

# SAMUEL PUTNAM'S TRANSLATION OF EUCLIDES DA CUNHA'S *OS SERTÕES. REBELLION IN THE BACKLANDS:* BETTER THAN THE ORIGINAL?

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*Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine the English version of Os Sertões considered by Straile & Fitz as an excellent translation. The Rebellion in the Backlands translated by Samuel Putnam presents a number of positive features and innovations that motivate the following question: Is the translation better than the source language text? In the course of this paper, I intend to answer that question and comment on the issues of authorship and visibility in the act of translation.*

*Keywords: Translational loyalty; Brazilian literature; Euclides da Cunha; Samuel Putnam.*

**R***ebellion in the Backlands*, Samuel Putnam's English translation of Euclides da Cunha's masterpiece, *Os sertões* has been translated into many different languages of the world; this global presence has contributed to the "transformation" of the book from a national work to an important piece of World Literature, universal in its message with regard to human behavior and available to speakers of French, Italian, Chinese, Spanish, Swedish, German and a host of other languages.

The place of *Os sertões* in Brazilian literature is secure. For the Brazilian critic and member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters, Afrânio Peixoto,<sup>1</sup> Euclides da Cunha

*is our number one geographer and sociologist, one who, in place of viewing his native land with patriotic emphasis as "my country, right or wrong" has rather, seen it and studied it and has drawn his deductions as to what this land really*

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<sup>1</sup> Afrânio Peixoto (1876-1947) was a medical doctor, statesman, university professor, literary critic and author of novels and literary histories. He was elected a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1910. See [www.academia.org.br](http://www.academia.org.br).

*is, and, as a consequence, what manner of man it is that springs from such a soil – how the land many be changed and man thereby may become a different being from the one he is* (in PUTNAM, 1943, p. xxi).

However, it is not only Samuel Putnam's "superb" translation into English as Straile and Fitz (1995) evaluate it, but also there are many other features accompanying the English rendering not mentioned by those critics that contribute, in my view, to the translation being so acclaimed by the readership.

Very valuable for the readers, who do not know Portuguese and are not familiar at all with Brazilian life, literature and culture, is the very scholarly and quite extensive preface written by the translator himself: "Brazil's Greatest Book: A Translator's Introduction" (PUTNAM, 1943, p. iii-xviii). Putnam situates the text for his prospective readers. Putnam's introduction points to his knowledge about Euclides da Cunha's life and work. To quote the translator:

*Whatever else he may or may not have been, Cunha was a hard worker. He was no ivory-tower inmate but a practicing engineer, toiling at his trade. From 1898 to 1902 he was engaged, simultaneously, in building a bridge and in writing his masterpiece, and the two were completed at one and the same time.*

Putnam is an exception to the view on the part of some translation scholars that all translators are invisible.<sup>2</sup> Highly visible indeed, Samuel Whitehall Putnam (1982-1950) was an editor, author, publisher and distinguished translator of Rabelais and Cervantes into English. For a number of years he served as literary and art critic for the Chicago *Evening Post*.<sup>3</sup> Schulte's (2002, p.1) remark in this regard is very much to the point: "Translating a text cannot be separated from the most intense form of research".

In addition to Putnam's learned introduction, those who read English are privileged to have access to a second preface written by Afrânio Peixoto (PUTNAM, 1943, p. xxi), a member of the Brazilian Academy of Letters who makes an important comment about the English translation:

*Such is this book, worthy of appearing in a language that is broader, more universal in appeal. It is a book that represents a moment in the history of humanity; and thanks to its style, its art, and its science, that ephemeral moment is destined to be eternal.*

*Os sertões* is not all an easy book to read in any language. Cunha's erudition is indeed impressive. His Portuguese is cultured, syntactically complex and lexically rich. His style is innovative but not experimental as are later writers such as Guimarães Rosa or José Cândido de Carvalho. Cunha's knowledge of history, geography, geology, sociology, and anthropology contribute to making the book difficult reading even for native speakers of the language.<sup>4</sup> He directed his work to a highly cultured elite in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century who were familiar with the historical, literary, political, anthropological and sociological facts

2 I agree with the plea on the part of translation scholars for recognition of the work of translators. What is fundamental with regard to visibility is to make translation studies and translation scholarship visible in universities and institutes of higher learning.

3 See <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article?toclid=9061989>.

4 An excellent bibliography of Master's theses and Doctoral Dissertations dealing with different aspects of Euclides da Cunha's work can be found at <http://euclidesite.sites.uol.com.br/teses.htm>. Research on the author has been carried out in the fields of history, sociology, geography, anthropology, politics, communication and literature a fact that attests to the interdisciplinarity of Euclides da Cunha.

in his text. References in the original Portuguese version to literary figures as Gonçalves Dias, to Brazilian flora as the *igapós*, to important events in Brazilian history, for example, the *Anhangüera*, an expedition by the Portuguese conquerors and explorers, in addition to one H. W. Bates, a 19<sup>th</sup> Century English scientist who carried out research in Brazil, were familiar to Cunha's readers and they needed no explanations in the form of footnotes to process the text. Quite parsimonious in the use of notations, Cunha included a limited number of endnotes that he, no doubt, deemed essential for his readership at the time of writing. Putnam translated Cunha's notes and added his own to facilitate textual interpretation for his readers.

Putnam as translator had to deal with a different type of reader. In addition to translating, he had to interpret or explain Brazil to his English-speaking readers. Only a minority of his readers had specialized knowledge of the country. Not all of them could be expected to know who Gonçalves Dias was, what an *igapó* is, or the significance of the *Anhangüera* expedition in Brazilian history. The translator tackles the problem of the "foreignness" of the text by providing explanatory footnotes to assist his readers in dealing with the plethora of terms cited by Cunha. The following footnotes<sup>5</sup> provided by Putnam contribute to the enrichment of the target language text and attest to his status as a scholar-translator:

*Gonçalves Dias* = [Well-known Brazilian poet of the last century (1823-64), noted for his love of nature, tinged with pantheism.] (PUTNAM, 1943, p. 53, footnote 5).

[H. W. Bates, *The Naturalist on the River Amazons* (London, 1982).] (PUTNAM, 1943, p. 58, footnote 12).

[The *igapós* are bits aquatic jungle, pools entirely grown over with vegetation. For a good description of the *igapó*, the *igarapé*, and the *paraná* cf. the *paramirim* or *paraná-miri*, see *Rose and Bob Brown*, *Amazing Amazon* (New York: Modern Age, 1942), p.24-25.] (PUTNAM, 1943, p. 59, footnote 15).

*Anhangüera* = [Large scale bandeirante expedition]

An additional feature of the translation not found in the Portuguese original is a rather extensive glossary of botanical, zoological and Brazilian regionalisms. One example from each category points to the usefulness of the information for those unacquainted with Brazil. The glossaries contribute to the readability of the translation for the English-speaking public:

*Carnaúba*. *The wax-palm* (*Copernicia cerifera* Mart.). (PUTNAM, 1943, p. 403).

*Ema* See *Rhea*. (Portuguese: *ema*). *The South American ostrich* (*Rhea americana*), which ranges from Brazil to Patagonia. (PUTNAM, 1943, p. 494).

*Sertanista*. As used by Cunha, this term is practically equivalent to "pioneer" of the *sertões*, or *backlands*); also, in general, a student of, or authority on, the *sertão* (q.v.). Not to be confused with *sertanejo*, a *backlands* native. See page page 174, n. 5 (PUTNAM, 1943, p. 497).

5 Duke (1993) argues that some translators resort to footnotes as a strategy to protect the meaning of original texts. She refers to the use of footnotes on the part of Vera Queiroz de Costa, the Brazilian translator of Chinua Achebe's *Things fall apart*, as a strategy to participate in the interpretation and construction of meanings. Putnam does the same in his role as researcher-translator.

Throughout Cunha's text, readers encounter a vast number of Brazilianisms. Putnam maintains many of the Portuguese words in English without italics or quotation marks: jagunço, sertanejo, gaúcho, vaqueiro but other words as *umbusada*, *cateretés*, *choradinho* and *fazendeiro* are presented in italics. Translations indeed act as instances of cultural exchange. Putnam's English version of *Os sertões* introduces new words into English. Those neologisms can become part of the vocabulary of those who read the translation as well as who may comment on or criticize the translation as Straile; Fitz (1995) do. As soon as words find their way into the speech and writing of speakers of English, it does not take very long for them to appear as entries in dictionaries of the language. Quite surprising, in my view, is Straile's; Fitz' (1995, p. 5) contention that Putnam's translation fails to enrich the English language.

While Straile; Fitz (1995) do indeed praise Putnam's translation (to cite their words: "One can only feel a great indebtedness to Samuel Putnam for his superb English rendering of Euclides da Cunha's *Os sertões*"), they argue that Putnam fails to reconstruct the "full stylistic impact" (p. 50) of Cunha's original. They go on to argue that Putnam prevents prospective readers from "experiencing the dramatic effect a reading of the original unquestionable creates" (p. 50). Straile's; Fitz' position with regard to the English translation is based on the belief that Cunha's style "underscores the uniqueness" of the Portuguese text. Putnam is faulted for altering the style of the original "especially in terms of the modern reader's response to it". Putnam's supposed "disfiguring" of the original amounts to a repositioning of a series of three sentences into one paragraph (composed as well of three sentences). Compare the original with the translation:

*Estamos condenados à civilização.  
Ou progredimos ou desaparecemos.  
A afirmativa é segura.*

*We are condemned to civilization. Either we shall progress or we shall perish.  
So much is certain, and our choice is clear.*

To be sure, English-speaking readers prefer paragraphs to separate sentences presented one after the other. Putnam had his readers in mind and was being loyal to them. This stylistic presentation has nothing to do with the perception of a dramatic effect on the part of readers. The problem here is that Straile; Fitz hold an essentialist view of translation. How do Straile; Fitz (1995) know that the original crates "unquestionably" a "dramatic effect" that the translation fails to provide? Who are the readers Straile; Fitz have in mind? Reader reaction to a specific text is a very personal matter and readership is located in time and situated in place. Many Brazilian readers (and no doubt readers of other nationalities) never finish their reading; some opt to read only certain parts of the work, particularly the Chapter "Man" ["O Homem"]. And again, how would English speaking readers (who do not know Portuguese) actually know that they are being deprived of the "dramatic effect" due to changes in the style?

Reader response on the part of the Brazilian cultural elite in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century shortly after the Canudos revolt (1886-1897) would be most likely quite different from the reaction of present-day Brazilian readers. Cunha's readers in the aftermath of the rebellion were not uniform in their view

of the action taken by the Republic. Some groups supported the government while others condemned the suppression of the jagunços. *Os sertões* was indeed a controversial text in the years following its publication. It was rejected by those in power and acclaimed by those who advocated a peaceful solution to the conflict.

Today, at the very threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, I contend that readers of *Os sertões in any language* (my emphasis) in spite of the (minor) linguistic differences can indeed experience the real “dramatic effect” of the work – the inhumanity of man to man, the cultural blindness and intransigence on the part of the Republic, determined at all cost to suppress the Canudos Rebellion, completely ignorant of the causes of the uprising – social exclusion and economic deprivation. Sensitive, humanistic and intellectually-prepared readers, no matter what their nationality may be, will, no doubt link, the Canudos tragedy to other “holocausts” that have occurred in the world. Some examples are the genocide in Nazi Germany during World War II as well as in former Yugoslavia, Uganda, Viet Nam, Iran, Iraq and many other parts of the world.

It is appropriate at this point to come to grips with the question posed in the abstract that accompanies this article. *Is the translation better than the source language text?* Based on what I have said about the situatedness of readership as well as the different types of possible readings of any text, the question I have raised is spurious. Who decides what is better? What elements contribute to making a translation “better”? Certainly the translation would be less felicitous for the putative readership if Putnam had not done his research as a scholar-translator by providing: (i) a scholarly introduction, (ii) copious footnotes, (iii) glossaries, and (iv) a preface by Afrânio Peixoto. Only readers who are familiar with both English and Portuguese as well as Brazilian culture and civilization are in a position to express an opinion about the original and the translation. Everybody has the right to their own opinions and beliefs, but they are always subjective.

Putnam’s translation is indeed visible, has been in print for over 50 years and has been read by legions of readers. The translator’s scholarship and painstaking work have contributed to making him “an author” in his own right, a “Euclides da Cunha” scholar as well as a “euclideano”, an admirer of the distinguished Brazilian writer and statesman. Putnam’s translation has extended the life of Cunha’s masterpiece and has placed it in different cultures where English is spoken as a native, second or foreign language. The translation is still being read around the world. No doubt the translation has been appeared in the reading lists of university-level Comparative and World Literature courses and particularly in disciplines devoted to Latin American and Luso-Brazilian Literatures in Translation. Even though it was published in the early years of the last century, *Rebellion in the Backlands* still remains contemporary and universal in its message: that humans can become different beings from the ones they are, to paraphrase once again Afrânio Peixoto’s remarks.

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**Resumo:** O objetivo deste trabalho é analisar a tradução inglesa de *Os sertões* considerada por Straile & Fitz uma tradução primorosa da obra de Euclides da Cunha. O texto intitulado *Rebellion in the Backlands*, traduzido por Samuel Putnam, reúne uma gama de atributos e inovações que motivam a seguinte pergunta: A tradução é melhor que a obra na língua de origem? No decorrer do trabalho, pretendemos responder à pergunta e tecer comentários sobre autoria e visibilidade no ato tradutório.

**Palavras-chaves:** Lealdade tradutória; literatura brasileira; Euclides da Cunha; Samuel Putnam