

TRANSLATION POLICY IN BELGIUM BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

THE QUESTION OF A “Belgian” literature has a long and vehement history.¹ Indeed, the construction of a Belgian political and institutional framework in 1830 has created the search for a “national” literature, and the following 160 years of Belgian history are marked by a continuous debate about the topic. The indecision which characterizes each attempt at self-definition by the Francophone literary field in Belgium is the result of two fundamental and interrelated obstacles. First, it was – and still is – extremely difficult for Francophone cultural agents to define their position toward France because of the linguistic identity and the geographical proximity of the capital of the Francophonie. The second problem is the problem of linguistic and cultural duality within Belgium. Both obstacles are based on the idea that language represents the dominant feature of a literary work, and that a literature is circumscribed by the language in which it is produced. The result seems to be a certain taboo attached to the Belgian literary corpus as a research subject. This problem has recently been thematized by Marc Quaghebeur as follows. “Pour un intellectuel digne de ce nom, longtemps le tabou concernait le fait d’oser choisir comme champ d’études le corpus littéraire belge” (14). Nonetheless, during the last few decades, scholars have shown an increasing interest in the topic. At the same time, the majority of recent studies are coloured by the institutional affiliation of their authors. In particular, since the beginning of the federalization of the Belgian state in 1970, “Flanders” is becoming more and more absent in the Francophone research on the Belgian (Francophone) literary corpus. Nonetheless, this determining role of the existing institutional framework leads to serious gaps in the investigation of certain periods and the results of such investigation. Literature, or the literary polysystem, forms part of the larger polysystem of culture (see Even-Zohar 1990; Lambert 1987). The relations between these various systems are “isomorphic in nature” and “can be observed on the basis of the mutual give-and-take which often occurs obliquely between them through transformational devices” (Heylen 1993, 21). The present case study, then, could be an illustration of how and to what extent translations – as one among many manifestations (certainly a privileged one) of

¹ At its founding, the modern Belgian state consisted of two parts: Wallonia, the French-speaking part in the south of the country, and Flanders, the Flemish-speaking part in the north of the country. Yet, during the twenties and thirties, public life (politics, justice, higher education) was still for the greater part Francophone in Flanders and the Flemish upperclass (upper bourgeoisie, upper clergy and nobility) was still completely Francophone.

contacts and migrations between Flemish and French within the Belgian state – can give insight into the structuring and development of bilingual and bicultural societies such as Belgium.

Translation practice in Belgium between the two World Wars reveals interesting quantitative aspects (for data see *Bibliographie de Belgique*; Arents 1931; Hermanowski and Tomme 1961; Pépin 1972). The Francophone market of the 1920s and 1930s is dominated by literary translations: almost 50% of all Francophone translations edited in Belgium are literary. Most of the time, Flemish is the first source language and more generally, Flemish is always within the top three of source languages. The period is also marked by an increase of translations from Flemish literary texts into French, whereas before 1918 and after 1945, German is the first target language. In other words, the period between the two World Wars is the only one in which French is the first target language for translations from Flemish. Moreover, these contacts take place almost exclusively within the borders of the Belgian state. More than 75% of the translations of Flemish texts are published in Belgium – instead of in France.² This new openness of the Francophone literary circles towards Flemish literature and Flanders in general is also apparent in various periodicals such as the *Revue Générale*, *La Renaissance d'Occident* and *La Revue Belge*. They published not only general articles on Flemish political claims or on Flemish arts (painting, literature, theatre, etc.) but also favourable reviews of Flemish novels in French translation, and Flemish novels and other literary texts in translation.³ Moreover, *La Renaissance d'Occident* and *La Revue Belge* declared that they aim at propagating Flemish literature by means of translations.⁴ Similar efforts were made by certain Belgian publishing houses who were considered as promoters of Belgian literature because they published almost exclusively Belgian authors such as La Renaissance du Livre, Office de Publicité and Éditions Rex – which all published series of Flemish novels translated into French.

These data point to the same observation: the period between the two World Wars is one of privileged literary contacts between the Flemish and the Francophone cultures and these contacts reflect the geographical and socio-political structure of the Belgian state. They appear to be a typically Belgian phenomenon, instigated by specific groups in Belgian society and designed to function in this specific context. In order to concretize these data, I would like to focus in the following on translations published by Éditions Rex in the 1930s.

² This virtual monopoly of the Belgian Francophone market in the domain of translations from Flemish goes against the tendency toward colonization in other domains by French (mostly Parisian) publishing houses during the twenties and thirties (see Gyselinx; *BOAEB*).

³ For articles in general see Vossen. For reviews: *La Revue Belge* (March 1, 1932, 479); de Mey in *Revue Générale* (February 1932: 255-56). For translations: Verhavert 1929/32; Buysse 1932; Claes 1932; Verschoren 1933; Van Cauwelaert 1933; Timmermans 1925, 1934.

⁴ Particularly interesting in this context is the point of view of Pierre Goemaere, director of *La Revue Belge*, according to whom only Flemish literature is worthy to be called “Belgian” literature (Gyselinx 29).

Éditions Rex, founded in 1926, profiled itself from the beginning as a “Catholic” publishing house, i.e., very closely guided and controlled by the Catholic Church. Initially, its function was limited to the publishing of A.C.J.B. pamphlets (Action Catholique de la Jeunesse Belge), a faction of Catholic intellectual youngsters who professed to a rigid and uncompromising Catholicism.⁵ In October 1930, a new, promising young editor appears on the scene: Léon Degrelle. For the Belgian reader, Degrelle is mainly known as the leader of the later Fascist Rex party which he founded in 1935.⁶ Originally, Rex and its editor are wholly devoted to the service of the Church and its spiritual values. Because the translations under study belong exclusively to this first “literary-catholic” period of Rex,⁷ I will not discuss its evolution toward a political movement here.

As the new editor, Degrelle initiates immediate changes in the publishing policy of Éditions Rex, all of which aim at reaching a large(r) public. He began his strategy by launching five periodicals and some book series.⁸ One of the book series was the “Collection Nationale,” devoted to the (re)edition of “good” (i.e., Catholic) Belgian Francophone novels at low prices (4.50 BF). Rex also published nationalistic works on Belgian history, religious and political works, books of general interest, etc. (To mention a few examples, see Briey; Degrelle; Lichtervelde; Draime; Denis; Nothomb.)

In 1931, the “Première série des chefs-d’œuvre flamands illustrés par Félix Timmermans” is founded.⁹ The series comprises four translations, simultaneously published in 1931: Felix Timmermans’ *Les Très belles heures de Mlle Symphorose, Béguine*, and *Triptyque de Noël*; Ernest Claes’ *Le Réveillon du Gueux (Wannes Raps)*; Gerard Walschap’s *Un Vaincu de la vie (Teugels Gust)*. However, the series was not followed by a “Deuxième série.” This could point to a lack of success of the first series, although this hypothesis is not proven. Between 1932 and 1935 three other translations of Flemish novels were published, one of them in the above mentioned “Collection Nationale:” Cypriaan Verhavert’s *Types bruxellois*, Ernest Claes’ *Filasse (De Witte)*, and Maurits Sabbe’s *Gens de Flandre*. In consequence, the publication of seven translations in four years made

⁵ On “le catholicisme réactionnaire,” see Defoort.

⁶ In May 1936, Rex – at that moment already condemned by the Church – had enormous success in elections for seats in the Belgian Parliament, mainly because of its campaign against the corruptness of traditional parties (*in casu* the Catholic Party). Nevertheless, Rex turned progressively into a Fascist party, finally collaborating with the Germans during the Second World War.

⁷ For example, see Étienne who divides the evolution of the movement into three stages.

⁸ *Rex*: a bi-monthly literary periodical, made in collaboration with the “elite” of the Belgian writers and comprising 16 pages; *Vlan*: bi-monthly, on Belgian politics; *Foyer*: “le journal récréatif des familles;” *Crois*: “revue apostolique,” disappeared after the first edition; *Soirées*: “le magazine chic et toujours à la page.”

⁹ Felix Timmermans was at the time already one of the most successful Flemish regionalistic (see below) writers whose works were already translated all over Europe. His drawings which accompanied his own and other writers’ works (e.g., Claes), also illustrate the translations.

Rex the leading publishing house in Belgium in the 1930s as far as translations of Flemish novels are concerned.¹⁰

In the following, I will present an overview of the most important metatextual and textual translation strategies apparent in the period in question. I will also show how and to what extent these strategies can be related to the larger literary and socio-political situation of the time. In the first instance, it is striking that all the translators themselves are Belgian Francophone writers (some of them born in Flanders) publishing works seen as “typically Belgian” (the qualification *de chez nous* returns in an almost obsessive way) at the time:

C’est une chose délicate et délicate, toute marquée à la vie de chez nous, la vie grave dans une ville calme et tendre, parmi des campagnes à la fois larges et pittoresques... Comme tout cela est bien de chez nous en sa simplicité fluide unie au paysage transparent d’âme! Camille Melloy est un véritable poète; un véritable poète de chez nous. (Joly 738-39; see also Goemaere 46)

Some of the translators (e.g., Maurice Gauchez in his function as director of *La Renaissance d’Occident*), explicitly act as promoters of Flemish literature (Gyselinx 24) while others also publish their own works at Éditions Rex (Melloy 1931, 1932; Kervyn 1931; Gauchez 1936). The full impact of this homogeneous social position of the translators will become clear in the second part of my paper. The selection of primary texts to be translated also happens in accordance with certain deliberate criteria. For example, the label *chefs-d’oeuvre* which features so promisingly in the title of the series, seems to be subjected to two more basic criteria – or a twofold preliminary norm (Toury 53) – which combine all translations. First, the application of norms of moralizing Catholicism with the result that much more successful but libertine works like Timmermans’ *Pallieter* (1916) are not integrated in the series.¹¹

Ce poème d’exaltation dionysiaque (*Pallieter*), vous pensez bien qu’on ne peut l’admettre sans de graves réserves, non seulement à cause des touches sensuelles, ... mais surtout à cause du rêve naturaliste qui le remplit et le soutient... Est-ce là le vrai, le meilleur Timmermans? Je ne le pense pas. Il reste pour moi le poète des intimités, le chantre des mystiques béguinages et des âmes

¹⁰ An analysis of data provided by Pépin 1972 gave the following results: Rex is responsible for about 10% of the translations of Flemish works into French in the thirties and is only preceded by L. Opdebeek (Antwerp) – which, however, mainly specialized in youth literature. The rest of the translations are spread over a large number of publishing houses which published mostly one or two isolated works.

¹¹ Similar abrogation towards the libertine, popular, naturalist, and Dionysic Flanders (“the land of fairs and beer drinking”) can be found in prefaces by the same translator (see, for example, Timmermans 1933, 1942).

candidates... (introduction of Camille Melloy in Timmermans 1931b, 12)

The second normative strategy was the focus on the regional character (see also below) of the source texts. The main features of this model are the articulation of traditional, pre-urban values and the romantic idealization of the country or the village and of everyday life of common people in Flanders and Brussels. Timmermans and Claes for instance were (and still are) considered as prototypical exponents of *Heimatkunst* in Flanders (see Lissens, Musschoot, Rens and Andrienne).

Three translations (Timmermans 1931b; Verhavert 1932; Sabbe 1935) contain a preface written by the translators themselves. These metatexts never refer to the translational strategies the translators followed. Instead, they present the Flemish author and his work and only mention the translation itself as a means to make Flanders and its literature known by the Francophone public. However, the problematic character of this declared aim is illustrated by the condescending tone of all these prefaces and by their lack of knowledge of the North of the country; similar to the situation demonstrated by the Belgian Francophone elite during the nineteenth century (see Capelle and Malherbe). Flanders is still a synonym for smallness, simpleness, superficiality, picturesqueness, and also for the mysticism of the Primitive painters:

Dans la *coquette* ville de Lierre, bâtie, entre Anvers et Malines, au bord de la Nèthe, Félix Timmermans vécut son enfance, *fit quelques études, se découvrit poète, fonda son foyer, écrivit ses livres*; là encore il accueille les hommages des Flandres et des Pays-Bas, toujours avec la même *joviale simplicité*, avec la même *philosophie superficielle et sereine*. Vieilles maisons à pignons dentelés, ruelles cocasses du béguinage, clochers et carillons, remparts ombragés, rivière capricieuse et belles campagnes fécondes, *Lierre est pour Timmermans l'univers, et d'abord la Flandre...* Ce que le peuple aime en Timmermans, c'est le "bon vivant," le peintre des ripailles breughéliennes, l'humoriste aux facéties innombrables, le conteur de la vie populaire, si colorée et si bruyante en Flandre. (Melloy in Timmermans 1931b, 8, 12; my italics)

Thus, the translations reproduce an ancient, mythical version of Flanders. In other words, the Francophone translators select some – mostly historical – elements in order to construct an appropriate Flemish identity as they see it. The metatextual ambivalence between instruction and myth has its counterpart in textual translation strategies. On the macrostructural level, all translations are integral

except Verhavert 1935, where mentions of prostitution and war are omitted, as well as the rather ironical comments on the Queen. These shifts may correspond to a general strategy of maintaining the idealistic, moralizing tone of *Heimatkunst* and, in this way, responding to the preliminary norm (see above). None of the other translations contain changes on the level of the story. Since one of the main features of Flemish regionalistic novels is the romantic idealization of the everyday life of common people in small villages, this is certainly one of the main reasons for the undeniably Flemish character of the translations.

On the other hand, the subdivision of the text in chapters – when absent in the source text, as in Walschap 1931 – and particularly the reorganisation of paragraphs in all target texts suggests a search for more “structure,” i.e., a strategy of assimilation to what was considered at the time typically French literary norms of “clarity” and “balance.”

The microstructural translation strategies, reveal similar ambivalence. For instance, on the one hand, all translations strive for syntactical adequacy, thus preferring the local colour, the popular Flemish sentence character to the well-organized and balanced French classical period.¹² These syntactical incalculations – however strange they may have sounded for a non-Belgian reader – were familiar to the Belgian reader of the 1920s and 1930s. Here are some examples:

Il rit, jovial, regarde ses yeux aux cils pâles, baisse les paupières, intimidé tout à coup, et vide à moitié le verre qu'elle remplit pour la seconde fois. (Timmermans 1931a, 8)

Il barbotait parfois jusqu'au cou dans l'eau, la nuit, pour mettre des nasses, et, quand, au matin, il lui arrivait de ne pas les retrouver, parce qu'un autre avait pris la poudre d'escampette avec ses tanches et ses ustensiles, il savait être toute la journée d'une si belle intraitabilité que personne n'osait lui adresser la parole. (Claes 1931, 24)

Nonetheless, this strategy is in contradiction to the regularly reiterated adaptations of syntactical norms of written French, which reveal again the search for more “clarity” and “structure”:

Hij woont nog maar enige maanden op het Begijnhof, en voor dien tijd was hij hovenier op het kasteel bij Turnhout; maar zijn oom... (Timmermans 1917, 7)

¹² Novelists such as Claes, Walschap, and Timmermans were known and appreciated in Flanders for their innovative narrative style which imitated popular oral discourse. The use of sentences without verbs, interruptions, oral constructions, etc., was intended as a reaction against academic style.

Il habite au Béguinage depuis quelques mois à peine. Au paravant [*sic*], il était jardinier d'un château près de Turnhout. Mais son oncle... (Timmermans 1931a, 6)

Met al zijn krachten kreeg hij zijn voeten weer los uit de sneeuw en vooruit, maar hij wankelde nu, ... en meende elk ogenblik ... (Claes 1926, 37)

De toutes ses forces, il arrache ses pieds à la neige, et en avant. Mais il vacille maintenant, ... comme pris de boisson. Il craint à chaque pas... (Claes 1931, 73)

Still, according to this strategy, free direct and free indirect discourse are systematically separated from descriptions – whereas constantly mixed up in Walschap (1930) for instance – and surrounded by conventional quotation marks and introductory verbs:

De meester trok ze vaneen, Teugels wat is dat nu ... gij die anders een voorbeeld zijt voor uw makkers, ik ken u niet meer, Teugels de klas in, op uw knieën. (Walschap 1930, 4)

Le maître d'école les sépara: « Teugels, qu'est-ce que cela signifie? Vous qui, d'habitude, étiez un modèle pour vos compagnons, je ne vous reconnais plus, Teugels. Allez! En classe, à genoux! » (Walschap 1931, 11)

Juist sprong buiten Lieske de naaister, van haren velo. Clemans, ze kwam eens reizekens binnen, aan dat blauw goed dat ge gebracht hebt is op verre na niet genoeg voor een palto. Is er niet genoeg aan, zei Clemans. Het was een coupon, dien had ze goedkoop op de markt kunnen kopen. (Walschap 1930, 6)

Justement, devant la porte, Lieske, la couturière descendait de bé-cane. – « Clémence, dit-elle, j'entre ici en me promenant. La pièce de drap bleu que vous m'avez apportée est trop petite, de beaucoup, pour en faire un paletot. » – « Trop petite? C'était un coupon que j'ai pu avoir à très bon compte au marché. » (Walschap 1931, 14)

With regard to the level of language, only Verhavert (1932) tolerates dialect by systematically rendering the Flemish Brussels dialect of Verhavert (1923) by French Brussels turns (“le marollien”):

Luppe Kassuul! potverdoemme, sprekt ma doe van! van Luppe Kassuul ... da was nogal e kadéke in zenne joengen tijd!... Pertans,

hij es uuk nen dag aaver geweudde, hij es na serjeus, hij cet eum gerehabilizeet... (Verhavert 1923, 133)

Luppe Kassuul! janvermille, parlez-moi de çuilà! de Luppe Kassuul... ça était encore un peu quelqu'un dans son jeune temps!... Pourtant, il est aussi devenu un jour plus âgé, il est mett'nant sérieux, il a se réhabilité... (Verhavert 1932, 147)

All other translations replace Flemish dialects (quite frequently used in the source texts – especially in dialogues) by French standardized “popular” or “familiar” terms.

Goat in oeve nest ligge of stekt oeve kop in nen iêmer botermelk ... gedome zè snotneus! (Claes 1926, 17)

Vas te coucher, ou fous-toi la tête dans un seau de lait battu ... petit merdeux, va! (Claes 1931, 30)

Ze moeste gedome pinnekensdroad in hun derme krije! (Claes 1926, 18)

Merde de merde, il faudrait leur coller du fil barbelé dans les boyaux! (Claes 1931, 33)

Thus, regional differentiation is rejected and translated as social differentiation. Flemish dialects could have been replaced by one of the dialects of Wallonia: Walloon dialects were (still) widely used at the time and a vivid regionalistic Walloon literature in dialect was promoted by the Walloon nationalists.¹³ The rejection of dialects is additionally demonstrated by the publication of several translations of Walloon works into French by Éditions Rex (see Gérardin 1932; Mignolet 1933a, b). The underlying reasons for this policy will become clear in the second part of my paper. Yet, the use of popular and even vulgar terms (already in the narrator's discourse and then in all the target texts) is counterbalanced by a systematic raising of the overall language level – even in dialogues. Independently from the source text, translators introduce literary and poetical terms, clichés and nominal turns, thus using a more codified language, a preestablished – French literary – code, whereas Timmermans, Claes, and Walschap were famous at the time for their innovatory images and original expressions, as a reaction against academic style:

“Zijn we dan niet arm genoeg?” vroeg de bedelaar Schrobberbeeck, met zijn zwerende oogen...” “Dan blijven we t’huis,” zei Schrobberbeeck; “of peisde gij dat ik voor een ander mijn ziel uit

¹³ The vitality of the genre is illustrated, among others, by the existence of a separate heading for this type of works in the *Bibliographie de Belgique*, comprising several publications every month.

mijn keel ga zingen! Dat is eens goed voor ééne keer!”
(Timmermans 1923, 26)

« Et nous, ne sommes-nous pas assez pauvres? Demanda Schobberbeeck, le mendiant aux yeux chassieux... » « S’il en est ainsi, nous resterons chez nous, décida Schobberbeeck; « tu crois peut-être que je vais me tuer à chanter pour autrui! Une fois a suffi! » (Timmermans 1931b, 50)

De grond komt omhoog van al het leven dat er onder broeit. De lente loopt in de lucht, het hout heeft een nieuwen reuk, de botten hebben de boschhagen met purperen tinten besprinkeld.
(Timmermans 1917, 14)

Saturée de vie, la terre fermente, mille bourgeons empourprent les halliers. (Timmermans 1931 a, 16)

An analysis of the translated texts leads us to the provisional conclusion that even on the same textual level, a tension is present between, on the one hand, the desire to write Literature according to established French literary norms and, on the other hand, the desire to reproduce the Flemish local colour and to introduce innovative Flemish models. Yet, the significance of these choices, of this specific relationship between code-breaking and code-abiding strategies, only becomes clear when we relate them to the position of Flanders in general, and to that of Flemish literature more specifically in the various cultural practices in which this translational policy is promoted. Notwithstanding all the claims of the *fidus interpretes* ideologists, translating is always manipulation, because it never appears in a socio-cultural vacuum and is never innocent (Bassnett and Lefevere 1990, 11). In the remainder of this paper I shall therefore try to identify the discursive systems in which the translations were meant to function, and describe their literary and ideological role within this framework as well as their function in the Belgian literary system as a whole. Because translations play an important part in the dynamics of cultural self-definition (Robyns), I want to take the problematic identity of Belgian Francophone literature as a starting point. The entire Belgian Francophone literary and cultural history is marked by a search – or even a battle – for the construction of its identity: “La Belgique est le pays du refus de l’histoire” (Quaghebeur 11).

Generally speaking, two antagonistic points of view divide artists and scholars throughout the last 150 years. On the one side we find those who consider Belgian Francophone literature as a literary province of France; others tend to emphasize its autonomy with respect to Paris. In systemic terms, this means that the Belgian Francophone literature is defined either as an autonomous polysystem with respect to the French or, on the contrary, as a periphery of the French macro-polysystem with Paris as the centre representing the canon. For the period between the two

World Wars, specialists advance contradicting and often simplifying views. For instance, Michel Otten avoids the problem insisting on the lack of available texts (65), for Klinkenberg the Belgian Francophone literary system after the first World War shows a centrifugal movement, a *lutétiotropisme*, searching for almost total assimilation with Paris (46). Quaghebeur, on the contrary, qualifies Belgian Francophone literature of the same period as “purement autochtone” and characterized by a “repli sur soi” (24). As I pointed out before, these contradictions only exteriorize the reductionism owing to the institutional position of these scholars. Yet, all the metatexts seem to show agreement on a number of fundamental changes in Belgian postwar society. On the political level, universal suffrage encourages the quick growth and first successes of Flemish nationalism. For the first time in the history of the Belgian state, Flemish nationalists are elected to political office. Formerly exclusively culture-oriented, the Flemish movement becomes a political movement – separatist and anti-Belgian in its more extreme manifestations. Its first tangible achievement is the voting of the first linguistic laws, imposing among other things the official unilingualism of the regions and the Flemish identity of the State University of Ghent. At the same time, the cultural, economic, and demographic revival of Flanders – which started already in the nineteenth century – continues. All these changes threaten for the first time the official Francophone and unitarian Belgian state *from within*.

These political and societal changes have homologue repercussions in the cultural system, among which figure an adapted definition and legitimation of the “national” literature by certain groups of cultural agents (see below). The previous definitions of the identity of “Belgian literature” become problematic. Until 1920, the ideology of literary nationalism proclaiming a “Belgian soul”, (*âme belge*) was built on the “myth of the North.” “Belgian literature” was defined by the formula of *nordicité* (i.e., Flanders, a Flemish subject) + *langue française*, whereas the Flemish language was not deemed worthy to procreate a literature (Klinkenberg 43). In other words, Flanders furnished a “Belgian” historical past: the Francophone cultural agency appropriated an imaginary Flanders in order to create a “Belgian” tradition but doing so by exclusion of the Flemish language *per se*.¹⁴ This emphasis on the northern, “Flemish” inspiration of the Francophone “Belgian” literature offered a distinctive feature for the affirmation of its autonomy with respect to France. After 1920, this dominant unitarian ideology was seriously challenged. Faced with the socio-political and cultural emancipation of Flanders, Francophones were forced to look for alternative legitimations of a “national” literature which would incorporate Flemish literature, at least to some extent, instead of ignoring it. Moreover, given the loss of political unity, the literary system was poised to re-define and to re-affirm the view of an endangered unitarian Belgium:

¹⁴ The mythical, imaginary Flanders – which also appeared in the translators’ prefaces (see above) – is most of the time that of the pictorial tradition of Brueghel, Teniers, Jordaens. It is synonymous with fairs, beer, feasts, but also with mysticism.

“Cette défense de l’unité politique par le recours à l’affirmation d’une unité littéraire belge apparaît surtout dans les années qui suivent 1918” (Vivier 42). The distinctive feature of this new kind of “Belgeoisie” – replacing the northern myth – will be its regionalistic inspiration. Regionalistic novels as a hymn to common people, the land and the village, tradition and traditional values, are seen as the means by excellence to define a literature “of our own” and to increase patriotism. They are considered as the “most natural” way to be patriotic (Hanlet 8), illustrating the political needs underlying the new literary myth:

Or, pour un écrivain, quel thème plus attachant qu’un visage familial et cher? Depuis longtemps, ce thème, M. Henri Davignon, romancier de chez nous, en exploite toutes les ressources... (Gerlache 483)

La Comtesse des Dignes est un des grands livres de notre littérature. Il est un tableau fidèle d’une contrée, des gens de chez nous et surtout de l’âme flamande, si profonde et si discrète. (Mey 254)

The group in charge of defending the new myth comprises the entire Belgian Francophone (Flemish and French) establishment.¹⁵ This elite represents and continues “tradition” in several societal domains. At the level of literary production, they aim at continuing the prewar traditional cultural models, qualified at the time as “neo-classicism,” and at taking a firm stand against all forms of avant-garde art. On the level of cultural institutions, they are members of the Academy or of the “Association belge des écrivains de langue française” (ABELF). In the political domain, the same people are members of the right-wing conservative Catholic party and many of them play an active political role as members of the Chamber of Representatives, as senators or as ministers. In the religious field, they are conservative – sometimes even reactionary – Catholics having strong, direct links with the Catholic Church and in particular with its Francophone upper-clergy. On the socio-economic level, they belong to the upper-bourgeoisie and nobility and occupy the most prestigious professional positions such as university professorships, the corporate leadership, and they are lawyers, landowners, etc. Their texts are also re-published by Éditions Rex and in the already mentioned periodicals.¹⁶ Thus the preference for, and the promotion of regionalistic literature is an aspect of a very coherent social discourse in which various subdiscourses are produced and re-interpreted from a nationalistic, unitar-

¹⁵ As I mentioned before, the Francophone elite of the 1920s and 1930s also included the Francophone Flemish upper-bourgeoisie, clergy, and nobility.

¹⁶ To mention a few names: Henri Davignon, Henri Carton de Wiart, Camille Melloy, Pierre Nothomb, Giovanni Hoyois, Thomas Braun, Charles du Bus de Warnaffe, Paul Crokaert, Pierre Daye, Robert de Vroylande, Charles d’Ydewalle, Maurice Gauchez, Roger Kervyn de Marcke ten Driessche, Léopold Levaux, Louis de Lichtmelde, Franz Ansel, Louis Picard, Jules Sottiau, Armand Thibaut.

ian, conservative Catholic point of view. The above cited passages already demonstrated how the literary subdiscourse tried to propagate the new Belgeoisie. The following examples illustrate the interdependence of politics, religion, and literature in this discursive practice:

On aurait fort surpris les catholiques de Belgique, il y a seulement un demi-siècle, si on leur eût annoncé qu'un jour ils auraient une activité littéraire assez fervente... Ce que l'enquête actuelle achève de nous révéler... c'est que l'idée catholique dans la Belgique contemporaine est réputée susceptible de devenir matière d'art et inspiratrice d'art... (Goyau 212)

Les lettres ont dans la hiérarchie nationale un rang, qu'elles doivent plus à elles-mêmes qu'aux conditions où elles se meuvent, mais qui mérite [*sic*] le respect et la sympathie de l'étranger. On doit plus que s'en réjouir. Il incombe à chacun de s'en rendre solidaire et de favoriser le recrutement, la connaissance et le progrès de notre littérature nationale. (Davignon 649)

Sauf le comté de Namur, toutes nos provinces ont toujours été bilingues. Voilà la tradition... La tradition, c'est une chose vivante... l'histoire le montre, clair comme le jour : le principe de vie pour la Belgique a toujours été, sa marche progressive vers l'union des provinces, et la constitution d'un État central... Du reste, l'expansion de la littérature flamande n'a rien à craindre de l'expansion voisine de la littérature française en Belgique. L'une et l'autre se soutiennent réciproquement. Et c'est un fait remarquable : leur épanouissement et leur décadence ont toujours été simultanés. Exaltons donc les deux cultures. (Goffinet 406-08)

Before I turn to the role of translations in this discursive system, two remarks may illustrate the ambiguity and difficulties characterizing its search for legitimation. First of all, the myth is undermined from the outside by the internationally oriented Belgian avant-garde, such as the Surrealists. For them, Belgian Francophone literature is a literary province of France.¹⁷ To become fully accepted by Paris, to avoid rejection, Belgian literature has to quit once and for all with its regionalistic inspiration:

¹⁷ On March 1, 1937, this thesis found its most elaborate formulation in *Le Manifeste du Groupe du Lundi*, signed by some twenty important writers (Otten 66) among which one finds the majority of Francophone Flemish authors such as Marie Gevers, George Marlow, Franz Hellens, etc.

Au point de vue littéraire, je tiens que la Belgique est une province française... Edmond Picard affirmait le contraire. Si on avait dû l'écouter, nos écrivains useraient aujourd'hui d'une langue bâtarde qui les confinerait dans les limites du territoire national... En France aussi, il existe des écrivains qui limitent leur horizon à leur province natale. Ils se trouvent, par rapport à Paris dans la même situation que les nôtres. (Franz Hellens in *BOAEB* 138)

Malheureusement un très grand obstacle menace d'entraver le plein épanouissement du mouvement d'avant-garde; la vague funeste de ce néo-classicisme auquel d'autres... se raccrochent comme à une planche de salut... Cet art nouveau doit être enfin et fatalement internationaliste, comme tous les grands courants actuels. (André de Ridder in Gyselinx 52)

The two groups confront each other via studies and articles which lead at the end of the 1930s to what is called at the time “the quarrel of regionalism”, (see Poulet). From the inside, the myth is undermined by a love-hate relationship with France. On the one hand, the unitarian establishment severely denounces the overwhelming presence of French books, journals, and their publishers on the Belgian market which – in their opinion – harm Belgian Francophone writers with respect to their own public (see *BOAEB* 120, 126). On the other hand, they are themselves – consciously or unconsciously – marked by a sometimes strong Parisianism, illustrated both by an intense interest in French literature, and an explicit affirmation of Paris as the norm for both Belgian Francophone and Flemish writers:

Nous sommes heureux de pouvoir mettre cette œuvre d'un auteur national sur le même rang que les meilleurs romans français de l'époque... (Sneyers 113)

Mettre la théologie en rimes, ainsi que le voulait Sully Prudhomme, n'est pas son [d'Alice Nahon] fait : “Ik voel me verwant, met kleine, simpele dingen.” Par là, son œuvre s'apparente aux romantiques, et particulièrement à Musset, qu'elle aimait beaucoup... En quelques mots, l'auteur situe son sujet, crée l'ambiance. Qu'on en juge par cette première strophe de *Middagwiedsters* qu'aurait aimée Leconte de l'Isle...

P.S. À ceux qui ne peuvent comprendre A. Nahon dans sa langue originale, nous signalons que quelques-unes de ses poésies ont été traduites en français par Mme Marie Gevers. (Louveaux 538-40)

The translation policy illustrated by the Éditions Rex translations functions as a means to strengthen the regionalist myth, and this for several reasons. In general, the cultural awakening of the Flemish people has led to an increased interest in and even appreciation of Flemish literature and culture in Flanders. This situation is perceived with envy and advanced as an example by Francophone writers who feel abandoned by their own public (see *BOAEB* 122). Moreover, translations are seen as an excellent means to construct the new Belgeoisie by increasing cultural and literary contacts:

... et nous avons travaillé à la réalisation de notre idéal qui est d'encourager et de propager la littérature d'expression française d'où qu'elle vienne, mais davantage les lettres « patriales. » Nous avons été la première revue d'expression française qui se soit occupée sérieusement du mouvement littéraire flamand et avons traduit déjà de nombreuses œuvres de nos confrères « moedertaliens. » (Gauchez in Gyselinx 24)

Un des buts littéraires que nous poursuivons est de faire apprécier davantage, par des traductions, les trésors de nos lettres flamandes... (Goemaere in Gyselinx 32)

As for the selection strategies I already referred to, the 1920s are the heyday of Flemish regionalism – with Claes and Timmermans as the most characteristic producers of *Heimatkunst* – which means that the models the Belgian establishment is in search for are widely available. Furthermore, it is obvious that the legitimation needs of the new Belgeoisie are particularly well served by translators who themselves are known as writers “de chez nous,” as is the case of the Éditions Rex translators, and of most of their Francophone colleagues. With regard to the textual translation strategies, the refusal of dialects by the Belgian francophone literary establishment is a clear example of the interference between socio-political and literary norms. Walloon dialects were unacceptable in translations which had to strengthen the unitarian state because of the existence of a separate literature in Walloon and promoted by Walloon nationalists. On the other hand, the translation choices which imply a certain degree of code-breaking – owing to the introduction of Flemish norms and models – are certainly inspired by the wish to recuperate Flemish literature for the sake of the new Belgeoisie and thus to serve the unitarian state.

Finally, it has also become clear how the contradictory Parisianism of this elitist nationalist discourse has influenced certain translation strategies. The superiority of the *Francophonie* is indirectly reflected by the sometimes slightly condescending tone and the stereotyped presentation of Flanders in prefaces and in critical texts:

Enfin, le récit poignant de Gérard Walschap découvre un autre aspect de la race flamande, ce flot d'amertume qui déferle parfois sur l'âme de la race, non seulement aux lendemains de ripailles... En un mot ces oeuvrettes diverses de ton, de caractère, d'accent, enclo-sent toute l'âme de la Flandre. Elles se complètent de la manière la plus heureuse. (*La Revue Belge* [March 1, 1932]: 479)

Wannes Raps est un malchanceux. Mais c'est un brave homme qui croit en Dieu bien qu'il dise à certains moments un étrange « chapelet de cheval. » Il y a dans ce conte un mélange de mysticisme, de comique et de grossièreté qui apparente cette œuvre aux tableaux de nos primitifs. Roger Kervyn a, dans sa traduction, conservé la couleur locale de cette œuvre, la naïveté de l'âme populaire. Ce personnage un peu loufoque, qui est le héros du récit, n'est pas une exception en Flandre, mais une fleur du terroir. (Mey 256)

The adaptation of the source texts to French models and norms (e.g., division into chapters, the use of the conventional quotation marks, the impositions of a pre-established literary code, etc.), illustrate the same phenomenon. My analysis shows how translations as a specific – but only one – manifestation of inter-systemic contacts, play a role in the dynamics of a cultural system. The case of the Éditions Rex translations in the 1930s is only the very first step toward a more global comprehension of the relationships of Belgian Francophone literature with “the Other” – hence of its functioning as such. Yet, it has already become clear how illusory it is to confine literary (and cultural) histories to “original” texts.

On a secondary level, my case study is a reaction against the restriction of literary histories to the afterwards canonized avant-garde. The severe denunciation of regionalistic literature by the Belgian avant-garde in the 1920s and 1930s, for instance, has to be related to the efforts of the establishment to save their literary canon – partly by means of importation. As long as the latter continue to be “forgotten” by scholars, interpretation and explanation of systematic changes will be biased.

Finally, the present study is also a plea for a cultural and socio-semiotic turn in translation studies. Without falling into the trap of determinism, we have to be aware that the emphasis within the systemic approach on the open-ended character of systems makes no sense if, in practice, descriptive research is still confined to *Literature* or *Culture*. My, albeit limited, investigation of the sociological context of specific translation practices is a first step towards an understanding of relationships between various discursive formations (literary, political, religious) in Belgian society between the two World Wars.

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