

*Brazilian Readings of British
Decadentism: Abgar Renault
and Pedro Nava Recreate W. B. Yeats
and A. V. Beardsley*

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Abstract: *The paper focuses on a double affinity, which concerns Literature and the Visual Arts, involving Brazilian and Anglo/Irish works. The text likewise traces the affinities between Pedro Nava's illustrations of Renault's poems and Beardsley's drawings for Salome.*

*Centring on Abgar Renault's translations of poems by Yeats and Wilde, the essay tries to trace the process of appropriation and re-invention which enables the Brazilian poet to transtextualize the Irish writers' poetry, interweaving source and translated texts. The Brazilian poet's choice of poems, which concentrates on different stages of Yeats' production, further reflects Renault's own stylistic choices: like Yeats, he starts as a symbolist, but moves on to a post-symbolist poetics, more attuned to modern taste. The paper relies on Augusto de Campos' notion of translation as a persona, in which the translator gets into the foreign text's skin, so as to "re-pretend everything again". A parallel is also drawn with Machado de Assis' translation tactics in *Ocidentais*: the appropriation of European poetry illustrates Machado's own project for the construction of Brazilian literary identity.*

The ways of intertextuality are unpredictable. There is no knowing where they will take us. Having no traceable beginning or end they may lead to paths as wayward as those of the electronic web, involving countless kinds of semiotic processes and all kinds of texts, literary or otherwise. In this connection, the relations between Brazilian and Anglo-Irish art provide exciting material, shedding new light on textual analysis.

To embark on one of these journeys, I would like to comment on the meeting of two Anglo-Irish poets, Oscar Wilde and William Butler Yeats, with one of their Brazilian

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translators, Abgar Renault – a poet whose centenary was celebrated in 2001 by the two literary academies to which he belonged (the Brazilian Academy and the Academy of Letters of Minas Gerais). On the other hand, I would like to explore the mediation of the three poets' work in drawings by Aubrey Beardsley and by Pedro Nava, the Brazilian memorialist whose many talents included that of painter and illustrator. In his long and busy life (he was not only a writer, but also a physician with a large practice) Nava was able to write a five-volume memoir spanning several decades of Brazilian social life. Not much time was left to develop his considerable talent for the visual arts. But he managed to leave enough paintings and drawings to display his different styles and to give a measure of his powers in the field.

In his illustrations of Renault's symbolist poems Nava seems to engage in a dialogue with Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations of Wilde's *Salome* and of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. A circuitous connection thus brings together the poetry of Wilde and Yeats, that of Renault, their Brazilian translator, as well as Nava and Beardsley's graphic art, in their illustrations of Wilde and Renault, respectively. The crisscross of associations among these texts also provides a glimpse of certain aspects of *fin de siècle* decadence as well as of its relative, Brazilian Symbolism.

We may begin with three illustrations by Nava for his lifelong friend Abgar Renault's unpublished *Poemas do Silencioso Romance*, dated 1925. Copied in the author's own hand, the poems were not selected by Renault for inclusion in his *Poetic Works (Obra Poética)*, the register of his aesthetic itinerary, which covers seven decades and decisive moments of twentieth-century Brazilian poetry, from late Romanticism, Parnassianism and Symbolism to Modernism and Concretism. Not included in this collection, the loosely symbolist *Poems of the Silent Romance* remain in a handwritten booklet presented by the poet to his fiancée, Ignez Brant. The first three pages of the booklet were illustrated with pen and ink drawings by Nava.

The drawings recall certain features of Aubrey Beardsley's illustrations for Wilde's 1893 English edition of *Salome* and also of Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. In a way they close the circle around Abgar Renault, who translated Wilde, as well as Yeats, into Portuguese. Like Yeats's, Renault's poetics wore many "coats": it underwent a number of metamorphoses – a long fling with Symbolism preceding a bare, unadorned verse, which marked both his maturity and that of the Irish poet.

Thus, although Renault did not translate many of Yeats's or Wilde's texts, his Portuguese versions of their poems invite analysis. Regardless of their intrinsic merit, they play a significant role as indicators of the Brazilian poet's aesthetic development. The peculiar kind of intertextuality which involves the poems, their translations and the mediation of Audrey Beardsley and Pedro Nava's illustrations, foregrounds certain affinities among the literary and visual arts in Europe and in Brazil. Renault's choice of texts to be translated also illustrates a process of appropriation and re-invention which enables poets to transtextualize other artists' creations in such a way that by interweaving source and target texts they make the foreign work serve their own purposes.

The mesh of texts I have in mind is a case in point. Before I pursue their analysis, however, I must qualify their similarities by mentioning a contrast between Beardsley's and Nava's achievements: Nava, a prolific memorialist, had little time to develop his talent in the direction of the visual arts. As for Beardsley, even though he also tried his hand at writing (he is the author of *Under the Hill*, his version of the legend of Tannhäuser) he is first of all a painter and draughtsman. Perhaps the greatest illustrator of the industrial age, also a master caricaturist and natural parodist, he was considered as much a master of pen and ink as Goya was of aquatint, or Handel of the combination of voice and trumpet. His drawings, a contemporary critic once declared, are the most complete expression of what is typical of the decadent movement – a “disdain of classical traditions in art, and of clean traditions in ethics; the *fin de siècle* outlook on the husk of life, and brilliant dexterity in portraying it”. Beardsley's black-and-white illustrations seemed to capture the spirit of his age so perfectly that Max Beerbohm once dubbed the 1890's “The Beardsley Period”. And yet the fashion for his work lasted for only about a year – from April 1894, when the first number of the magazine *The Yellow Book* brought him notoriety – to the spring of 1895, when Oscar Wilde's trial for indecency created a public backlash which also led to the dismissal from the magazine of the illustrator of *Salome*.

An expert in the art of intertextuality, Beardsley was capable of working at once in several different styles, and of blending them with a startlingly fresh touch. His artistic relations are as diverse as the early Pre-Raphaelites, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, Whistler, Japanese prints, Greek vases, French Rococo, art nouveau and Toulouse Lautrec. For the drawings for Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, his first commission, Beardsley couldn't resist sending up the mannered intensity of Burne-Jones and Rossetti. He filled his pages with androgynous knights and droopy nymphs, but brilliantly adapted their slightly old-fashioned Pre-Raphaelitism to the more refined taste of the 1890s. In fact he considered the art of Morris and Burne-Jones as “old stuff”. In his drawings for *Salome* Beardsley ironically appropriates the decadent theme of the evil, emasculating woman. The drawings create a vaguely Byzantine setting, but the artist also works in the fashionable japonisme of the period, drawing on the asymmetry, economy of line, and decorative flatness of the Japanese woodblock print. The silhouetted outlines of the figures on Greek red-figured vases served him for Aristophanes's satire *Lysistrata*; while for the illustrations to *Volpone* he used a heavy cross-hatch to create a richly baroque effect. His later infatuation with the French rococo informs the suitably frothy illustrations to *The Rape of the Lock*.

Beardsley's drawings are marked throughout by a voluptuous elegance, an ornamental rhythm akin to the abstract decorations of Islamic palaces, an exquisite calibration between the flowing lines and the flat areas of black and white. The figures appear to be arbitrarily cropped. Without totally effacing an illusion of reality, his aim, like the Eastern artist's, seems to be a beautiful design or pattern within a given space.¹

Some of these features may be seen in Nava's illustrations of Renault's *Poems of the Silent Romance* and thus take us back to the intertextual relationship we started with.

We may first remember how gifted Nava was as a painter and illustrator. We have it from himself that his first artistic manifestations lay in that direction, and he kept a lifelong inclination for finding likenesses between real life characters and figures in painting and sculpture. On this aspect of his talent he once said: "I had an extraordinary vocation for painting, which I played with, but let pass."² However, he sometimes gave vent to this inclination, as in eight gouache illustrations he drew on the pages of a copy of Mário de Andrade's novel *Macunaíma* in 1928. In the course of the correspondence with the novelist, Nava also sent Andrade five drawings. Andrade considered them excellent, especially one, *Claudionor*, which he thought "splendid" and which reveals Nava's knowledge of anatomy.³ His friend Carlos Drummond de Andrade mentions other drawings, some of which (as a head of Oscar Wilde) Drummond kept for himself. Drummond reports, too, that Nava used to draw caricatures on the marble top of bar tables – ephemeral creations soon to be wiped off by waiters [...].

To capture the similarity between Nava and Beardsley, we may look at three vignettes, the first from Beardsley's drawings for Wilde's *Salome*, the two others Nava's illustrations for the initial pages of Renault's manuscript *Poems of the Silent Romance*. The four drawings show a family resemblance, revealed in the similarity of their upward thrust and in their economy and flatness of line, balanced by similarly flowing curved shapes. Nava's next drawing may be compared to "The peacock skirt" from Audrey's *Salome*. Tempered by violet, orange and pink touches, Nava's figure reminds us of the voluptuous slender black and white elegance in many of Beardsley's sketches, and, like some of them, is vaguely reminiscent of art nouveau. The Brazilian drawing also evokes the dreamy, vaguely pre-Raphaelite style of Beardsley's illustrations for *Le Morte D'Arthur* (1470), Malory's first poetic prose account in English of the rise and fall of King Arthur and the fellowship of the Round Table. A delicate eroticism, toned down by a reticence which does not deceive the attentive eye, can be traced in the faceless, gracefully curved naked figure. What cannot be found here, and couldn't anyway be expected in a booklet dedicated to a chaste young woman in the conventional Brazilian society of the 1920's, is the blunt eroticism which gave Beardsley's art such a role in the creation of the myth of the English "Naughty Nineties".

This eroticism often becomes pornography, and may be related to the fashionable japonisme of the times. Many artists had studied the prints of Hokusai and Hiroshige. But Beardsley alone looked attentively at the Shunga genre of print-making, so pornographic that such prints were sold under the counter in Victorian bookshops specialising in erotica or "curiosa". In the same vein Beardsley produced obscene drawings for private collectors. In his published work, he managed slyly to insert schoolboy smut even in seemingly blameless illustrations. The fact could not escape his contemporaries. They considered him a dangerously subversive talent, who posed a danger to the very fabric of society: in 1894 and 1895 *Punch* castigated him as "Mr Aubrey Beer de Beers", with his "comedy of leers".

The kinship between Beardsley and Nava is not limited to the affinities between the few drawings mentioned so far. The more heavily erotic or pornographic aspects of

Beardsley's art also find an echo in Pedro Nava's later drawings, kept under lock and key in Rio de Janeiro's *Biblioteca Nacional*. These illustrations, which recall Nava's long practice as a doctor, reveal the anatomist's skill in their coarse, almost brutal sensuality. So, in accordance with his family's wishes, they have not been published and can only be seen under special conditions.

This oscillation between dreamy stylized sketches and a bare, realistic touch brings us back to Renault's translations of Wilde and Yeats' s poems and to the Brazilian poet's own original work. The first thing to notice is the criterion implicit in his choice of texts to be translated – not the representativity of the poem within the author's work or of the author within a national tradition. Side by side with towering figures like Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Coleridge, or Wallace Stevens, Renault's translations include writers virtually unknown in Brazil in the early twentieth century. The fact is, Renault translates poems showing striking stylistic affinities with those he himself authored at the time. The act of translation was an exercise in literary empathy, confirming the notion (chiefly developed by the Campos brothers in Brazil) that translation may prove a way for writers to choose their precursors and to antropophagically appropriate them for their own uses. Appropriation, re-invention and transtextualization then allow for the weaving together of source and target texts. In this train of associations, Renault's selection of Yeats' and Wilde's poems is a creative option. Echoing Haroldo de Campos' words, who in turn echoes Fernando Pessoa, translation thus becomes something like a heteronym. The poet translates only what he loves, he only pretends what he wants to. The foreign text becomes a kind of skin: the translator gets into it, so as to "re-pretend everything again":

translation for me is a persona. Nearly a heteronym. It is to get into the pretender's skin, to re-pretend everything again, each pain, each sound, each colour. This is why I never set out to translate everything. Only what I feel. Only what I lie. Or what I lie that I feel, as, once again, Pessoa would say in his own persona.⁴

Consistently with this notion of translation, among Yeats' ample poetic range Renault chooses poems that, great lover and teacher of Literature in English that he was, could, at a certain stage, have been written by himself. The same can be said about his translations of Wilde. Two of the translated poems, "When you are old" and "She wishes for the clothes of heaven" were taken from Yeats' s early books *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind among the Reeds* (1899) Here we find the symbolist voice which, fighting the "prevailing decadence" of the nineties, Yeats will later disown for its "sentimental sadness", its "womanish introspection", as he calls them. In a letter dated 1904, the poet declares he no longer wants the kind of poetry that "speaks [...] with the sweet insinuating voice of the dwellers in that country of shadows and hollow images".⁵ But in 1893, before this denunciation, when Yeats is 28, it is still the soft redolent musical voice of Symbolism that we hear in "When you are old". We can read the first stanza side by side with Renault's translation:

WHEN YOU ARE OLD

*When you are old, and gray and full of sleep
And nodding by the fire, take down this book
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep.*

QUANDO FORES VELHA

*Quando estiveres, já velhinha, a cochilar
junto à lareira, tira este livro da estante
devagarinho lê [...] sonha com o suave olhar
dos teus olhos de outrora e suas sombras
fundas.*

Owing to the character of Portuguese morphology, the translation cannot duplicate the predominantly monosyllabic line. Largely responsible for the slow dreamy rhythm of Yeats's stanza, the heavy monosyllables seem equivalent to the curved florid pen strokes in Beardsley's and Nava's illustrations. Forcing the gaze to linger in different directions, the flowing curves retard the perception of the whole, and make for a slower rhythm in the reading of the illustration. In his blank verse transcreation of Yeats's poem Renault does his best to achieve a similar slow pace: he introduces a number of pauses, made explicit by the punctuation, which reduce the speed of the reading. Yeats's other early poem, written six years later, is marked by resplendent, precious imagery, favoured by symbolists, as well as by the hesitancy between sound and meaning so valued by Valery. Let us again compare the English and the Portuguese:

SHE WISHES FOR THE CLOTHS OF HEAVEN

*Had I heaven's embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;*

*I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

ELA DESEJA OS TECIDOS DO CÉU

*Se eu tivesse dos céus os tecidos bordados,
de luz dourada e viva prata entretecidos
os azuis, os escuros e os claros tecidos
da noite, do romper do dia e do crepúsculo,
estender-te-ia esses tecidos sob os pés [...]
Mas, pobre como sou, só possuo os meus
sonhos;*

*eu espalhei os meus sonhos sob os teus pés:
pisa de leve, pois pisas os meus sonhos [...]*

Here again Renault's exercise in literary empathy evinces the stylistic similarity between Yeats's and his own poetry. The slow dreamy rhythm of "When you are old", as well as its general theme and atmosphere can be found, for instance, in Renault's original poem, "Diante do Mar". Like Yeats's, this is a young man's piece, taken from *A Princesa e o Pegureiro*, the first book of *Obra Poética*, marked by a premoninantly symbolist aesthetics. Had the young Yeats written in Portuguese, he could have written this poem, so akin in tone to "When you are old":

DIANTE DO MAR

*Uma tarde, quando eu não for mais eu, virás a mim sem ti.
Ver-te-ei cegamente num mortiço espelho.*

*O que apertarei e beijarei presente será distante aqui,
sombra de lua e nada, e estarei meu eu mais velho.*

*Saberei que me serás apenas álgido futuro
um dia de asas em indelével fuga, e não terei
alípede cavalo, anjo ou bruxedo. Gelado furo
no ar de inverno arrastará meu íntimo rei. (Etc., 49)*

As an equivalent for “She wishes for the cloths of heaven”, I would choose Renault’s “Em Busca da Estrela”, another youthful composition. In tone, as well as in the rich texture of its cosmic imagery, these verses again recall Yeats:

*Que firmamento ou que anfracto,
perdido de ti, e pálido,
possui o vestido cálido
que afagou as nebulosas, o vinho, as ondas e as rosas
do teu subvertido corpo?*

The same might be said of these lines, from *Sub specie aeternitatis*:

*Vi-te e vi a expressão essencial
da forma, da graça e da luz.
Vi-te e vi a trêmula fragilidade do efêmero
vestida das roupagens do eterno. (A Princesa e o Pegureiro, 17)*

In the two poems by Renault one finds the cosmic imagery that, as in Yeats’s “She wishes for the cloths of heaven”, evokes the transcendental aspect of Symbolism presenting the beloved as an incarnation of the Platonic Idea.

Renault’s translation of Oscar Wilde’s “Requiescat” also illustrates his youthful bent towards Symbolism. Readers can see this for themselves, noticing the translator’s use of rare, literary epithets like *fulvo*, *fúlgido*, well suited to Wilde’s “golden”, but also recalling the use of a similar register in Renault’s original poems.

*REQUIESCAT
Tread lightly, she is near
Under the snow,
Speak gently, she can hear
The daisies grow.*

*All her bright golden hair
Tarnished with rust,
She that was young and fair
Fallen to dust.*

*REQUIESCAT
Ela está aqui (pisai de leve [...])
por sob a neve.
Falai baixinho; pode ela ouvir
crescer as flores.*

*Seu fulvo e fúlgido cabelo
está mofado.
e ela, que foi formosa e jovem,
Desfeita em pó.*

*Lily-like, white as snow,
She hardly knew
She was a woman, so
Sweetly she grew.*

*Coffin-board, heavy stone,
Lie on her breast;
I vex my heart alone,
She is at rest.*

*Lirial e branca como a neve,
mal conheceu
que era mulher, e suavemente
assim cresceu*

*Dura pedra e tábua de um caixão
seu peito cobrem;
sòzinho, dói-me o coração;
ela descansa.*

Note, too, that the young woman celebrated by the poem, with her “bright golden hair/ Tarnished with rust” and her “lily white “complexion likewise recalls the beloved of Abgar’s poems, who has auburn hair “cabelo enastro” (“Alegoria”) and “the white face of transiency” (“o alvo rosto do efêmero”) in “Nas mãos de Deus/II”). Similar descriptions, which pop up in other poems, also evoke the “Rossetti face”, created by the Pre-Raphaelite painter for the *femme fatales* and tragic heroines of his paintings.

As they overcome this symbolist stage, both Yeats and Renault later adopt other voices – (as does Wilde, in *De Profundis*). Here is Renault’s translation of “A Drinking Song” (*The Green Helmet*, 1904), with its lighter, quicker pace:

À DRINKING SONG

*Wine comes in at the mouth
And love comes in at the eye;
That’s all we shall know for truth eis
Before we grow old and die.
I lift the glass to my mouth
I look at you, and I sigh.*

CANÇÃO

*Entra o vinho pela boca
pelos olhos entra o amor,
tudo quanto sabemos
antes de velhice e morte
Levanto meu copo à boca
E contemplo-te, e suspiro.*

This is not a far cry from Yeats’s later unadorned style, punctuated by realistic details. The lyricism is still here, but the song has lost its piercing intensity, which has been replaced by a quieter, lucid, almost dry tone. Yeats’s “Old men admiring themselves in the water”, on the age-long theme of the transiency of all things, rings with this new voice. It can here be heard side by side with Renault’s rendering::

*OLD MEN ADMIRING THEMSELVES
IN THE WATER*

*I heard the old, old men say,
“Everything laters,
And one by one we drop away.
They had hands like claws, and their knees
Were twisted like the old thorn-trees
By the waters.*

OS VELHOS CONTEMPLAM-SE NA ÁGUA

*Eu ouvi os velhos dizendo:
“Tudo muda
E um a um vamos desaparecendo...”
Tinham mãos como garras, e seus joelhos
eram tortos tais espinheiros velhos
ao pé das águas.*

*I heard the old, old men say:
“All that is beautiful drifts away
Like the waters.”*

*Eu ouvi os velhinhos dizendo:
“Tudo que é belo passa correndo
como as águas...”*

The poem, from *In the Seven Woods* (1909) seems to announce the Yeats's voice that

we hear in *Last Poems*. Abgar, too, will find a new, mature voice, most notably in his great philosophical poem, *Sofotulafai*. These confluent paths enhance the significance of the two poets' meetings, either through the visual mediation of Nava's and Beardsley's illustrations, or through their stylistic resemblances. Renault's and Nava's plunge into the vast aesthetic web we call Decadentism – a manifestation of their own individual tastes – supports the notion of intertextuality and translation as a vehicle for artists' individual projects. We are here reminded of *Ocidentais*, Machado de Assis's collection of translated poetry. In his recreations of European texts, Machado's disregard for the ancient ideal of “faithful” translation, reveals, instead, a project of his own, which included the construction of Brazilian literary identity.⁶ In their use of foreign texts on their way to the finding of their own voice, Renault⁷ and Nava also brush by Machado de Assis, perhaps the greatest of all artists writing in Portuguese.

Notes

- 1 The remarks on Beardsley's art have been largely taken from art critic's Richard Dorment's text on the catalogue for the Aubrey Beardsley Exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum, on the centenary of the artist's death, from 8 October 1998 to 10 January 1999. I have also drawn freely from Michael Gibson, *Symbolism*. “
- 2 “Eu tinha uma extraordinária paixão pela pintura que deixei passar brincando”. Apud Bueno, Antônio Sérgio. *Vísceras da Memória*. Uma leitura da obra de Pedro Nava. Belo Horizonte: Editora da UFMG, 1997, 101.
- 3 Andrade, Carlos Drummond. Ambrosina e os incendiários arrependidos. Apud Bueno, 105.
- 4 Campos, Augusto de. *Verso, Reverso, Controverso*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1978, 7. Trans. and quoted by Vieira, Else Ribeiro Pires. Nudity versus Royal Robe. *Brazil and the Discovery of America. Narrative, History, Fiction, 1492-1992*. Mc Guirk, Bernard and Oliveira, Solange Ribeiro (Eds.). London: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996, 1-15.
- 5 From Yeats's letter to A.E. in April 1904. *The Collected Letters*. Wade, Allan (Ed.). London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954, 434 (apud Mutran, Munira Hamud. *Album de Retratos*. George Moore, Oscar Wilde e William Butler Yeats no fim do ‘seculo XIX: um momento cultural. São Paulo. Tese [Livre-Docência, Departamento de Letras Modernas], Faculdade de Filosofia Letras e Ciências Humanas da Universidade de São Paulo, 2000, 207.
- 6 Here I briefly sum up Sérgio Bellei's convincing thesis in Bellei, Sérgio Luiz Prado. O Corvo Tropical de Edgar Allan Poe. *Nacionalidade e Literatura*. Os Caminhos da Alteridade. Florianópolis: Editora da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina, 1992, 77-90.
- 7 For a study of the evolution of Renault's poetics, see Oliveira, Solange Ribeiro de. Centenário de Abgar Renault: Poeta sem Rótulos. *Revista da Academia Mineira de Letras*, v. XXII. Belo Horizonte, 2001, 17-31, Pastiche Pós-Moderno: uma releitura de Abgar Renault. *Suplemento*

Literário. Secretaria de Estado de Cultura de Minas Gerais, n. 83, May 2002, 4-7. Cf. also Oliveira, Solange Ribeiro de, and Renault, Affonso Henrique Tamm. *Abgar Renault*. Belo Horizonte: Centro de Estudos de Literários da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, 1996.

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- _____; Renault, Affonso Henrique Tamm. *Abgar Renault*. Belo Horizonte, Centro de Estudos de Literários da Faculdade de Letras da UFMG, 1996.
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