or between a dominant one and a dominated one, to use P. Casanova’s terminology). A glaring omission in research, therefore, has now been filled. It is only fair to say that right from the start, the enterprise was a risky one which consequently deserved to be favourably received. On the one hand, there are no previous studies that could have been assessed and taken up anew, thereby providing the researcher with a safety-net. On the other hand, he started from square one where it was not possible to predict the quantity and quality of the materials he would have to collect. Indeed, in itself, this task meant spending a lot of time and energy. Furthermore, mention should be made of the way Špírk recognised the fact, for example on page 137, that it was very difficult to find available sources in Portugal for a certain kind of research. Nevertheless, there is no end to the questions we may ask as regards his topic: two cultures, the Portuguese and the Czech (Slovakian), neither of which belongs to the same linguistic family nor shares the same cultural heritage, now being placed together and studied in the light of an extremely concrete form - translation - of relating and interchanging them.

In considering the period under scrutiny – the 20th century, when the two countries lived under dictatorial regimes for various decades, regimes that happened to oppose each other it is true, although they bore some remarkable resemblances – Špírk’s decision to follow a view of translation that mainly envisaged ideological aspects and social contexts, has subsequently proved itself to be a wise one. In accordance with this resolve, Chapter 1 dealing with conceptual research includes a thorough discussion on ‘ideology’ and ‘censorship’. The remaining points handled in this first chapter are based on the characteristics of the collected *corpus* which begs reflection upon indirect translation, non-translation, the canon and world literature, paratexts and the medium-sized languages and socio-cultures (the latter being the terms in which the two cultures under study are referred to). All these subjects are treated with great scientific rigour: concepts are presented and followed by their definition, after which a review of the literature is made and a conclusion drawn. This chapter, mainly in what concerns the review of the literature, indicates great depth of knowledge about the studies



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pertaining to each item. Špírk shows that he is able to select and make a critical analysis of these studies as regards what throws light on his topic.

A few questions raised by Chapter I:

See p.35: in spite of his defensive attitude as regards ideology and his concern to use as objective a descriptive method as possible, it should nevertheless be pointed out that ideology is not merely present in the opinions that are expressed, but rather, the entire discourse about translation may be seen as ideological.

See p.59: it is true that indirect translation is a case of indirect reception. However, the idea that “it distorts and misrepresents what it shows, appearances being doubly deceptive here” forgets that the translation original, as we see it today, is everything but a stable object and neither does it have an everlastingly fixed meaning. On the contrary, a text only takes on meaning in the act of reading. Seen in this light, the notion of manipulation which is so popular in Translation Studies is not convincing as ‘manipulation’ works along the assumption that the right meaning was there to start off with. This is why Špírk’s sentence, “Indirect translations, as the epitome of indirect reception, are thus an exacerbated form of ‘what gets lost in translation’” (p.60) should be reformulated. There is wide consensus today about translation being a negotiation between losses and gains.

While still on the subject of indirect translation which, until recently, was so frequent in Portuguese culture, it would be interesting to put forward a method for studying it, above all owing to the many cases in which it is difficult to identify the respective source text. Indeed, it should be possible to analyse these translations, otherwise we would have to exclude a large number of texts from being studied.

In the following chapter (Material and Methodology), the arguments favouring the decision to use Popovič’s methodological and theoretical concepts are very convincing. The case Špírk makes for reclaiming Popovič’s (as well as Levý’s) many works about translation thus adding to the bibliography of international Translation Studies, is highly commendable.

For the same reasons as those given above, however, we need to question Popovič’s methodological tool for studying the literary work and its translation, which has been highly praised by Špírk as regards “his famous concept of ‘shifts of expression’” (p.128). Once again, when talking about a ‘shift’, it presupposes another term of comparison composed of an undeniably fixed meaning. This idea of the original text is fairly difficult to accept today. Obviously, it does not exclude the fact that translation may make an erratic interpretation of the source text.

Perhaps the strongest argument in favour of using the tools proposed by Popovič and Levý has to do with the credibility, or rather the scientificity, that they confer on Translation Studies.



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Within this context, Špírk shows that he is well-aware that the two authors may be underestimated owing to their prescriptive approach (based on their insistence on the 'intertextual invariant' which means "the semantic core retained in the metatext", p.124). Be that as it may, at a time when the concept of translation has become transdisciplinary and is used metaphorically in several social sciences, I believe that this proposal is very pertinent and worth exploring because it may lead to identifying a translated text (or to use Popovič's word, the metatext) and moreover, to a concept of translation that necessarily includes linguistic diversity (I am referring here to the ongoing discussion about "cultural translation").

The third chapter concerns the historical and political setting of Czechoslovakia and Portugal in the 20th century. Although this sort of contextualising is doubtlessly necessary in a dissertation based on this topic, apart from involving an enormous amount of work in terms of data gathering, it demands a special ability to synthesise and requires constant thought divided between the amount of information and the choice of facts to talk about. On the other hand, it also involves carefully following a narrative thread that builds up its own view of events. Where Špírk has written about Portuguese history and censorship, he has attained a balanced view and deserves praise, particularly as his knowledge of both the language and Portuguese culture has only been recently acquired. However, it may also be said that sometimes the facts are enumerated more while the narrative develops less.

Worth highlighting in this chapter, is the periodization proposal for Czech-Portuguese relations (pp.191-196), which should not be over-looked in future research on the subject.

There is a question that has not been answered and which arouses curiosity: two references have been made to the cut in diplomatic relations between Portugal and Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. Why? Are there no sources?

Chapter 4 (Czech Literature in Portugal) starts by referring to cases of non-translation by using the Portuguese Censor's Reports as its basis. They tell us about 33 books originally written in Czech or Slovakian, or books dealing with subjects specific to Czechoslovakia which were not authorised to circulate in Portugal or whose translation was forbidden. It should be mentioned that Špírk tried to collect as much information as he could in order to identify the books (the Censor's Reports failed to give these data) and their respective authors. He has succeeded in gathering data about the originals and the translations of the publications submitted to the Censors, which acts as an important contribution in reconstructing international book exchanges. The various statistics presented here help the reader to retain the main pieces of information (for example, it is important to learn that "1990 was 'the year of Czech literature in Portugal', with 4(6) books translated into European Portuguese and published in Portugal in that year." p.245).



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I suggest that it is worthwhile looking into the work that was translated after the Carnation Revolution. It is an issue directly concerned with any sort of study focussing on censored books during a particular period: is what a culture loses because it had no access to certain cultural productions ever recoverable or not? Of course, the answer depends upon the actual value of the work that has been censored.

Any dissertation on Translation Studies should analyse the quality of the translations themselves. This is what has been done in Section 4.3, "Micro-textual Contrastive Analysis". The object of study here, and rightly so, is a piece of Czech literature from the canon translated to European Portuguese in the 20th century: Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*. As regards the methodology, Špírk followed the expected procedures: data on the author and the development of the work, an inventory of translation difficulties, other translations of the same original, the evaluation of a recent Portuguese academic study of the book (by K. Štěpánková), and lastly, an examination of the Portuguese translation itself starting with the respective paratexts and then following it up with an analysis of selected passages. The analysis was based on Popovič's method and terminology and was made very carefully and clearly.

Although these passages were dealt with in a systematic way according to the subject matter, thus allowing us to perceive the reason underpinning each choice, should it not have begun by expressly discussing the selection criteria? Why were these passages chosen and not others?

One of the conclusions about Alexandre Cabral's Portuguese translation of *The Good Soldier Švejk* deserves particular attention; Špírk mentions that it "does not seem to have been subjected to any form of formal censorship" (p. 280). As there was every likelihood that the book contained censurable aspects, it might well indicate that despite everything, the Portuguese censor's eagle-eye gave translators sufficient leeway in which to work. Nevertheless, it is clear that hasty conclusions cannot be drawn on the basis of only one example.

The final pages of the dissertation where questions are raised as regards future research on the topic are extremely valuable to Translation Studies in Portugal. I sincerely hope that Mgr. Jaroslav Špírk's interest in the subject will continue and that he himself will undertake the projects he has proposed. Among them, would be the other side of the coin where a study is made of the Czech translations of Portuguese and Lusophone authors' work.

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