



Le Fanu, Sheridan. *Carmilla: A Vampira de Karnstein*. Trans. José Roberto O'Shea. São Paulo: Hedra, 2010.

It is impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavours, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many.

Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid's Tale*

There are no rules to guarantee the success of a literary translation, but there are a few widely-accepted influencing factors. One general assumption is that if a book is a success in England and America, like *Harry Potter*, a series of seven fantasy novels *written by* the British author J. K. Rowling, it inevitably attracts the attention in other countries. The influence of media coverage and positive reviews helps the book's international success. Another fact considered to be influential is the cinema effect, through a film adaptation, which often can result in a considerable growth in any given book's sales. Besides these three main influential factors, the story, or more precisely, the content of the book is the most determining factor to help the sales of a competently translated book.

If we first consider Bran Stoker's *Dracula*, we can see that this novel still remains an iconic element of vampire fiction not only for bringing about many of the concerns of Victorian England (decline of traditional culture in the face of modern technology, together with the decline of morality), but also for dealing with appealing horror and supernatural themes. The wide availability of and free access to translations of Stoker's *Dracula* in different languages as well as its various adaptations through other media like films and television, plays and series as well as games have inspired a variety of similar works along the decades of the centuries. Among the most contemporary examples of fictional works based on vampire stories are Stephen Edwin King's *Salem's Lot* (1975), Elizabeth Kostova's *The Historian* (2005), Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), to cite just a few. Their translations or film adaptations suggest the profound significance of ongoing exchange among languages, literatures and cultures in a civilized world with uncensored freedom of communication.

However, not many people know that despite the huge influence of *Dracula*, the masterpiece of the gothic genre, previous influential works covered the spectrum of the subject of vampires. Sheridan le Fanu's erotic novella of a lesbian vampire, *Carmilla* (1872), is said to have directly inspired Stoker's *Dracula*. It is true that Stoker improved the treatment Le Fanu gave to the vampire myth. Although Le Fanu's work fell out of interest in the early twentieth century, later on, towards the end of the previous century, his ghost story became increasingly appealing and still remains comparatively strong. This example of Victorian gothic which prevailed in literature and architecture during

the reign of Queen Victoria in Britain (1837-1901) thematises the repression of female sexuality at the time, while it marks the writer's political-philosophical schism in terms of the inner turmoil lived by his characters. The suggestive and detailed descriptions of realistic settings, the inventive and convincing use of supernatural elements, the insightful characterizations coupled with the skilled narrative techniques (unexplained incidents to heighten suspense), and the examination of the psychological life of his characters are elements that have much influenced many contemporary stories in the genre.

As an Irish writer, Le Fanu draws on Irish folklore to construct his story. Carmilla then embodies traits of the Irish *banshee*. As an Irish spirit, the banshee haunts a family and foretells the death of its members. Carmilla acts as a banshee by attracting Laura's family as her distant ancestress and, in a strange way, managing to infiltrate into the family's life. In this way, she can make Laura her prey. The lesbian overtones in the story, which were so shockingly perverse and violently opposed to the moral of nineteenth-century society, do not cause the same effect in contemporary times, but rather seem to attract sympathisers among the general public as well as within scholarly circles. Signs of popular resurgence of a genre with such subversive traits are evident whether delivered in print, on the stage, on television or other genres.

In fact, attention to sensation fiction which emphasizes transgressive approaches on issues such as class, race, gender and imperialism began to grow within the academy in the 1970s and 1980s. The expansion of the canon resulted from the cultural upheaval of 1960s and reached an important recovery with the increasing number of scholars that began to focus their work on cultural and gender-based interpretation of sensation novels. Authors located in the margin of the genre, such as Sheridan le Fanu, Charles Dickens and others, were invited to an inclusive analysis, considering the fluidity of genre boundaries. Today, Le Fanu stands at the conjunction of Irish Studies, Gothic Studies, and the Study of Victorian Sensation Novel. There can be no doubt that a return to the overtly politicized readings of Gothic novels and the contextualization of Le Fanu's work in relation to Irish Studies have been necessary. Concerning Le Fanu's work, particularly, we see that he crafts his text by using elements of scientific information, psychological theories (Freud's theory) and other modern approaches, such as modern notions of gender/power relations as well as vampire politics.

Still, it is fair to say that there is a living energy around us and in all things in the universe. Under certain circumstances in life we may fully express ourselves as vampires. As vampires, we are in one degree or another adept at tapping into one's living energy for self-benefit. This is why vampirism is considered to be the interaction with life energy for the benefit of "practitioners". As we live in a capitalist society, our success depends on our financial freedom or economic power. As an oppressive system, modern capitalism involves obsessive individual competition. Individuals tend to develop impetus and tendencies to achieve the economic nirvana in a very manipulative way. Profit is the goal in all senses. Thus, it is not surprising to see individuals overpower, exploit, buy and sell one another for their own sake. This is what one can call "vampire"

in capitalism, for it encompasses not only particular economic sectors but goes beyond and reaches individuals' intelligence, time, thoughts, religion, faith and anything that can fuel energy. Capitalism then needs blood to suck.

Having said this, it seems that the atmosphere of the present century has favoured the translation of a classic of the vampire genre from the Victorian era when reanimations of the vampire figure are mixed with "embodied decadence, cynical neo-Romanticism, HIV, savvy camp, and [...] a post-punk aesthetic", according to Trevor Holme<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, what we see is that the late nineteenth-century monstrous other is being presently transformed into a largely sympathetic figure. Interest in supernatural entities has permeated present day pop culture as well as the universe of children's stories. In short, instead of going out of style, vampires grew stronger in mystique and intrigue, becoming timeless creatures.

But, how could such a literary genre cross so many frontiers in place and time without the work of a translator? How could individuals enrich their cultural background and develop interest in other cultures without the activity of the specialists in literary translation? It is true that Hollywood cinema has played its relevant role by contributing to stimulate audiences' interest in literary works through film adaptations. The boost in film adaptations of many classical novels, plays and other genres has grown tremendously and has reached great popularity in all media forms. Quite often, if an audience have not read the source texts, they are eager to read them in order to see how the transition from text to screen has taken place.

The other questions to reflect here pertain to how readers from different countries can be touched by an author's work without the presence of translated foreign literary material? So, translations play a crucial part in the expansion of literary horizons through the process of literary cross-fertilization. We would be deprived of the unimaginable and the recurrent variance and dissimilarities that prevail in human affairs without experiencing any literature written in other languages. We would never have the chance to read classical or contemporary books. The availability of the universe of Homer or Sophocles, Dante or Petrarch, Tolstoy or Chekhov, Shakespeare, James Joyce or Virginia Woolf and many others made us leave the confinement of national literary production to cope with the expanding sea of foreign literature (I am not examining here film subtitles and the access to other cultures they provide).

However, do readers in a given target language ponder the opportunity translators give to worldwide societies? There is no question that behind the "humble", "anonymous handmaids-and-men of literature", the "ever-obsequious servants of the publishing industry", lies a writer. What we readers of translations perceive, when we react emotionally and aesthetically to the text, is not dissimilar to the way first readers experienced it. Although translators (re)write someone's else work, there is no doubt that the aesthetic delight readers of translated works experience comes from the creative decisions, vocabulary and phrase, structural rhythms and stylistic devices used by translators in the production of their final text. By working through the process of

analogy, that is, by finding similar, not identical characteristics, vagaries and stylistic peculiarities in the target language, the translator also does the work of an author. This is why many translations are considered to be better than their original.

By examining the translation of *Carmilla* into Brazilian Portuguese by Jose Roberto O'Shea, we realize the role of the translator as a mediator that helps the cross-cultural communication necessary to convert one cultural artefact into another in today's society. We see that this specialist goes beyond the simple task of translating words. He develops concepts and ideas between the languages. As a widely respected first-class translator – a position he conquered through life experience and path trailed along formal academic training compounded with sheer ability – O'Shea demonstrates how sensitive he is to the culture of the target language. The decisions he takes on the levels of lexicon and syntax, allied to his meticulous research and deep involvement in the ancestral text (in order to accurately provide information from one language to the other), evinces not only his engagement in the task of transforming and defamiliarizing the source language but also his craft in keeping the author's role, that is, to entertain, to express the author's art in the translator's language. By liberating the translation from the servitude of the target language, O'Shea makes his work a kind of "a meeting point where cultures are mutually enriched", as Niranjana Mohanty says in *Translation: A Symbiosis of Cultures*<sup>2</sup>.

As a translator of classical literary texts, such as Shakespeare's, James Joyce's, Joseph Conrad's, among others, the translator of *Carmilla* once more contributes to further enhancing literary-canon formation while helping to increase the visibility and sales of the product. I can think of no better way to conclude this essay than to recognize the significant challenge both introduction and translation present in the Brazilian edition. By bringing about a brief glimpse of the content of the book, bibliographical information and updated references, the first part of the main body of the volume comes to be an appealing invitation for the reader to explore the universe of the author while enlarging his/her literary experience. By keeping the aesthetic and synergistic reality of its source, the intricacies of the author's language, internal states and acts of imagination within the contemporary experience of the translator, the question of temporal distance, the chasm of almost two centuries separating the translator and Le Fanu did not interfere with the ability and measure to bring the English language and culture of the nineteenth century over into Brazilian Portuguese of the twenty-first century. In short, a consciousness of something enduring, independent of the shifting of time, entails the assumption that the cultural production of the past can be in a sense contemporaneous with the present. Translation then sustains this scheme of recurrence and rebirth – and that is why I have considered this work as something which is "found in translation".

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## Notes

- 1 Joan Gordon, Veronica Hollinger, eds. *Blood Read: The Vampire as Metaphor in Contemporary Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. 174.
- 2 Dollerup, Cay and Lindegaard, Annette. *Teaching Translation and Interpreting: insights, aims, visions...* Volume 2. Philadelphia: Johns Benjamins Publishing Co., 1994.