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Mainstreaming Classics in 21st Century Portugal

Abstract: *After decades of decline, Classical Philology is now thriving in the universities of Lisbon and Coimbra. However, with 40 new students, at most, every year, this is still a niche under graduation. How can we explain, then, that in February 2019 a new Latin grammar became a best seller in Portugal? How is it possible that two social media pages about Latin and Ancient Greek have reached more than 12 000 followers, during the lockdown period? Have the Classics finally become mainstream? These will be some of the questions we will try to answer in our paper, focusing mainly on outreach activities to adults.*

I. An unexpected trend.

When it comes to reading habits, Portugal ranks consistently below most EU countries. A study presented last September at ISCTE-IUL (Higher Institute of Business and Labour Sciences – University Institute of Lisbon) reminded us that in 2013 67,5% of European over 15 years old declared to have read at least one book in the last 12 months. In Portugal, only 37,8% did so. This study, a collaboration between ISCTE researchers and the governmental PNL (National Reading Plan), also revealed, among other data, that in 2019 only about 31% of elementary and secondary school students read more than 3 books[1]. So, it does not come as a surprise the fact that bookselling is not a profitable business for most small bookshops, that struggle to survive in a market dominated by large corporations. The Portuguese reader is not a sophisticated one, either. A walk among the aisles of any big bookstore will reveal mostly national and international bestsellers. But, if one is lucky, one may find a Latin grammar there. Yes. You heard it correctly. A Latin grammar (Lourenço, 2019b). Or a bilingual anthology of ancient Greek poetry (Lourenço, 2020). Or a fresh new Virgil translation (André, 2020). So, why is there a Latin grammar among other bestsellers? Latin has only a few dozen students in secondary schools[2], and

[1] The full document and video presentation can be seen here: http://www.pnl2027.gov.pt/np4/praticasdeleitura.html (last visited 12 October 2020).

[2] In 2019 only 65 secondary school students applied for the National Latin Examination.

no more than maybe 300 in all Portuguese universities, each year. But this new Latin grammar (already in its 2nd edition) sold more than 2000 copies since it was first published, in March 2019. What about the bilingual Greek poetry book? Published last April, when the country was in full lockdown, it arrived in bookstores only in May, when most restrictions were lifted, and bookstores could reopen. Since then, it already sold more than 1000 copies, in only 4 months[3]. Do we have about 1000 students of ancient Greek literature in our universities? Maybe a few dozens, every year[4]. I must remind you that we are only about 10 million, with very poor reading habits. This only highlights how exceptional these figures are.

II. A late rediscovery.

Portugal never had a strong tradition of translating classical Greek and Roman literature. When I was an undergraduate of Classical Philology, in the early 90s, I had to rely mostly on English, French and Spanish translations. We had to wait until 2003 to have the first translation of the *Odyssey* in verse, and the first modern translation of the *Iliad* came out only in 2005. The first academic verse translation of the *Aeneid* was published last June, after the first academic prose translation in 2003. These are no modest works, but the most remarkable foundations of western culture. Of course, there were a few translations in the beginning of 20th century, and even earlier, but they were outdated – and out of print, for decades.

There are some reasons for this neglect. First, for economic reasons, we have no access to the vast Brazilian market. Until recently, all books published in Portugal had a note stating they could not be sold in Brazil. The fact is even though Brazilian and European Portuguese varieties do not differ much, still Portuguese books are subject to spelling and minor syntax intervention, unless the author states that they don't allow any kind of adaptation, like José Saramago famously did. The same goes for Brazilian authors published in Portugal, although not so often. So, our market is a small one. One might argue that some even smaller markets have quality translations of the Classics – even other Iberian languages, with much fewer speakers, like our sister Galician, with only about 2 million speakers, have their own versions of Homer, since the 90s. But there are other reasons.

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3 Approximate numbers provided by the author of both books.

4 Greek Literature is only mandatory for Classical Philology students. In Lisbon and Coimbra there about 40 new students every year.

Second, as I said before, we do not read much, and when the 1974 Revolution put an end to five decades of fascist dictatorship, we had outrageous illiteracy rates, over 25%. Now, with about 5%, we still have one of the highest European illiteracy rates[5].

Third, during most of last century, even after the 1974 Revolution, culture was the privilege of a minority who could easily read in French, Spanish and English, so there was no demand for Portuguese translations.

Finally, there was a certain haughtiness among Portuguese scholars, the idea that you just do not need to read a Portuguese translation, because you already can read good English, French, Spanish or German translations. When I was still a young reckless student of Classical Studies, I remember asking a professor why there were no Portuguese translations of the Odyssey. She looked at me, puzzled, almost offended, as if I were asking an utterly bizarre question, and all she said was "Why? Can't you read English?". The notion of enriching our language and literature and outreaching to non-academic readers through quality translations, the idea that Homer and Virgil and Ovid were not the privilege of an elite enclosed in their dark, dusty libraries was – and still is – strange to many a scholar in Portugal.

If I bother you with these facts, it is because much what I have to say today is already normal in so many countries. But my country, one of the poorest in Europe, has a very serious problem with reading, and recent History might explain it.

When the first modern translation of the *Odyssey* came out in 2003 (Lourenço, 2003), however, it was much more than another academic translation. It became an immediate cultural phenomenon and, most surprisingly, a bestseller. Everybody was talking about it, on TV, on newspapers, everywhere. The same happened two years later, when in the same publishing house came out a new translation of the *Iliad* (Lourenço, 2005).

III. Not all Classics were created equal.

Let me be clear, though. These unexpected bestsellers are just that, exceptional. Not all Classics were created equal, for the Portuguese reader. Many other translations have been published in the last two decades, but none had the same wide impact as Homer, the bilingual poetry, or even the Latin gram-

[5] These numbers are from the 2011 national census, and were published by PORDATA (Contemporary Portugal Database): https://www.pordata.pt/Portugal/Taxa+de+analfabetismo+segundo+os+Censos+total+e+por+sexo-2517

mar. Apuleius, Catullus, Horace, Lucretius, Ovid, Petronius, Tacitus, Virgil, just to mention a few, all had new translations in more than one publishing house. Still, they have interesting selling numbers, and publishing houses are interested in them. For instance, Virgil's *Georgics* and *Eclogues* had new translations, published last November by Gabriel Silva (Silva, 2019a; Silva, 2019b), from our Centre for Classical Studies. Both books were presented at a well-known bookshop, by a Latin Literature expert. But also, by a popular comedian and radio host, with no connection to the traditional academic world. So, why this sudden change at the beginning of the century? Why are media celebrities presenting Virgil, and why are Latin grammars and Homer bestsellers? I think it has to do with how the Classics have been presented.

IV. The Rising of popular Classics.

In 2002 my dear friend Frederico Lourenço published his first and acclaimed novel (Lourenço, 2002). It was the first openly LGBTQ+ themed book in contemporary Portuguese literature to become mainstream and to win one of our most important literary prizes[6]. Therefore, when one year later Lourenço published his new *Odyssey* verse translation, it was not just another academic self-centred and obscure publication. It was an exquisite hardcover edition, in a literary but contemporary, accessible, and beautiful Portuguese, by someone everybody already knew. Not as an academic, but as a novelist, and an unconventional one. And it was issued by one of our most respected publishing houses, and marketed not as an academic work, but as a book for everyone who likes literature. And it was a bestseller, and everybody was talking about it, not only classical philologists. Two years later, Lourenço published his translation of the *Iliad*, and I dare say it was even a bigger success. Those two books became the first of a new collection by Cotovia publishing house, featuring quality translations from the Greek and Roman classics, by classical philologists from Lisbon and Coimbra universities.

Lourenço went on to achieve further editorial success, now on Quetzal publishing house. Among other works, such as revised editions of the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, in February 2019 he published a new Latin grammar (Lourenço, 2019b), which sold more than 2000 copies, and surely being marketed as a "book for everyone" contributed to this unexpected success. Also, both the original versions and his adaptations of Homer for children entered the official list

[6] Lourenço won the 2002 PEN Club award for a first novel: http://www.penclubeportugues.org/os-premios/pen-clube-portugues/

of readings in elementary and secondary schools, which is no small feature. During the March and April lockdown, he started teaching Latin and Greek on Facebook, by creating two very successful pages, with thousands of followers[7].

Does this mean that all those who bought his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* have read them? Or any other of the many new translations by other academics published in the last 20 years? Unfortunately, I believe they do not. Most just bought them because everyone was talking about it. Maybe most just read a few pages and moved on. And that is not as bad as it may sound. At least some Classics are becoming mainstream. They are being shelved in personal libraries, just like other literary unread icons, like Joyce's or Tolstoy's masterpieces.

V. Outreaching to the community.
V.1. Secondary schools.

But does this mean Classics are just a fad among Portuguese readers? Not at all. In the last few years Classics have become popular, in Portugal, and I am sure Lourenço's translations and mediatic exposure had a very important role. But outreaching activities led by my Centre for Classical Studies and other centres and non-academic associations are perhaps the key for maintaining this flame, this interest people from all sort of background have been having for Classics.

V.2. Society.

Outreaching activities led by Centre for Classical Studies of the University of Lisbon have, as I've said, a very important role on this trend. As mentioned in my presentation in February, in Skopje, we deal mostly with activities for children and teenagers, both in elementary and secondary schools. But outreaching to adults is also a key part in mainstreaming the Classics, mainly by conferences and short-term courses.

I have been particularly interested in this kind of approach, and every time I am surprised by how eager adults are for Classics-related content. For the past years I have been giving lectures about Classical literature, in my hometown public library, organized by a cultural association of which I am a member, Estufa, in collaboration with the Centre for Classical Studies.

The first edition took place in 2016 and 2017, comprising 8 lectures, from Homer to Petronius. The second edition was in 2018, with 6 lectures on

[7] "Latim do zero" (Latim from scratch): https://www.facebook.com/latimdozero ; "Grego do zero" (Greek from scratch): https://www.facebook.com/Grego-do-Zero-Li%C3%A7%C3%B5es-de-Frederico-Louren%C3%A7o-a-partir-do-Novo-Testamento-100354565008928

Horace, Lucian and others. In both editions, all lectures took place at the public library, on a Saturday, and all sessions were packed with retired people, doctors, secondary school teachers, unemployed, commerce workers, lawyers, etc. Accordingly, I do not present Euripides or Petronius the same way I do in my University classes. This is no academic audience. I know this might sound obvious to you, but unfortunately it is not for most academics when addressing to non-academic audiences.

In 2019, I was asked to give a Latin language course. And so I did. In 7 sessions I presented the basics of Latin to more than 30 people from all kinds of background, including the Secretary of Culture of our town council. Two of these sessions were field trips to the local museum and to a medieval monastery, to read and talk about local roman inscriptions and also Latin in Christian art and literature.

VI. Some conclusions.

There is a demand for classical related content, in our societies. And that should not be unexpected. After all, modern pop culture is full of classical references. I mean, isn't *Harry Potter* full of classical mythology, with characters with Latin and Greek names? Aren't fantasy series, the likes of *The Hunger Games*, based on Roman and Greek iconography, culture and, again, personal names? Aren't our soap operas based on a narrative structure that dates to the Greek novels and comedies? Aren't so many blockbusters full of classical references, albeit discrete, sometimes even in their names? Aren't our shops full of products with Greek and Roman related names?

Ordinary people do want to learn about Classics, and when we present Classics not as exclusive, elevated, purely academic, distant masterpieces, but as the fascinating literary and cultural foundations of our western culture they are, people pour into our classes, and pack our conferences, and, especially, they ask for more.

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