

FEMINIST, "ORGASMIC" THEORIES OF TRANSLATION AND THEIR CONTRADICTIONS¹

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RESUMO: O objetivo principal deste ensaio é o exame de algumas reflexões teóricas sobre a tradução inspiradas pelo feminismo contemporâneo e amparadas numa reflexão sobre a linguagem de vocação supostamente pós-moderna, centrado, sobretudo, em "*Writing in No Man's Land: Questions of Gender and Translation*", de Susan Bassnett, publicado recentemente num periódico brasileiro. Como pretendo argumentar, sua proposta de uma "teoria de tradução orgás-mica" – que pudesse transcender os modelos tradicionais "colonialistas" e "machistas" – e defendida, também, em termos semelhantes, por teóricas tais como Lori Chamberlain, Barbara Godard e Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, entre outras, ao invés de se opor frontalmente à "violência" das teorias que rejeita acaba por endossar algumas das mesmas estratégias que tanto combate nas concepções de ascendência patriarcal. Como tenho proposto, a grande contribuição que as teorias de linguagem contemporâneas (vinculadas ao pós-

ABSTRACT: *The main goal of this essay is to examine some theoretical reflections on translation inspired by contemporary feminism and based on theories of language that are supposedly postmodernist as expressed mainly in a text by Susan Bassnett, "Writing in No Man's Land: Questions of Gender and Translation," recently published in a Brazilian journal. As I intend to argue, her proposal of an "orgasmic theory of translation" – which could transcend traditional, "colonialist" models – and also defended, in similar terms, by authors such as Lori Chamberlain, Barbara Godard and Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, among others, is not radically opposed to the "violence" of the theories she rejects and does, in fact, endorse some of the same strategies she criticizes in patriarchal conceptions. As I have defended in other texts, the major contribution that contemporary theories of language (usually associated to post-structuralism and postmodernism) can offer to translation theory is precisely the notion that every*

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modernismo e ao pós-estruturalismo) podem oferecer à reflexão sobre a tarefa da tradutora, ou do tradutor, é exatamente a noção de que toda tradução – como todo ato interpretativo – por se constituir inevitavelmente numa forma de re-escritura, numa interferência eminentemente autoral, será também, “violenta”, ou seja, implicitamente se apoderará da escritura de outrém e sobre ela imporá seus próprios significados, ainda que tenha como única meta a proteção ao chamado “original”. Assim, para que uma teoria de tradução feminista possa ser também pós-moderna terá que reconhecer, em primeiro lugar, que o prazer da tradutora, ao se apossar do texto que traduz e ao interferir explícita e implicitamente em sua rede de significados, está mais ligado ao prazer autoral de quem imagina poder inaugurar o significado do que à satisfação de uma “colaboração” supostamente pacífica e “orgás-mica” com o “original”.

UNITERMOS: Feminismo; gênero; teoria de tradução; pós-modernismo.

Neutrality has a negative essence (ne-uter), is the negative side of transgression. Sovereignty is not neutral even if it neutralizes, in its discourse, all the contradictions and all the oppositions of classical logic. Neutralization is produced within knowledge and within the syntax of writing, but it is related to a sovereign and transgressive affirmation. The sovereign operation is not content with neutralizing the classical operation in discourse; in the major form of experience it transgresses the law or prohibitions that form a system with discourse, and even with the work of neutralization.

Jacques Derrida (1978)

Susan Bassnett ends a recently published text with the “proposition,” “idealistic though it may seem,” for “an orgasmic theory of translation, in which elements are fused into a new whole in an encounter that is mutual, pleasurable and respectful.” Such a theory would attempt to transcend

translation – as any interpretive act – for being inevitably a form of re-writing, a form of interference which is basically authorial, will also be “violent,” that is, will implicitly take over someone else’s writing and will transform it from its own perspective, even if its only goal is the protection of the so-called “original”. Thus, for a feminist theory of translation to be truly postmodernist it will have to recognize that the (female) translator’s pleasure, as she takes over the text she translates and as she implicitly and explicitly interferes in its network of meanings, is more akin to authorial pleasure than to an allegedly non-violent, “orgasmic” collaboration with her “original”.

KEY-WORDS: Feminism; gender; translation theory; postmodernism.

the violence implied by what she calls “colonialist” and “sexist” conceptions of translation which describe the translator’s task in terms of “inadequacy and betrayal, of rape and penetration, of faithfulness and unfaithfulness” and would be the ideal outcome of a successful cooperation between Translation Studies and Feminism (Bassnett, 1992, p. 72). My main goal in this paper is to examine some limits and possibilities of such a “cooperation” as well as the contradictions it often seems to harbor in its pretension to offer us a non-violent alternative to the “masculine” metaphors of invasion implied by most traditional theories of translation. I shall start by detailing some of Susan Bassnett’s basic argumentative moves beginning with her support of Lori Chamberlain’s groundbreaking “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation” – a brilliant critique of the metaphors with which tradition usually describes the translator’s task – which examines, first of all, how “the oppo-

sition between productive and reproductive work" "organizes the way a culture values work: this paradigm depicts originality or creativity in terms of paternity and authority, relegating the figure of the female to a variety of secondary roles" (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 455). As she observes, "the sexualization of translation," which "appears perhaps most familiarly in the tag *les belles infidèles*" ("like women, the adage goes, translations should be either beautiful or faithful"), suggests a "cultural complicity between the issues of fidelity in translation and in marriage":

For *les belles infidèles*, fidelity is defined by an implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author). However, the infamous "double standard" operates here as it might have in traditional marriages: the "unfaithful" wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing. This contract, in short, makes it impossible for the original to be guilty of infidelity. Such an attitude betrays real anxiety about the problem of paternity and translation; it mimics the patrilineal kinship system where paternity – not maternity – legitimizes an offspring. (1988, p. 456)²

For Chamberlain, an exemplary "masculine" theory of translation (also mentioned by Bassnett) is what she considers to be George Steiner's "model," which "illustrates the persistence of [...] the politics of originality and its logic of violence in contemporary translation theory." Chamberlain refers to Steiner's "four-part process of translation" developed in the opening pages of "The Hermeneutic Motion," Chapter Five of *After Babel*, which she summarizes as follows:

The first step, that of "initiative trust," describes the translator's willingness to take a gamble on the text, trusting that the text will yield something. As a second

step, the translator takes an overly aggressive step, "penetrating" and "capturing" the texts (Steiner calls this "appropriative penetration"), an act explicitly compared to erotic possession. During the third step, the imprisoned text must be "naturalized", must become part of the translator's language, literally incorporated or embodied. Finally, to compensate for this "appropriative rapture," the translator must restore the balance, attempt some act of reciprocity to make amends for the act of aggression. His model for this act of restitution is, he says, "that of Levi-Strauss's *Anthropologie structurale* which regards social structures as attempts at dynamic equilibrium achieved through an exchange of words, women, and material goods." Steiner thereby makes the connection explicit between the exchange of women, for example and the exchange of words in one language for words in another. (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 463).

To Lori Chamberlain's reflection Susan Bassnett brings the contribution of Hélène Cixous's thought particularly as it is expressed in the 1975 essay "*Le Rire de La Meduse*" that proposes to replace the age-old opposition masculine vs. feminine with "a notion of the feminine as transcending biological distinctions." Within such a logic, Cixous considers Jean Genet, for example, as a "feminine" writer because his writing could be placed somewhere in between the two opposites. According to Cixous,

To admit that writing is precisely working (in) the in-between, inspecting the process of the same and the other without which nothing can live, undoing the work of death – to admit this is first to want the two, as well as both, the ensemble of one and the other, not fixed in sequence of struggle and expulsion or some other form of death but infinitely dynamized by an incessant process of exchange from one subject to another. (Cixous, 1976, quoted in Bassnett, 1992, p. 64)

In later texts, Cixous associates the "undoing" of "the work of death" to the undoing of yet another opposition that is also related to the "mas-

2 I have also discussed Lori Chamberlain's views on the "sexualization of translation" in Arrojo 1992 and 1994.

culine" and to tradition: the dichotomy which divides reality into categories of subject and object and that she sees as the basis of all forms of oppression, including patriarchy and colonialism³. Within such a stance, in which "masculine" and "feminine" are considered as different ways to relate to pleasure and to the law, the "feminine" is equated with a certain mode of relationship that could give up the pursuit of power and mastery and that would, therefore, respect difference. Such an attitude towards otherness is already defined, for instance, in "the first fable of our first book," in which "what is at stake is the relationship to the law." In Eve's attitude towards the Apple, towards pleasure and the "law" that regulates it, Cixous identifies "the start of libidinal education." (Cixous, 1988, p. 15). For Eve, God's words ("if you taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge, you will die") do not mean anything "since she is in the paradisiac state where there is no death." Between the two choices with which she is faced – the law, that is "absolute, verbal, invisible, [...] a symbolic *coup de force*" and, above all, "negative"; and the apple, "which is, is, is" – Eve will decide for the "present," "visible" apple which has an "inside" that is "good" and that she does not fear. Thus, Cixous concludes, this very first fable already "tells us that the genesis of woman goes through the mouth, through a certain oral pleasure, and through a non-fear of the inside [...] Eve is not afraid of the inside, neither her own, nor that of the other" (Idem). On the other side of the opposition, the "masculine" response to the law is represented, for instance, by the countryman of Kafka's story who spends his whole life waiting before the law, dominated by the fear of castration. Hence, as Cixous's logic goes, giving is easier for women (or for anyone or any-

thing that can be called "feminine") while men are more prone to retaining: "a limited, or masculine, economy is characterized by retention and accumulation. Its dialectical nature implies the negation – or death – of one of the terms, for the enhancement of the other" (Conley, 1992, pp. 39-40).

These opposite ways of relating to the law produce different styles, different strategies of reading and writing as well as different modes of research. A "feminine" mode of writing, for instance, involves strategies which strive to treat the other "delicately, with the tips of the words, trying not to crush it, in order to un-lie" (Cixous, 1991, p. 134). Obviously, such a "feminine" mode of research, which "presents radical alternatives to the appropriation and destruction of difference necessitated by phallic law" has implications for the ways in which texts are approached. Reading becomes an act of listening to the text's otherness. As a consequence, if the text as other is not to be mastered but listened to, contemporary theories of reading which underline the reader's productive, authorial role are "resisted" and leave room for "the adoption of a state of active receptivity," in which the reader tries to "hear" "what the text is consciously and unconsciously saying" (Susan Sellers's Introduction to Cixous, 1988, p. 7). Cixous herself describes "feminine" reading as "a spiritual exercise," a form of gentle "lovemaking," in which what is important is "to take care of the other": "to know how to read is to take infinite time to read; it is not to take the book for a little geometric object, but for an immense itinerary. It is knowing how to scan, to pace, how to proceed very slowly. To know how to read a book is a way of life" (Cixous, 1990, p. 128).

According to Susan Bassnett, it is "significant" that Cixous was developing her notion of "the in-between" "at exactly the same time as the fledgling discipline of Translation Studies was

3 For a more extended discussion of Cixous's attempt to "undo" such a dichotomy, see also Arrojo 1994a.

coming into being" and that the development of both Translation Studies and feminist theory has gained momentum in the 1970's. For her, both fields share an interest not only in transcending traditional dichotomies but also in going "beyond death" and have a lot to gain from an interdisciplinary dialogue. As she explains, in the 1970's, "much of the work by theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Lucy Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Elisabetta Racy and a good many others was their refusal to continue looking at the world in terms of binary oppositions, male-female, masculine-feminine," at the same time that "most scholars working in Translation Studies" expressed the need "to get away from the binary concept of equivalence and to urge a notion of equivalence based on cultural difference, rather than on some presumed sameness between linguistic systems" (Bassnett, 1992, p. 64), a move which she appropriately relates to "postmodernist thinking" (idem, p. 67). Also, from Walter Benjamin's often quoted "The Task of the Translator" Bassnett gets the notion according to which translation is not "the sterile equation of two dead languages" and is "charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (Benjamin, 1973, quoted in Bassnett, 1992, p. 65). For Bassnett, the "assumption" in Benjamin's text is that translation is "somehow equated with the maternal principle, with caring and with giving birth." It is a process that "gives life to the source language text by bringing it to light in a new language; it is not an activity involving conflict between two literary systems that has to result in the defeat of the one and the victory of the Other" (idem, p. 65). Benjamin's text also allows Bassnett to question "the terminology of loss and gain" that is traditionally associated with translation, and, therefore, also "the idea that translation is somehow a secondary activity, inferior to the act of writing, that the translation stands lower in the hierarchy than the privileged 'original'." Such a conception is rejected "in favor of a notion that sees translation

and writing as interconnected, with the one assuring the survival of the other." Thus, based on an intertextual encounter between Benjamin and Cixous, and inspired by Lori Chamberlain, Bassnett proposes "a reformulation of the old hierarchy that placed woman lower than man. Man, the Original, towered over Woman, the Translation, created (according to one of the Biblical versions of the Creation at least) from man's rib" (idem).

Even though Susan Bassnett and Lori Chamberlain are right in their pointing to the "masculine" "bias" of the supposedly "universal" theorization of George Steiner and others, their own reflection cannot be free from what we might call a "feminist" or a "feminine" stance. In spite of her willingness to "undo" the binary opposition male vs. female which is supposedly related, at least in part, to the marginal status of translation, Bassnett cannot accomplish her goal of establishing the basis for a theory of translation that would be derived from the notion of the "in-between" she finds in Hélène Cixous's conception of "feminine" writing. First of all, as Cixous proposes "to transcend biological distinctions" and to find "some place in between the two poles of male and female," she undoubtedly takes the "feminine" to be the new paradigm, the new *logos*. In other words, it is the "feminine" or, at least, something that she identifies with the "feminine," that comes to be the legitimate basis for everything that is supposedly non-violent and positive. It is the "feminine" which comes to be what we might call, after Jacques Derrida, a "master-concept" or a "master-word" which could be ideally free from the effects of *différance*. Cixous's effort to "undo" the traditional opposition between feminine and masculine does in fact bear some resemblance with what Derrida has considered to be merely a "phase" in a kind of "general strategy of deconstruction" which is an attempt "to avoid both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it" (Derrida, 1987, p. 41). Even

though Cixous tries to "overturn" the hierarchy⁴ of the traditional opposition by placing the "feminine" in the privileged position generally taken by the "masculine," she does not go beyond the overturning phase and simply repeats that which she wishes to deconstruct. That is, by trying to empower the "feminine," which is then associated to everything that is good and desirable, she inevitably emphasizes not only the polarity male vs. female but all the others implied in her argument: violence vs. non-violence, evil vs. good, life vs. death, among others. Instead of finding the "in-between," the space in which the oppositions on which our culture has been built could be deconstructed, Hélène Cixous ends up defending an essentialist thesis: what is "feminine" can be purely "non-violent," which is clearly separated from what is "violent" and "masculine;" what is pleasurable is clearly distinguished from what is not, and so on. That is also why, I might add, she can propose a theory of reading that is supposedly "non-violent," in which the act of reading is comparable to the act of carefully "listening" (or gently "making love") to the text's otherness. Rather than believing that reading is a form of taking over the text – which would be more compatible with postmodernist conceptions of language – Cixous entertains the possi-

bility of a "feminine" style of reading that could protect difference and avoid the pursuit of mastery⁵.

If a "true" deconstruction of all oppositions indicates that every element of any binary opposition cannot be clearly and forever distinguished from its alleged other, if male and female, pleasure and pain, violence and non-violence, cannot be the simple poles between which we can find absolutely clear-cut limits and which could be placed beyond the domain of interpretation and the interference of *différance*, Susan Bassnett's proposal of an "orgasmic theory of translation" cannot ever be more than a Utopia. It is appropriate to remember, by the way, that as she criticizes the "sexualization of translation" implicit in most male theories she also uses an explicitly sexual metaphor to express her ideal theory, a metaphor which could be rather problematic if we also considered some of its implications. After all, an "orgasm" is not, necessarily, the result of "elements [that] are fused into a new whole in an encounter that is mutual, pleasurable and respectful" (Bassnett, 1992, p. 72).

Even more problematic in Bassnett's arguments is the obvious incompatibility between what she defends and the examples of feminist strategies for translation that she endorses. To the "masculine" conception of translation exemplified by Steiner's, Bassnett opposes notions of translation developed, for example, by the group "working with and around Nicole Brossard in Quebec" "that significantly [...] rejects both the old writer-oriented criticism and the newer reader-oriented criticism, arguing that neither component should be

4 My source is, once again, Jacques Derrida, according to whom in order for us to deconstruct "the binary oppositions of metaphysics" "we must proceed using a double gesture, according to a unity that is both systematic and in and of itself divided, a double writing, that is, a writing that is in and of itself multiple, what I called, in '*la double séance*' a double science. On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of overturning. To do justice to this necessity is to recognize that in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-à-vis, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand. To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment. To overlook this phase of overturning is to forget the conflictual and subordinating structure of opposition. (1987, p. 41)

5 In Arrojo (1994a) I have tried to show how Cixous's actual reading practice denies her theoretical views. As I have argued, Cixous's reading of Lispector does not suggest the reader's wish to protect her author's otherness but the desire to make Lispector "say" that which her reader needs to "hear". The relationship that Cixous establishes with Lispector's texts seems to repeat precisely the traditional relationship between subject and object that she so vehemently rejects.

prioritized" (Bassnett, 1992, p. 66). Such an "in-betweenness," however, is conveniently "forgotten" when Bassnett quotes Barbara Godard, another Canadian translator/writer, who proposes a daring, explicitly "invasive" and "appropriative" notion of translation:

Though traditionally a negative topos in translation, "difference" becomes a positive one in feminist translation. Like parody, feminist translation is a signifying of difference despite similarity. As feminist theory has been concerned to show, difference is a key factor in cognitive processes and in critical praxis ... The feminist translator affirming her critical difference, her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing, flaunts the signs of her manipulation of the text. Womanhandling the text in translation would evolve the replacement of the modest, self-effacing translator. (Godard, 1990, quoted in Bassnett, 1992, p. 68, my emphasis)

Another basic contradiction in Bassnett's argumentation can also be found in the parallel she establishes between the feminist theorization on translation developed particularly by the group she calls "the Canadian School" and our Augusto de Campos's theoretical views as expressed, for instance, in a well-known text in which he declares that "translating" is "his way of loving" the authors he admires, with the important observation that here "translating" is a synonym for "devouring".⁶ As Bassnett recognizes, we can find echoes of de Campos's "metaphors of cannibalization and vampirism" in Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's discussion of her translation of Lise Gauvin's *Letters from An Other*:

I am not her [Lise Gauvin]. She wrote in the generic masculine. My translation practice is a political activity aimed at making language speak for women. So my signature on a translation means: this translation has used every possible feminist translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language ... translation is an act of linguistic invention which often enriches the original text instead of betraying it. (Gauvin, 1989, p. 9; quoted in Bassnett, 1992, p. 69).

In Barbara Godard's and in Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood's statements, as in Augusto de Campos's, translation is explicitly described as an activity that is not by any means innocent or neutral. It is far from being identified with "the adoption of a state of active receptivity," in which reading could be comparable to a form of attentive "listening" to what the text has to say, as Cixous and her disciples might put it. All the three translators are brave enough to expose their authorial "will-to-power" and their "manipulation" of the texts and authors they translate and de Lotbinière-Harwood goes even further as she admits that her translation practice is in fact an interventionist "political activity" aimed at serving the interests of her own cultural community. At this point it is almost impossible to avoid asking Susan Bassnett a simple question: why is the "feminist" translator's "affirmation" of "her delight in interminable re-reading and re-writing" the text which she deliberately "womanhandles" positive and desirable whereas Steiner's "masculine" model is merely "violent" and "appropriative"? Or, in other words, why is de Lotbinière-Harwood's transformation of the text she translates a way of "enriching" the original whereas a male translator's "interference" in the text he translates is a form of "betrayal"? Wouldn't the defense of a "feminist" theory of translation in Bassnett's terms be just an inverted version of the same "infamous double standard" which, as Lori Chamberlain points out, "operates" in the "implicit contract between translation (as woman) and original (as husband, father, or author)"? That is, if, as Chamberlain rightly argues, from a "sexist"

6 I refer to this excerpt from *Verso, Reverso, Controverso*: "A minha maneira de amá-los é traduzi-los. Ou degluti-los, segundo a Lei Antropofágica de Oswald de Andrade: só me interessa o que não é meu. Tradução para mim é persona. Quase heterônimo. Entrar dentro da pele do fingidor para refingir tudo de novo, dor por dor, som por som, cor por cor" (6, p. 7, quoted in 4, p. 69).

stance, "the 'unfaithful' wife/translation is publicly tried for crimes the husband/original is by law incapable of committing," wouldn't Bassnett's proposal suggest that from her "feminist" point of view the explicitly "unfaithful" female translator could never be tried for the "crimes" the male translator is necessarily accused of committing? (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 456)

The search for a "paçifistic" theory of translation, based on the possibility of a "respectful" collaboration between author and translator, sponsored by some trends of contemporary feminism, is not simply "utopic" or "idealistic." It is incompatible with what is perhaps the most human of all characteristics in a world in which meaning is not intrinsically attached to words and objects: the need to make reality (and, consequently, also texts and objects) our own, the need to fight for the power to determine and to take over meaning. However, the recognition of such a need, which is one of the most revolutionary insights we can learn from contemporary thought, does not have to be associated to the death, the destruction, or even the betrayal of the "original." Rather, it can be truly liberating. It can help us, for instance, see the "masculine" bias in Steiner's model, as Lori Chamberlain has showed us, and it can help us truly deconstruct the logocentric polarities between male and female, "original" and translation, fidelity and infidelity, violence and non-violence, which have been (at least, partially) responsible for the marginal roles both women and translations have played in our culture. And what is essential for Translation Studies, it may help us recognize, as does Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, that translation is an inevitably political practice that has its own interests and goals (even when they are not explicit or conscious), without which texts would not "live" in other cultures and in other times. What contemporary thought cannot allow us to do, though, is to ignore that our own moves and theories are also determined by our desires and circumstances and are, thus, inevitably "biased" and, in some way,

also basically "violent" since they always intend to replace, or at least to supplement, other moves or other theories. After all, one does not need to resort to psychoanalysis to reason that the best way to deal with everything that constitutes our own otherness – that which we do not like, or do not acknowledge in ourselves and would rather project somewhere else – is not by ignoring it or by hoping it only exists in those we explicitly oppose, but by recognizing and facing it in our own territory.

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