

WRITING IN NO MAN'S LAND: QUESTIONS OF GENDER AND TRANSLATION

Susan Bassnett
University of Warwick

One of the principal innovations in literary criticism in the last twenty years has been the debate inspired by feminist writers on the problems of gender and language. While Anglo-American feminist scholars have focused more on sociological issues concerning women, on the construction of gender in different cultural contexts and on historiography, elsewhere attention has shifted to an exploration of the vexed questions of gender and language, the relationship between writing, reading and the body.

We have come a long way from the kind of simplistic thinking that prevailed when I was a student in the 1960s, when attempts to discuss language and the feminine were met with contemptuous questions from (male) critics as to how one could determine the sex of a writer from simply reading a piece of text. At that time, when feminist theory was still in its infancy, it was difficult to counter that kind of argument, which also went along with the 'there have never been any great women geniuses' line of thinking. But in the 1970s the whole question of gender and language became the subject of some very sophisticated thought, and for the first time attention shifted from discussing the sex of the author to questions involving gender signs encoded in the text. Hence Hélène Cixous, in her highly influential essay, *Le Rire de la Meduse* (1975), could propose moving away from a notion of the 'feminine' that is part of a binary logic that stands in opposition to a notion of the 'masculine' insofar as the one is attributed to women, the other to men, and urge instead a notion of

the Feminine as transcending biological distinctions. Jean Genet, a man, is therefore one of the figures that Cixous proposes as a 'feminine' writer, because in her interpretation of the term, the feminine involves some place in between the two poles of male and female:

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.¹

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 coming into being, and indeed the development of Translation Studies through the 1970s closely parallels the development of feminist theory, even though the two areas remained apart until quite recently. In general terms, however, the significance of much of the work by theorists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Elisabetta Rasy and a good many others was their refusal to continue looking at the world in terms of binary oppositions male-female, masculine-feminine, father-mother, despite the very different, often conflictual, views they proclaimed. Similarly, one of the principal concerns of Translation Studies in the 1970s was the need felt by most scholars working in the field 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. Gideon Toury, for example, discusses the question of norms governing the composition of a text in the source literature and those governing the formulation of a translation and states that:

under no circumstances can the two sets of norms... be entirely identical: for translational norms have to do not only with the formation and formulation of the translated text (that is, the (re)composition phase of the translating process), but also with the inevitable decomposition of the source text; the assignment of relevancy to certain of its features, on a certain level (or levels); and with the crucial phase of the transference of those features across semiotic

borders, hence with the translational relationships, those observable relations which actually obtain between the translated and source texts at the end of the process.²

In both the extracts cited here, the writers use figurative language involving images of death and decomposition. Both are concerned with going beyond death, however, and in this too there are strong parallels between work in psychoanalytic feminist theory and work in Translation Studies. As Walter Benjamin says, translation is far removed from being "the sterile equation of two dead languages", and he goes on to add that:

of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.³

The assumption here is that translation is somehow equated with the maternal principle, with caring and with giving birth. Translation, in Benjamin's terms, 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. The terminology of loss and gain, 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' is rejected in favour of a notion that sees translation and writing as interconnected, with the one assuring the survival of the other. Likewise, Cixous' rejection of binary opposition between male and female leads on to 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.

Discussing Jacqueline Risset's metaphor of the translator as both midwife and mother, Nicole Ward Jouve, herself bilingual and bicultural, comments that:

The translator is a being in-between. Like words in translation, s/he endlessly drifts between meanings. S/he tries to be the go-between, to cunningly suggest what readings there could be in the foreign language other than those the chosen translation makes available. Is there a word in English, that, like *langue*, designates both the bodily organ and the existence of words, the structure of speech? Should it be language, should it be tongue? You

are led to reflect on how particular translations become constructed. What gets lost, what is gained, what and how altered, in the passage from one language to the next.⁴

A great deal of time and energy has been spent on analysing the role of the translator, on trying to describe that role in terms that neither privilege the translator over the author, nor place him or her in a subservient position, and it is significant that so much recent work, by which I mean work from the mid-1980s onwards, has been initiated by women.

The old binary concept of translation saw original and translated texts as two poles. Translation studies scholars then endeavoured to water down the hierarchy implicit in such terminology by referring instead to source and target texts, though here again the metaphoric implications tend towards polarisation ('source' having feminine connotations through some of its range of meanings, and 'target' having obvious militaristic, hence masculine, overtones). In contrast, feminist translation scholars have chosen to work with the idea of the in-betweenness of the translator, of the space between the poles and, if those poles are metamorphosed into masculine and feminine, then the space becomes androgynous or even bi-sexual, neither the one nor the other. It is no accident that a great deal of extraordinary powerful work investigating translation and gender, issues centres around lesbian or bisexual writers, in particular the group working with and around Nicole Brossard in Quebec.⁵ Significantly, this group rejects both the old writer-oriented criticism and the newer reader-oriented criticism, arguing that neither component should be prioritized. Kathy Mezei describes the translation process as "a compound act of reading and writing", since the translator is both reader and writer:

When I translate I read the text... then I re-read the text and I re-read the text, and then I write in my language, my words: I write my reading and the reading has rewritten my writing.⁶

This is a very different notion of translation to that offered by George Steiner, who sees translation as involving the 'appropriative penetration' of the source text, so that the text is 'captured' and the translator then compensates for the act of aggression by a gesture of restitution.⁷ Lori Chamberlain, in one of the most useful essays that has appeared to date on the question of translation and gender examines Steiner's model, and points out that he "seems to argue further that the paradigm is universal and that the male and female

roles he describes are essential rather than accidental".⁸ Lori Chamberlain takes issue with the implicit assumptions about sexual/gender relationships in Steiner's work, pointing out that this comes from a powerfully patriarchal line of western literary thought that has tended to be taken for granted.

One of the key metaphors in traditional thinking about translation is that of the 'belles infideles'. This image, in its traditional interpretation, suggests that translation can be compared to woman – if she is beautiful, she is unfaithful, whereas an inadequate or ugly translation will be faithful to its source. There is no need to comment on the sexist nature of this proposition, since it is self-evident, but it has become so powerfully ingrained in contemporary thinking that it is still regularly used by men and women alike, despite the fact that it is nonsensical. The problem, of course, is that it is a metaphor devised in an age when the idea of a 'faithful' translation was profoundly significant (we need only think of the C17th and C18th descriptions of translations as 'mirrors', as 'copies', as something defined in relation to a more perfect original and needing to be justified in terms of the closeness to that original). Work in Translation Studies, paralleling post-modernist thinking, has moved away from the idea of faithfulness as an ideal, rejecting it as spurious in the same way as the notion of equivalence as sameness has been rejected, but the image of the 'belle infidele' still lingers.

In 1986, having been invited to give a lecture to the Czech Translators' Union in Prague, I devised what I thought was an original title. Because I was dealing with issues of reading and translation strategies and contesting the idea of a normative approach to translation, I chose to entitle my talk "Being Unfaithful". The title aroused a lot of hostility and the discussion session was very lively. Within weeks of that lecture, I started to come across a range of other women using the same image, starting with Barbara Johnson's 'Taking Fidelity Philosophically' in which she suggests that the translator ought to be considered "not as a duteous spouse but as a faithful bigamist",⁹ through essays by Barbara Godard, Sherry Simon, Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood and a host of others, all querying the traditional model of a subordinate 'feminine' translation to the superior 'masculine' original. There was a definite feeling that women were starting to propose alternative theories of translation, and 1985 had seen the publication of a full-length work on feminism and translation, Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz's book, *Translating Poetic Discourse: Questions of Feminist Strategies* in Adrienne Rich.¹⁰

Diaz-Diocaretz tackles a specific problem: the role of the translator in translating a specifically feminist text, and argues that more systematic thinking about language and gender is required. She stops short of making prescriptive statements about the need for a translator to share both a gender bias and an ideology with the original author, but does warn against "betrayal of the message", arguing that:

Authors consciously writing from a woman-identified perspective, who are creating texts in order to widen the semantic possibilities for the female speaker, call for the translator's additional cooperation.¹¹

Not only for the translator's cooperation; in 1986, Lucie Armitt, then a graduate student working with me at Warwick wrote an MA paper that examined publishing strategies for the translation of women's writing. She conducted a survey among British publishers, including major publishing houses, small-scale publishers and those specialising in translations and her findings were remarkable. Despite the existence of a boom in women's writing generally, and the fact that publishers were vying with each other to extend their women's studies' lists, only one editor in one publishing house claimed to have given the question of translation a second thought. The feminist publishing houses, Virago and the Women's Press, both responded dismissively, and Lucie Armitt concluded that although gender and language was supposedly high on everyone's agenda, it disappeared when translation was involved. She suggested that this might have much to do with the low status of translation, and also with the traditional monolingualism of many British editors.¹²

In an essay entitled 'Theorizing Feminist Discourse / Translation', Barbara Godard proposes a radical notion of translation that prioritizes the gender issue:

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.¹³

Barbara Godard's translator rejects the history of translating as a secondary activity, throws off all modesty, false or otherwise, and flaunts her possession/re-possession of the text. She goes so far as to suggest that the immodest translator "flaunts her signature in italics, in footnotes – even a preface". Her translator is not self-effacing, certainly not transparent, but is a real physical presence within the text she translates.

At this juncture, Brazilian readers may begin to feel echoes of something familiar, and with good reason. The Canadian school especially, has made connections between a feminist theory of translation and a post-colonial theory, and the immodest translator flaunting her new-found relationship with the text has many parallels with the theories propounded by the De Campos brothers, for example, with their metaphors of cannibalization and vampirism¹⁴ as a way of trying to liberate the discourse of translation whilst simultaneously trying to raise the status of the translator:

"Com uma tal falta de gente coexistível, como há hoje, que pode um homem de sensibilidade fazer senão inventar os seus amigos, ou quando menos, os seus companheiros de espírito?" (Fernando Pessoa)

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.¹⁵

Augusto de Campos here physicalizes the translation process in ways that are very similar to the physicalizing of the feminine proposed by Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, discussing her translation of Lise Gauvin:

I am not her. 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.¹⁶

At the start of this paper, I noted that the development of Translation Studies runs chronologically parallel to developments in feminist theories of language, and we could add to developments in post-modernist theory as well. What is interesting is that so much of this work has not been linked, and it is my contention that we are at a point in time when encounters between the separate groups are finally beginning to take place. It has long been argued, for example, that the level of discourse of many translation scholars has remained out of date and as recently as 1985 Raymond Van den Broeck still felt it necessary to attack the 'value judgement' school of translation scholars, who spent their time ranking translations in a (highly subjective) order of merit¹⁷, whilst in an essay published in 1991, Andre Lefevere talks about the need to see translation in terms of 'packaging' and argues that we are today in a position to examine the processes of manipulation, both literary and political, that control our lives.¹⁸

Feminist scholarship has shed light on the ways in which societies marginalize women and women's creative products, and translation scholarship is increasingly shedding light on the manipulative processes involved in the supposedly 'innocuous' transfer of texts from culture to culture. And here a glance at the figurative language used to describe translation can be significant in more ways than one. Hence the metaphor of faithfulness to an original, so often couched in gender terms, tells us a great deal about the hierarchical structures of the societies that coined and utilized that image. The Original, the Father, stands in a higher position than the copy, the female, whether described in terms of wife, concubine or mother. And the metaphor of penetration, of sexual possession of the text derives also from the same patriarchal system of values, a system of owners and owned, colonizers and colonized, penetrators and prey. Most significant of all, perhaps, is the way in which such metaphors reinforce the long-standing problem with which translators still have to contend: the lower status accorded to translating and to translated texts.

The introduction of questions of gender into translation invites us all to consider the implications of what the encounter between the translator and the source text actually is, and what kind of union between the source and target texts results from that encounter. If we accept that the translator is not, and never could be, a transparent filter through which a text passes, but is rather a very powerful source of creative transitional energy (and this is the fundamental premise of Translation Studies scholars), then thinking in terms of gender serves

to heighten awareness of textual complexities in the roles of both writer and reader. So, for example, Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz tackles the thorny problem of translating Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" into Spanish, noting that Pablo Neruda's "Veinte poemas de amor y una cancion desesperada" will immediately loom large on the horizon of expectation of her readers. The difficulty here is not a matter of two sequences of poems with similar titles; it is the fact that Neruda's poetry is heterosexual poetry, written by a man to women, whilst Rich's is most emphatically homosexual poetry, written by a woman to another woman, and in linguistic terms, the translator is faced with the added difficulty of translating into a language that marks grammatical gender. Diaz-Diocaretz also notes the constraints posed by different social conventions:

To use the masculine for the adjective '*juntos*' (together) would be a common, grammatically legitimate way to indicate the duality... but... to leave this form would be a displacement of reference... As a translator who is aware of the moral and social tradition and conventions in the Hispanic culture as a whole, in the context of my own horizon of prospective readers, to use the adjective in the feminine plural (*juntas*) would be more than daring.¹⁹

Here gender issues within the text have to be dealt with in relation to social conventions and the expectations of the world outside the text. The task of the translator is further complicated by Rich's own adamant views on how her poetry should be read, arguing that to remove the signs of lesbian love embedded in the text is an act of patriarchal imperialism. Diaz-Diocaretz describes herself as a translator "torn between the poet's message... and the constraints that limit the accepted norms and conventions of a woman's poetic voice within the Hispanic literary tradition."²⁰

In contrast, my own translation of Gabriele D'Annunzio's autobiographical novel, *Il fuoco*, presented other difficulties. Fascinated by the text, which offers a reading of the doomed love-affair between D'Annunzio and the great actress Eleonora Duse, I accepted an invitation to translate it as a representative novel of turn of the century Decadentism. I had written extensively on Duse and knew the context in which D'Annunzio's novel was written, but it proved extremely difficult to strike a balance between the dominating masculinism of a man out to justify himself through the medium of fiction for the appallingly cruel treatment of his lover and my own partisanship. I began to wonder whether it might not be an

impossibility to expect a translator with one set of views on patriarchy and a writer with diametrically opposite views to come together at all. Whereas Diaz-Diocaretz describes herself as 'torn', I described myself as engaged in conflict with the writer, 'struggling' or 'wrestling' with the text and its ideology, demanding the right to work creatively as a translator and concerned that my 'unfaithfulness' should not be crudely political. To transform a novel that is a hymn to male creativity into a feminist tract would have been absurd, for the strength of the book lies in D'Annunzio's lyric style that is always hyperbolic. In the end, the English translation reflects our struggle, and in the process of fighting with the text and its author, I arrived at a reading which is much more complex than I had at first discerned, a reading that sees the whole book as a struggle not only between two characters, but also between the male and female principles, between fire and water, spring and autumn, life and death.²¹

Translation is a complex, multifaceted activity that demands time and care, commitment and scholarship, and Translation Studies is attempting to look systematically at some of the issues involved. The work that has begun which considers translation in relation to issues of gender is as important for men as it is for women, because it seeks to explore in greater depth the linguistic, cultural and philosophical dimensions of the translation process. In a recent lecture on this very subject, I was asked by the audience to propose a metaphor for the future that might move us on beyond earlier models with their resonances of sexism and colonialism, beyond the metaphors of inadequacy and betrayal, of rape and penetration, of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. My proposition, idealistic though it may seem, is for an *orgasmic theory of translation*, in which elements are fused into a new whole in an encounter that is mutual, pleasurable and respectful. Lori Chamberlain says that any feminist theory of translation "will finally be utopic". I do sincerely hope that she is wrong.

Notes

- 1 Hélène Cixous, *Le Rire de la Meduse*, *L'Arc*, 61, 1975, pp. 39-54. English transl. by Keith Cohen and Paula Coben, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, *Signs*, 1, Summer 1976, pp. 875-99.
- 2 Gideon Toury, *Translation, literary translation and pseudotranslation*, *Comparative Criticism*, Vol. 6, 1984, pp. 73-85.
- 3 Walter Benjamin, *The Task of the Translator*, transl. Harry Zohn, *Illuminations*, London, Fontana, 1973, pp. 69-83.

- 4 Nicole Ward Jouve, To fly/to steal: no more? Translating French feminisms into English, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue: Criticism as Autobiography*, London, Routledge, 1991, p. 47.
- 5 See the journal *Tessera*, also works by Nicole Brossard, Annie Brisset, Barbara Godard, Suzanne Lamy, Daphne Marlatt, etc.
- 6 Kathy Mezei, The Reader and the decline, *Tessera: L'Écriture comme Lecture*, September 1985, pp. 21-31.
- 7 George Steiner, *After Babel*, London and New York, Oxford University Press, 1975.
- 8 Lori Chamberlain, Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation, *Signs*, 13, 1988, pp. 454-472.
- 9 Barbara Johnson, Taking Fidelity Philosophically, in ed. Joseph Graham, *Difference in Translation*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1985, pp. 142-148.
- 10 Myriam Diaz-Diocaretz, *Translating Poetic Discourse: Questions of feminist strategies in Adrienne Rich*, Amsterdam, John Benjamin, 1985.
- 11 Ibid, p. 156.
- 12 Lucie Armitt, unpublished MA paper, Graduate School of Comparative Literary Theory and Translation Studies, University of Warwick.
- 13 Barbara Godard, Theorizing Feminist Discourse/Translation in Susan Bassnett and Andre Lefevere, eds. *Translation, History and Culture*, London, Pinter, 1990, pp. 89-96.
- 14 See Augusto de Campos, *Verso, Reverso e Controverso*, Sao Paulo, Perspectiva, 1978; Haroldo de Campos, *Deus e o Diabo no Fausto de Goethe*, São Paulo, Perspectiva, 1981.
- 15 Haroldo de Campos, op. cit., p. 7.
- 16 Suzanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, About the *her* in other, preface to Lise Gauvin, *Letters from An Other*, Toronto, Women's Press, 1989, p. 9.
- 17 Raymond Van den Broeck, Second Thoughts on Translation Criticism. A Model of its Analytic Function, in Theo Hermans, ed. *The Manipulation of Literature*, London, Croom Helm, 1985, pp. 54-63.
- 18 Andre Lefevere, Translation and Comparative Literature: The Search for the Center, *TTR*, Vol. IV, No. 1, *Languages and Cultures in Translation Theories*, 1st Semester, 1991, pp. 129-145.
- 19 Diaz-Diocaretz, op. cit., p. 51.
- 20 Ibid, p. 53.
- 21 See Susan Bassnett, *The Flame*, London, Quartet, 1991; transl. of Gabriele d'Annunzio, *Il fuoco*, Milan, Mandadori, 1900.