

“Neither Erudite Nor Didactic”: José Bento’s Translation of Spanish Literature Into Portuguese

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Abstract This article focuses on the long list of translations by the Portuguese poet and translator José Bento (1933-2019), considering his selection, translation and paratextual comment of several Spanish literary works, and eventually taking into account Bento was also a published poet, with clear ideas about literary reading and creative writing. This will allow us to discuss some specificities of the translation of Spanish literature into Portuguese, as well as Bento’s conceptualization of the translator’s task as a reader and re-writer of the Iberian literary tradition.

Keywords Portuguese translation of Spanish literature. José Bento. Translation and paratext. Literary canon.

Sommario The Bento case. – Iberian literary dialogues and translation. – José Bento on translation and literary writing



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1 The Bento Case

During his lifelong career as a translator, José Bento (1933-2019) came to be known as a remarkable expert in Spanish literature and a unique agent in its dissemination in Portugal. In 1996, after the publication of one of his anthologies of *Siglo de Oro* poetry, Eloísa Álvarez referred to him as “the Bento case”, and described his dedication to the translation of Spanish literature as an example of “heroic titanism”:

Quase cinquenta anos dedicados à poesia hispana, com a qual Bento mantém uma relação espiritual circular, que o leva a rever as suas versões antes de uma segunda edição sempre melhorada, deram os seus frutos [...] [que] não só fazem do “caso Bento”, como nós gostamos de dizer, um exemplo heróico de titanismo, como possivelmente nos encontramos perante o poeta responsável pelo facto de que nenhuma outra literatura tenha atingido uma tão sistemática, extensa, inteligente e apaixonada representação noutra língua. (Álvarez 1996, 212)

In this fragment, Álvarez underscores several key aspects: first, Bento was a careful and meticulous literary translator, always striving to improve his versions and often commenting on his task; secondly, his persistent and engaged work provided a “systematic, large, bright and passionate”¹ picture of Spanish literature made available in Portuguese language by the end of the twentieth century; and last but not least, Bento was himself a published poet, and him being a literary author added yet another layer to his complex profile as a translator and cultural mediator. All these issues must be taken into consideration when analysing José Bento’s legacy in the context of Iberian translation dynamics.

In this article, I propose to develop a comprehensive reading of “the Bento case” in the panorama of late twentieth-century Iberian literary dialogues and translation. After a brief account of this panorama and of the specificities of literary translation from Spanish into Portuguese, I will first comment on the list of published translations by José Bento and then analyse his stance concerning the translator’s task, eventually also considering his ideas on literary reading and creative writing. The close reading of several paratextual elements will guide this analysis, in line with Kathryn Batchelor description of paratexts as “places of potential translation or translator visibility” (2018, 32). When delving into José Bento’s self-conscious visibility in his books of translated Spanish literature, we come to the conclusion the translator aimed at situating these volumes in the difficult (and

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all translations into English are by the Author.

perhaps paradoxical) threshold between erudition, pedagogical concerns and the promotion of reading for pleasure. Moreover, through this analysis it becomes even more clear the translator's enduring engagement as a reader and re-writer of the Iberian literary tradition.

2 Iberian Literary Dialogues and Translation

One important line of research in the field of Iberian Studies has been the identification of cultural and literary relations between the authors belonging to the different literary and linguistic systems co-existing in the Peninsula. Of course, from a Comparative Studies perspective, we may also 'build the relation' and study comparatively literary works by authors who did not know nor read each other; when proposing this kind of relation, we often aim at stressing the idea that those artworks share some common Iberian formal aspect, or theme, or concern, which overcomes the specific national or regional system they were produced in. Both methodological approaches (i.e., to describe the actual and manifest literary dialogues, or to put forward the latent relations between the literary phenomena) are necessary for the field of Iberian Studies, and should be combined even when it seems that we are dealing with rather obvious pragmatic issues. Within the Iberian literary panorama, closeness and distance have been shaped in so many ways that all layers and modalities of relationship should be considered.

When addressing the matter of literary dialogues among Iberian authors, one tends to focus on similar topics or recurrent genres, trying to find mutual knowledge or aesthetic influences among poets, novelists, and intellectuals. In order to identify this mutual knowledge and 'influence', one often pays attention to letter exchange between authors, or to reviews on specific works from one another, or quotations and epigraphs – and sometimes also translations. Even when the authors are not professional translators, they sometimes engage in literary translation exercises that signal both aesthetic appreciation and linguistic commitment. For example, one may recall one recent case of (rather unexpected) poetic translation. In his 2018 novel *Feliz Final*, the Spanish novelist Isaac Rosa (b. 1974) introduced two poems by the Portuguese poet Eugénio de Andrade as epigraphs at the beginning and at the end of the novel. Despite the previous existence of published translations of both texts, Isaac Rosa provided his own Spanish translation of the poems, thus presenting himself as a reader in Portuguese, and as a translator.²

I contend that this is a relevant element in the creative literary system of the contemporary Iberian Peninsula, even if private, random,

² For a detailed analysis of this novel by Isaac Rosa, see Fernandes 2023.

and sporadic translation experiments (as this one by Rosa) do not build a broad dynamic of literary mutual knowledge. Nevertheless, these particular cases should be acknowledged as a first step in this process; in another sphere, published translations in well-identified volumes do have the chance to reach a larger audience and become recognized by the common reader. It is true that mutual understanding among Iberian romance languages may be sometimes possible in informal oral situations, but literary reading is certainly more demanding, and published translations have become a crucial element in the functioning of Iberian literary communities at least since the early twentieth century (as shown by recent studies such as Gallén, Lafarga, Pegenaute 2010, Poch, Julià 2020, or Gimeno Ugalde, Pinto, Fernandes 2021).

Translation studies have emphasized how translation phenomena are permeated by all sorts of power relations: the decision to translate and publish any text implies a judgment about that text and becomes a way of accepting it (and wishing to have it accepted) in the target culture. Translators, publishers, and sponsors are all key agents in this process of legitimization, consecration, or canonization of literary texts by granting them the opportunity or the privilege of becoming available in another language, to a different and larger reading audience. These general remarks about translation dynamics must be adapted to the specific situation we find in Portugal when it comes to the translation of Spanish literature.³

In the year 2000, in the article "A tradução da literatura espanhola em Portugal (1940-1990)" (The Translation of Spanish Literature in Portugal), Dionisio Martínez Soler pointed out the asymmetric positions of the Spanish and the Portuguese literary and cultural systems, which actually mirror other historical asymmetries in terms of political and economic importance of the two Iberian countries. Given this unbalanced situation, Martínez Soler identified the main criteria that seemed to guide the selection of Spanish authors and titles to be translated and published in Portugal during the second half of the twentieth century:

A tradução para português de uma obra literária que pertence a um sistema literário considerado rival em "visibilidade e presença" mundiais, que nem sempre retribui as "dívidas" com importações literárias recíprocas e que está escrita numa língua considerada acessível, precisa de uma justificação, de uma legitimação que a inclua no corpus a traduzir - e portanto a preservar e canonizar.

³ A broad overview concerning literary translation from Spanish into Portuguese may be found *e.g.* in the studies and historical texts gathered in the volumes edited by Xosé Manuel Dasilva (2005-2010).

Uma primeira aproximação parece mostrar que a legitimação é efectuada através de três critérios principais: o facto dessas [sic] obras pertencerem ao cânone do sistema literário espanhol, a sua canonização no polissistema literário ocidental e, por último, a sua relação com temas e/ou autores especificamente portugueses. (Martínez Soler 2000, 81)

In the first sentence of this fragment, Martínez Soler quotes and elaborates on some ideas expressed by the Portuguese intellectual Eduardo Lourenço in his essay *Nós e a Europa ou as duas razões*. Lourenço (1988, 83) mentioned the "visibility and presence" of Spanish culture to build the contrast with the less visible Portuguese culture worldwide. Along with this contrast, Martínez Soler identifies also some sort of cultural rivalry, and hence concludes that, in the late twentieth-century, translating Spanish literature in Portugal would mean building a bridge to a 'rival' system, which was, at the same time, very close in linguistic terms. Both aspects (the cultural rivalry and the linguistic closeness) would probably favor non-translation,⁴ and consequently all translation projects from Spanish would require 'justification' and 'legitimation'. In short, Portuguese publishers and translators need to rely on strong arguments and clear criteria in order to translate and publish Spanish literature.

According to Martínez Soler, the selection of texts and authors from the 'rival' Spanish system seems to be driven by both centripetal and centrifugal movements: on the one hand, the agents look outside and prefer the texts recognized and canonized in the alien systems (be them the 'Spanish literary system' or the 'Western literary polysystem'), and on the other hand, facing inwards, they turn to the center of the Portuguese system, and choose Spanish texts having some sort of relation with Portugal and with 'specifically' Portuguese authors or issues. This very last criterium is probably the most Iberian one, because it relies on the assumption that there are relevant Spanish texts and authors that are already somehow close to the Portuguese system, and that is why they are worth translating. But if we think it over, this is also the most redundant argument, since the translation processes are thus 'feeding' some Intra-Iberian literary relationships that already exist, and not truly creating new knowledge or new bonds within the Iberian polysystem.

All these criteria seem to have been involved in the case of the many translations prepared and published by José Bento, but above all the

⁴ For an attentive conceptualization of 'non-translation' phenomena, see *e.g.* the seminal work by João Ferreira Duarte (2000). When addressing the topic of 'language closeness', Duarte affirms: "it is beyond doubt that language closeness played a major role in explaining the empirically observable scarcity of translations from Spanish and Latin-American literatures into Portuguese before the 80s as compared to other European languages" (2000, 97).

translator affirmed that he was guided by a personal drive towards the texts he appreciated. In an interview conducted in 2013 by Miguel Filipe Mochila, Bento stated: "Nunca tive a ambição de ser um divulgador. Traduzi sempre simplesmente porque gosto e o que gosto de traduzir" (I never had the ambition of becoming a promoter. I always translated simply because I enjoy it and what I enjoy translating) (Mochila 2013, 198). In spite of José Bento's dismissal of any deliberate role as a promoter of Spanish literature in Portugal, the truth is that his long list of published translations makes him inevitably a genuine Iberian literary and cultural mediator. A close scrutiny of this list and of some relevant paratexts will help us understand why the translator preferred to be seen above all as someone reading and translating for pleasure.

3 José Bento, a Translator of Spanish Literature Into Portuguese

Starting in 1958, with the translation of *Platero e eu*, by Juan Ramón Jiménez, Bento's repertoire of publications of translated Spanish (and some Spanish American) literature spans over fifty years, until *Os trabalhos de Persiles e Segismunda*, by Miguel de Cervantes, published in 2014.⁵ These translations came out mostly during the two decades between 1985 and 2005, and two titles are important milestones: the monumental and groundbreaking *Antologia da Poesia Espanhola Contemporânea* (Anthology of Contemporary Spanish Literature), in 1985, and the emblematic *O Engenhoso Fidalgo D. Quixote de la Mancha* (The Story of Don Quixote de la Mancha), by Miguel de Cervantes, in 2005. Along with many volumes dedicated to specific authors, three other broad anthologies ought to be mentioned: *Antologia da Poesia Espanhola do "Siglo de Oro". Renascimento* (Anthology of "Siglo de Oro" Spanish Poetry. Renaissance) (1993), *Antologia da Poesia Espanhola do "Siglo de Oro". Barroco* (Anthology of "Siglo de Oro" Spanish Poetry. Barroque) (1996), and *Antologia da poesia espanhola das origens ao século XIX* (Anthology of Spanish Poetry from the Origins to the Nineteenth Century) (2001). And one should mention Bento was awarded several prizes both as a poet and as a translator,⁶ his pivotal role in the dissemination of Spanish literature in Portugal being often acknowledged on these occasions.

⁵ Bento's translation of *Vida de Lazarinho de Tormes e de suas Venturas e Desventuras* was published in 2020, already posthumously.

⁶ For a rather thorough description of José Bento's works and prizes, see *e.g.* the obituary by Luis Miguel Queiróz published in the Portuguese newspaper *Público*, on 27 October 2019. And to get firsthand knowledge of José Bento's ideas on literature and translation, see *e.g.* the interview conducted by Miguel Filipe Mochila, in the summer of 2013, and published in the journal *Suroeste*.

The list of translations by José Bento is an Iberian list – not because it mirrors any kind of previous Iberian dialogues, but because it builds for Portuguese readers a systematic path towards Spanish literature, bringing together the “Siglo de Oro” and contemporary authors to draw a comprehensive picture of Spanish literature made available in Portuguese. And this was a truly Iberian dialogue in motion, as has been noted on several occasions. For example, in her review of the *Antologia da Poesia Espanhola Contemporânea*, Maria de Lourdes Belchior stressed: “Bem útil é este instrumento de ligação entre Espanha e Portugal” (This linking instrument between Spain and Portugal is most useful) (Belchior 1987, 113). In this line, and being a conscious mediator between the Iberian literary systems, José Bento also referred to his work as an inevitably incomplete contribution to a proper mutual knowledge. In the preface to this same anthology, he explained:

As notas sobre cada poeta foram reduzidas ao indispensável, por economia de espaço; reconhece-se porém que, no actual estado de conhecimento da poesia espanhola entre nós, deveriam ser mais desenvolvidas e deseja-se que isso seja possível um dia. (Bento 1985, 7)

This implicit lament over the scarce knowledge of Spanish poetry “among us” comes together with the wish that an expanded version of the book “may one day be possible”. During the following decades, José Bento’s persistent work as a translator of Spanish literature into Portuguese was a continuous attempt to overcome the lament and to accomplish the development of this knowledge.

There are several aspects worth noting in Bento’s work. First of all, the publication of the volumes resulted many times from a long and difficult editorial process, and we may find testimonies about the translator’s personal engagement in several projects. In the above-mentioned interview, Bento explained that “durante muitos anos não havia editores para as traduções que eu fazia” (for many years there were no publishers to the translations I made) (Mochila 2013, 198). In the introduction to the 1985 anthology, he recalled the book was ready in 1976 and since then he had tried to have it published, namely by means of “morosas diligências” (lengthy endeavours) to get support from Portuguese institutions (Bento 1985, 33). The anthology was eventually published thanks to the support provided by the Spanish ministry of culture (Dirección General del Libro y Bibliotecas del Ministerio de Cultura de España), and indeed most of the volumes that came out during the 1980s and the 1990s benefited from this kind of institutional sponsoring from Spain.⁷ In view of these circum-

⁷ Most of the translations published by Bento in the publishing house Assírio & Alvim benefited from this sponsoring, and on some occasions they were bilingual editions,

stances, it becomes clear the importance of both the translator's engagement and the possibility of getting institutional support to have literary translations published, and José Bento was indeed an active agent in the editorial projects.

Another relevant aspect in Bento's translations is the noticeable quantity of paratexts that most of his books offer. Very often, in addition to the translation, Bento provided his readers with prefaces, prologues or afterwords, with historical data and information about authors, literary genres and literary movements. Many volumes include dedications, epigraphs, lists of bibliographical references or "further readings", as well as notes (mostly endnotes) on the translation, intended to identify the sources of the translated texts and clarify all sorts of quotations or allusions.⁸ In her study on the role of paratexts in translation, Kathryn Batchelor identifies paratexts as "places of potential translation or translator visibility" (2018, 32), since the reader becomes significantly aware of the translator's agency and of the translation process when facing these added elements. In the case of José Bento, this "visibility" is closely linked to his concept of translation as a special type of reading, and to his aim of endowing the books with multiple kinds of readership.

In the prologue to the *Antologia da Poesia Espanhola do "Siglo de Oro"*. *Barroco*, the translator presented himself as just a dedicated reader who, having conducted some research in order to understand better what he was translating, had to share it with his prospective audience:

As traduções que constituem esta antologia dizem mais sobre os poetas aqui incluídos e sobre a sua época - espero - que este prólogo e as notas, que não podem ter um objectivo crítico e erudito, mas o de facilitar a leitura dos poemas aqui traduzidos, evitando ao leitor as buscas que tive de efectuar. (Bento 1996, 18-19)

Again in a rather humble stance, Bento pictures himself as a facilitator, stressing that his anthologies are not guided by strict philological criteria and do not aim at a restricted learned audience, even if they provide some research materials in the paratexts. In short, getting the readers closer to the poems and to the poets constitutes the main goal of his translation project.

as the books of poems by Garcilaso de la Vega (1986), by Francisco de Quevedo (1987), by Santa Teresa de Ávila (1989), by San Juan de la Cruz (1990) or by Fray Luis de León (1992).

⁸ Just an example: the 2001 anthology includes an "Afterword" (727-8), "Notes About the Time Periods and the Poets" (731-68), "Notes About the Poems" (769-93) and the "Sources of the Translated Poems" (794-801).

4 José Bento On Translation and Literary Writing

Despite being very much aware of the peculiarities and the difficulties concerning the translation and the publication of Spanish literature in Portugal, Bento chose to present himself primarily as an enthusiastic reader of the texts he came to translate. In the multiple paratexts, literary pleasure was highlighted beyond any cultural activism that might be guiding his work. For example, in the short note introducing his Portuguese translation of *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, published in 2005, José Bento offered this explanation:

Quanto à minha tradução (...) fi-la sobretudo para melhor poder saborear esta obra querida, não no seu original mas em algo que também é meu. Pretendi servir o livro traduzido, cingindo-me muito à sua letra, que cifra o seu espírito, o que não foi fácil nem isento de dúvidas e receios. (Bento 2005, 11-12)

The translator described his work as a personal endeavour, which was both enjoyable and rewarding for him as a reader and as a co-author: not only the translated *Don Quijote* was "also [his]", but it granted the translator-reader the possibility of "better tasting this dear work". Moreover, in his usual humble stance, Bento asserted that he aimed at "serving" the book, keeping close to the source text, which was "not easy nor free from doubts and fears". Thus, in the remaining pages of this introduction, he thanked the opportunity to discuss his work with other translators and scholars, and mentioned several bibliographical sources that he had used when translating Cervantes' master piece.

As on many other occasions, José Bento emphasized that he considered translation just another form of reading. Therefore, the critical assessment and the background study of historical and literary contexts should also be an essential part of the translator's task. The comments and the information that he made available in prefaces and notes, in most of his volumes, became a way of sharing with the Portuguese prospective readers his own processes of discovery and interpretation. At the same time, he somehow justified his translational options, along with offering lists of further readings for those who wanted to know more about Spanish literature and culture.

All this was affirmed in a sustained modest tone, as we may see, for example, in the short "Afterword" to the *Antologia da poesia espanhola das origens ao século XIX* (Anthology of Spanish Poetry from the Origins to the Nineteenth Century), published in 2001, when Bento stated:

Esta antologia, como as outras que fiz, não tem um propósito erudito nem didáctico; e deve considerar-se que a escolha do seu

conteúdo foi condicionada pela minha capacidade de traduzir.
(Bento 2001, 728)

In line with this aim of being "neither erudite nor didactic" and complying with his "ability to translate",⁹ Bento was ultimately both erudite and didactic in his work, since he engaged for several decades in the persistent path of building a relevant collection of Spanish literature, both classical and contemporary, available in Portuguese language. It is my contention that José Bento's many published translations constitute, as a whole, pieces of honest erudition, as well as potential 'textbooks' for students of Spanish literature, and also attractive sources for Portuguese readers to get acquainted with a vast array of (often scarcely known) Spanish literary works. And the books function in a balanced way in all these rather disparate readership domains precisely because they were framed by the translator's self-positioning as 'just' an engaged reader.

In the comments scattered throughout the above mentioned paratexts, we may grasp José Bento's conceptualization of the translator's task as a reader and re-writer of the Iberian literary tradition. And significantly his ideas on translation may also be found in his own creative work as a published poet.

Bento's double condition of poet and translator was frequently underscored by critics. In an "In memoriam" text mostly dedicated to his poetry book *Sítios*, published in 2011, Fernando Martinho described Bento as a "poet-translator" and explained he would rather give "priority to the poet"¹⁰ (Martinho 2020, 186-7). Also in a review dedicated to the book *Sítios*, Rita Taborda Duarte emphasized that he was noticeably "um autor formado pelo diálogo com muitas vozes e que convoca para a sua poesia uma enraizada memória poética" (an author formed by the dialogue with many voices and who summons a deep-rooted poetic memory to his poetry) (Duarte 2011, 226). Of course, the dialogue with poetic voices happens notably when translating, and this is instrumental to understand Bento's views on the close connection between translation and creative writing.

When commenting on the influence of the translated works on his own poetry, Bento affirmed: "A tradução é um modo de ler e, lendo outros autores desse modo atento que a tradução exige, só se um tipo for muito burro é que não aprende" (Translation is a way of reading,

⁹ One should mention that this "ability to translate" was sometimes disputed in terms of linguistic accuracy by some literary reviewers, who nevertheless praised the overall task, cf. Álvarez 1994 and 1996, or Belchior 1987.

¹⁰ "Me apraz encará-lo [...] como poeta-tradutor, dando primazia ao poeta que, ele próprio, aliás, tem ajudado a deixar um pouco na sombra" (I am pleased to see him [...] as a poet-translator, giving priority to the poet who, in fact, Bento himself has helped to leave a little hidden) (Martinho 2020, 186-7).

and when reading other authors in the attentive way required by translation, only someone very stupid will not learn) (Mochila 2013, 199). This conceptualization of translation as an extremely “attentive” way of reading that inevitably provides knowledge is in line with the ideas about translation phenomena that may be found both in the above mentioned paratexts and in a few of Bento’s poems. His poetry book *Silabário*, published in 1992 and gathering poems written since the 1950s, includes many references to Iberian and Ibero-American authors, and offers some reflections on the close connection between writing, reading, and translating. The two most relevant poems from this point of view are “A Ruy Belo, pelas suas traduções de Jorge Luis Borges” (Bento 1992, 59; first published in 1984) and “Eu tradutor, traidor” (Bento 1992, 98; first published in 1986, in *Textos para Ángel Crespo*).

The first of these poems is dedicated to the Portuguese poet and translator Ruy Bello (1933-1978), and it will be worth examining the stance adopted by the subject-reader when describing - and praising - the role of the translator as a go-between. Here is poem:

A RUY BELO,
pelas suas traduções de Jorge Luis Borges

Não te procuro em versos teus somente
ou a compor teu rosto, que mal vi:
sulco diferente me conduz a ti,
que és só luz desde que és o teu poente.
Busco-te nessa pedra ou boca ardente 5
a defender o que gravaste ali,
ditado por alguém que conheci
pela cifra que abriste e nunca mente.
Trouxeste-me esse arauto sem traí-lo:
os mitos, o ser um outro, o esquecimento
que tudo sorve, pântano tranquilo. 10
Na máscara a que deste a tua voz
leio o fogo que, sendo teu, sustento:
ele e tu nesse acorde somos nós.
(Bento 1992, 59)

In this sonnet, the attention to the praised author Ruy Belo moves from his condition as a poet (“I do not look for you only in your verses”, v. 1) to his work as a translator (“I search for you in the stone or the burning mouth [...] dictated by someone I knew”, vv. 5 and 7). The translated author is here identified as the Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges, whose poetry is summarized as “the myths, being one and another, the forgetfulness | that absorbs everything, calm swamp” (vv. 9-10). But the poetic voice is addressing Ruy Belo and looking for

the face of this author as translator. The poem thus becomes a tribute to all translators who "bring" (v. 8) to the readers the "fire" (v. 13) of distant voices, which is also the fire of the intermediary's voice, and which is ultimately "supported" by the reader. The final verse brings together "him" (the author, Borges), "you" (the translator, Bello) and the reader who mingles with them both in an inevitable "we".

In the "we" ("nós") at the very end of this poem, or in the attempt to arrive at a common cultural ground, we find the best metaphor for José Bento's work as a translator of Spanish literature into Portuguese. As previously explained, his life-long career, pursuing and accomplishing both erudite and didactic aims, was tied together by a continuous defence of translation as being primarily a kind of attentive and enjoyable reading. And in his many volumes of translated Spanish literature, when multiplying the paratexts and making the translator and the translation procedures visible, José Bento managed to underscore the poetic 'fire' that must animate both literary translators and literary readers.

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