

Three Women – A Poem for Three Voices, by Sylvia Plath – a Portuguese version. Can a monologue be polyphonic?

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*How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?
How long can I be
Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,
Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?
The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow
Lap at my back ineluctably.
How shall it soften them, this little lullaby?*

(Sylvia Plath, *Three Women. A Poem for Three Voices*, p.44)

1- Translation and discourse hybridity

The process of *trans/lation*, etymologically speaking, always involves a movement, a divide and an estrangement, which paradoxically also signifies a ‘coming close to’. The magnificent poem by Sylvia Plath, *Three Women – A Poem for Three Voices*, is a perfect illustration of that oxymoronic dwelling place which is central to Plath’s poetics. The aim of this paper is thus not to scrutinize and reassess the current multifarious scholarly approaches to the field of Translation Studies and its interface with other areas within Human and Social Sciences, but rather, more concisely, to focus on a text, a dramatic poem, authored by a woman who became a legendary sorceress in “the art of dying” and henceforth propose a number of reflections on its Portuguese version, *Três Mulheres Poema a três vozes*, (2004). I will start by suggesting that the poem dwells on a number of “delusions” – the creation of three separate voices, three identities, three private dramas – as rhetorical strategies which theatrically

unfold before the reader's eyes, and which enable the poetic voice to argue and enact her own drama, based on the disparate notions of estrangement, alienation and intimacy that I referred to previously. Firstly, the poem offers itself to the reader under the veil of the dramatic poetic tradition of the soliloquy (resonating particularly with echoes of Elizabeth Barratt Browning), a recognized feminine mask of self-preservation and seclusion, when in fact it wants to expose and literally "stage" a split identity. The result is a desperate cry against silence and the silencing of creativity, (here suffused under the metonymy of fertility and woman's 'roundness' versus the world's/man's "flatness"), enacted through the shared drama of three individual lives, reported by three Voices – the "Wife", the "Secretary" and the "Young Woman". They are voices that exist isolated from each other, though each individual drama contaminates and could be said to be shared by all the others. The poem breathes through these three elocutionary gestures, each of them deeply engaged in a journey of self-reflection and a quest for meaning. Through each of these voices, Plath enacts the drama of womanhood (and that of her own solitude), maternity and subjectivity continuously struggling with each other, arguing against each other, searching all possible shadows and remote possibilities of being and becoming. Each of the three performative identities, "Wife", "Secretary" and "Young Woman", each poetically independent from the other, is nonetheless immersed in the same abyss of identity, all but enacting *one* kaleidoscopic drama – the struggle of womanhood to find a *voice* in a hostile, "flat" world, made of cardboard, a 'flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions, /Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed / Endlessly proceed' (p.20).

The crux of the poem thus resides in the tension between its apparent monologism – three separate voices, deaf to each other's claims, to each individual drama, enshrined in their own mute circle of pain and desolation,

releasing but a scream which nobody, not even the other two voices recognises in the aseptic bleakness of the hospital ward (a quasi-Beckettian scenario), and the hybridity of the discourses of the three women in the poem, if we listen globally to its polyphony, taken as a whole, rather than to each individual drama of womanhood voiced here. This polyphony is based on a metonymic structure that sets a “cardboard flatness” against the “roundness” of fertility and creativity, here assumed to the full.

In this resides the crucial challenge of the poem in terms of its translation, and the agency of the *translatress*, to which I will now turn.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, translation is always a movement towards another language, another culture, and, necessarily an other, an alterity, the writer or creator of the source text. Walter Benjamin phrased it beautifully in his iconic essay, “The Task of the Translator” (1923), making clear the implicit agency of the translator in this whole process, thus putting an end to the myth of aseptic or neutral translation practice. In fact, Benjamin claims that a “translation which intends to perform a *transmitting function* (my emphasis) cannot transmit anything but information – hence, something inessential” (Benjamin 1979, p. 69), which is, he adds, “the hallmark of bad translations” (Ibid.). Instead, he argues, translation should be understood as a mode, which he names *translatability* (Ibid., p.70), signifying the relationship the original establishes with the translated work. The importance of translations, Benjamin sustains, derives from the fact that they constitute *the afterlife of works of art*, simply because ‘important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, *their translation marks their stage of continued life*’ (Ibid., p.71, my emphasis). Thus, translation highlights rather than effaces the differences between languages and cultures, it makes more apparent the intricacy of the play between identity and signification, our awareness of their *revelation* and *remoteness*

in relation to the original, to use Benjamin's words, or, ultimately, our understanding of *the other* through a humble coming to terms with our provisional/translated versions of the other's foreign "I".

Benjamin's essay has been the object of continuous critical revisitations and reappraisals, particularly, in more recent years, from critics interested in issues of cultural translation. Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 5) has famously described the contemporary world as a "translational culture", forced into translation by the pressing needs of communication from the increasing numbers of migrant communities, their situation of physical displacement and linguistic disjunction craving a socially responsible translation of cultural difference ¹.

In this context, Rey Chow (1999) underlines the fact that the strength of Benjamin's text lies in its premonitory emphasis on the fluidity of cultures and the contamination of worlds, proposing that the "task of the translator" should be, above anything else, a movement towards the other. From this perspective, the act of translation is signified as a freedom, a sense of openness between original and translated text, as 'languages rendering each other'. Translation becomes thus a relational activity, which suggests a new pattern of reading contaminated by an "other" language and an "other" culture, i.e., a form of 'transactional reading' (Chow 1999, pp. 506-7; p.512).

In a similar mode, Gayatri Spivak, in a text entitled "The Politics of Translation" (1992), discusses translation as a relational activity which performs a crucial role in the liminal definition of the boundaries of identity (the self and the other's), as articulated primarily in language:

(...) language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves (...). Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity. (...) One of the ways to get around the confines of one's "identity" as one produces expository prose is to work at

¹ For further discussion of this topic see Ana Gabriela Macedo, "Identity and Cultural Translation. An Introduction", in Macedo and Pereira, *Identity and Cultural Translation: Writing across the Borders of Englishness* (2005, pp. 11-18).

someone else's title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating. *It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self* (Spivak 1992, p. 177; my emphasis).

Spivak's words on "the task of the translator" are, I believe, a reverential acknowledgement of Benjamin's 1923 essay. There is undoubtedly a strong resemblance in the tone of the two texts, particularly concerning the emphasis on the "fabrication" of identity in language, and therefore the respect, the "awe", translation should inspire. "*The task of the translator*", writes Benjamin, "consists in finding that intended effect upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original. (...) Unlike a work of literature, translation does not find itself in the centre of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at that single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, *the reverberation of the work in the alien one*" (Benjamin 1979, p. 76). A similar imputation of the responsibility of the translator towards both text and audience, as a binding act of love and surrender, is subtly phrased by Spivak in the following terms:

Translation is the most intimate act of reading, I surrender to the text when I translate. (...) The translator earns permission to transgress from the trace of the other – before memory – in the closest places of the self. (...) *The task of the translator* is to facilitate this love between the original and its shadow, a love that permits fraying, holds the agency of the translator and the demands of her imagined or actual audience at bay (Spivak 1992, p. 178).

Plath's poem was written as a radio play. As such, from the very beginning, it represented a poem for voices in dialogue. It is worth considering for a moment the historical genesis of the poem. It was written at the suggestion of Douglas Cleverdon, a BBC radio producer who ran a department specializing in the adaptation and broadcasting of literary works. (Early in 1962 he had broadcast an adaptation of the Ted Hughes

play, *The Wound*). In May of the same year, Plath sent her poem to Cleverdon, who gave it its first radio broadcast on 13th September. In 1968, five years after Plath's suicide, the poem was published by Turret Books, with an Introductory Note by Douglas Cleverdon himself. Faber republished it in 1971 in the anthology *Winter Trees*, with a note by Ted Hughes which stated that the poem established a bridge between two of Plath's major works, *The Colossus* (1960) and *Ariel* (1965). Hughes notes the change of style that this poem marks within Plath's poetics, as it was meant to be read aloud, thus implying a significant emphasis on orality². In fact, Plath herself identified this as a distinctive characteristic of her poetical work at the time, as she wrote in the script that accompanied the poems sent to Douglas Cleverdon to be read on the BBC broadcast³ that 'they are written for the ear, not for the eye: they are poems written out loud' (Plath, apud Frieda Hughes 2004, p. 195)⁴. In personal terms, the poem coincides with a phase of profound and contradictory emotional experiences in her life – the birth of her two children in the short interval of two years, in 1960, her daughter Frieda, and in 1962 her son Nicholas. In February 1960, after moving to London, Plath experienced the joy of having her first book of poems, *The Colossus*, published. Nevertheless, throughout the period of those two years of intense and rewarding maternal experience, Plath lived through desperate moments of loneliness, insecurity and the violent loss of her relationship with the poet Ted Hughes. She had also suffered a miscarriage in between, and undergone a prolonged stay in hospital. Meanwhile she was at work on her autobiographical novel, *The*

² Ted Hughes, Note to *Winter Trees* (1971): 'Sylvia Plath has said that about this time she began to compose her poems more to be read aloud and this piece may well have played a big part in this technical development' (p.7).

³ This script referred to the following poems: "The Applicant", "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy", "Sheep in Fog", "Ariel", "Death & Company", "Nick and the Candlestick" and "Fever 103°".

⁴ It could otherwise be argued, as claimed by Mário Avelar, author of an important study in Portuguese of Plath's work, *Sylvia Plath: O Rosto Oculto do Poeta* (1997) and translator of her poetry, that this is not just a singularity of a phase in Plath's work, but rather a major trait in the whole of her poetics (p.132).

Bell Jar. The family had moved to the countryside, Devon, but in December 1962 she moved back to London alone with her two children. The *Bell Jar* came out in January 1963. She had been writing incessantly during that extreme period - “Mary’s Song”, “Lesbos”, “Mystic”, “A Birthday Present” were all written in the last six months of her life. They are poems which seem to dwell on a domestic, intimate scenario composed of the kitchen, the nursery, and then abruptly implode into violent rhetoric. Plath confides in frequent letters to her mother, Aurelia Plath (*Letters Home*, 1975) her anguish at this paradoxical existence: “I am a writer ... I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me (...)” (letter of 16th October 1962). And a few months later: ‘The children need me most right now, so I shall try to go on for the next few years writing mornings, being with them afternoons and seeing friends or studying and reading evenings’ (letter of the 4th February 1963).

On 11th February 1963, Plath committed suicide. As she wrote in “Edge”, her last poem (from 5th February): ‘The woman is perfected/Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment’. Her words, like ‘axes’, persist through reverberant echoes, which she will no longer control. Words now become “dry and riderless” as she writes in anticipation:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes travelling
Off from the center like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,

*A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road –*

*Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.*

(*Words*, 1963)

2- The challenge of translating *Three Women*

Sandra Gilbert in “‘A Fine, White Flying Myth’: Confessions of a Plath Addict” claims that *Three Women – A Poem for Three Voices* enacts the intimate drama of three female characters (Wife/ Secretary/ Young Woman), as variations on one woman, caught within the drama of fertility versus creativity. This is a psychodrama, writes Gilbert, in the literary tradition of her precursors (Mary Shelley, the Brontë sisters, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson), of the woman writer enacting and thus becoming ‘the myth of herself’: ‘the self splitting, doubling, mythologizing itself until it hardly seems to have an existence within itself’ (Gilbert 1989, p. 54). The poet, as Gilbert sustains, explores both visually and dramatically the perception of maternity as a potential liberation of the self through the experience of a deep communion with life and a transcendence of subjectivity, in all akin to that reached through poetic creation. As Gilbert further argues, ‘The story told is invariably a story of being trapped, by society or the self as an agent of society, and then somehow escaping or trying to escape’ (p.55).

(...)

I see them showering like stars on to the world –
On India, Africa, America, these miraculous ones,
These pure, small images. They smell of milk.
Their footsoles are untouched. They are walkers of air.
(*Three Women*, p.38)⁵

The challenge of translating Plath's work, and in particular the above poem, is substantiated in the need to grasp and coherently articulate in another language the hybridity of her discourse, her continuous self-interrogative tone, her rejection of any possibility of monologism, which in this poem is demonstrated in exemplary fashion in its formal three-voicedness and in its subject matter. As in the extract quoted above, the "First Voice" is later in the poem challenged by another "Voice", who renders a different vision altogether of maternity, which seems to deny the previous one: 'I wasn't ready. The white clouds rearing/ Aside were dragging me in four directions. / I wasn't ready. / I had no reverence.' (p.22)⁶

Plath's poetics is thus substantiated in ambivalence and duality, a continuous tension between affirmation and denial, as it dwells on a rhetoric of enclosure versus liberation, a common trope in a feminine aesthetics. This poem allows the reader to sense almost materially that agonistic split that divides the woman poet into a proliferation of selves – the Wife, the Secretary, the Young Woman -, scattered fragments of a life here aseptically exposed in a hospital ward, confronting each other on issues of life and death, renewal and stillness.

⁵ All excerpts of the original poem by Sylvia Plath and its translation into Portuguese will be taken from the bilingual edition *Three Women. A Poem for Three Voices/ Três Mulheres Poema a Três Vozes*, (Translation and Introduction by Ana Gabriela Macedo), 2004. 'Vejo-os a cair no mundo como estrelas – / Na Índia, na África, na América, estes pequenos seres milagrosos./ Estas imagens puras e minúsculas. Cheiram a leite./ Têm as solas dos pés incólumes. Como se caminhassem no ar' (p.39).

⁶ 'Eu não estava preparada. As nuvens brancas que se formavam/ Arrastavam-me em todas as direcções. / Eu não estava preparada./ Não sentia qualquer fervor' (p.23).

I will argue that the whole poem is constructed around a central metaphor – designated as “flat” or “flatness”, in the original text. Here lies the fundamental difficulty of translating this poem. The vast polysemy of this concept (vacant, sterile, barren, meaningless, ...) allows for the possibility of numerous interpretations and likewise numerous translations, some of them naturally diverging from the original and even contradicting it. As has often been stated, every translation implies a choice within a universe of contextualized possibilities. I will argue the case now for my own translation of this expression, which as I view it, is intimately related to the interpretation of the concept referred to above, as a key semantic node of the poem. “Flat”/“flatness” is repeatedly used in the poem in different contexts, with different functions and at different rhetorical levels (literal, metaphoric, metonymic), constructing a conceptual framework which coherently transmits the atmosphere of this tense and polyphonic poetic drama.

Second Voice:

When I first saw it, the small red seep, I did not believe it.
I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were
so *flat!*

There was something about them like cardboard, and now
I had caught it,

That *flat, flat, flatness* from which ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
Endlessly proceed – and the cold angels, the abstractions.
(...)

I am dying as I sit, I lose dimension.
(*Three Women* p.20)

Segunda Voz:

Quando a vi pela primeira vez, aquela pequena mancha

avermelhada, não queria crer nos meus olhos.
Observei os homens que andavam à minha volta no escritório.
Como eram *vazios*!
Pareciam *figuras de papelão*, e de repente eu senti-me contaminada,
Esse *imenso, imenso vazio* de onde desfilam ideias, destruições,
“bulldozers”, guilhotinas, câmaras lívidas de horror (...)
Sinto-me morrer aqui sentada. Perco a dimensão de mim.
(*Três Mulheres* p.21)

The imagery of the poem explores to the limit the paradox between masculine sterility and the fertility of the feminine, maintaining at one remove, however, the ambivalence of their relationship, which goes through numerous symbolic re-enactments. The same theme and motivations unfold subsequently in a variety of *tableaux*, or scenarios of each singular life voiced by each of the three faceless women on stage. Each voice is a Kaleidoscopic variation on the other, with only a figurative change of actors. There is the same awe and fascination before the miracle of conception and the rites of fertility, only an intermittent shift of focus.

Within this rationale, in my translation I opted for the lexical fields “raso”/ “rasura”/ “arrasar” and also alternatively “vazio” and “esvaziar”, to transmit the wide-ranging polysemy of “flat”/ “flatness”, as well as its intentional ambivalence, and also due to the grammatical flexibility (noun, adjective, verb) of those expressions in Portuguese.

Moreover, I will argue that “flat” is a gendered term in the context of Plath’s poem, beyond any positive or negative connotations or moral judgement, standing for bleakness, numbness and misogyny, and that it is crucial to understand it within the oxymoronic relationship with the atmosphere of “fertility” of the maternity ward. Likewise, the incessant echo of the word “conceptions,” in tandem with its semantic antonym, “emptiness” and “death”, echoes frequently through the poem.

And the man I worked for laughed: “Have you seen something awful?”

You are so white, suddenly”. And I said nothing.
I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation
I could not believe it. Is it so difficult
For the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?
The letters proceed from these black keys, and these black
keys proceed
From my alphabetic fingers, ordering parts,
(...)
(*Three Women* p.20)

E o homem para quem eu trabalho riu-se: “Viu algum fantasma?
De repente ficou tão branca”. E eu não disse nada.
Vi a morte nas árvores desfolhadas, o vazio total.
Não podia crer nos meus olhos. Será assim tão difícil
Ao espírito conceber um rosto, uma boca?
As letras têm origem nestas teclas pretas e estas teclas
Pretas têm origem
Nos meus dedos alfabéticos, os elementos que sustentam a
ordem,
(...)
(*Três Mulheres* p.21)

The “flat” world of bureaucracy and blind rationality the Secretary describes contaminate her, stick to her “alphabetic fingers”, in spite of herself: “I am dying as I sit. I lose dimension”; her feet assume “mechanical echoes” (p.20).

While the First Voice expresses a wish for a return to “normality” (I am reassured. I am reassured. (...) I shall meditate upon normality”(p. 46), the Second Voice confesses her “old dead love of death” (p.22), but it is the Third Voice who unleashes her anger most vociferously at a hostile world:

I am a mountain now, among mountain women.
The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
They are to blame for what I am, and they know it.
They hug their *flatness* like a kind of health.

And what if they found themselves surprised, as I did?
They would go mad with it.
(*Three Women* p.28)

Sou uma montanha agora, entre mulheres-montanhas.
Os médicos movem-se no meio de nós como se o nosso tamanho
Lhes estremecesse a alma. Mostram um sorriso idiota.
São os culpados daquilo que sou, e sabem-no bem.
Aconchegam os seus ventres *rasos* como um bem precioso.
E se eles se vissem de repente surpreendidos, tal como eu?
Enlouqueceriam pela certa.
(*Três Mulheres* p.29)

Each woman voices an intrinsic duality, a hybrid form of discourse, in permanent self-interrogation. There are no static assumptions, or unique visions expressed by any of them. In fact, there is a constant fluidity in their speech, which is most aptly transmitted by the parodic disclaimer of the Second Voice:

I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.
I shall not be accused by isolate buttons,
Holes in the heels of socks, the white mute faces
Of unanswered letters, confined in a letter case.
I shall not be accused. I shall not be accused.
The clock shall not find me wanting, nor these stars
That rivet in place abyss after abyss.
(p.36)

This speech resonates powerfully in Plath's poetics as a guarantee against closure, against any retirement into "normality", the home, the children, work. 'I am a wound walking out of hospital. / I am a wound that they are letting go', claims the Third Voice (p. 42). 'It is I. It is I - / Tasting the bitterness between my teeth. / The incalculable malice of the everyday', offers the Second Voice (p.44).

'I wait and ache', confides the Second Voice now sheltered in the warmth of the home, 'I am mending a silk slip: my husband is reading./

How beautifully the light includes these things' (p.50). 'The city waits and aches', she adds disruptively, rejecting any note of self-commiseration.

Conclusion

Despite the intense grief that permeates this poem, and which is equally dominant in her work, there is a level of speech in Plath's lyric that is often dismissed and which is, in my view, decisive: her irony, often poignantly self-addressed, but nevertheless working as a catalyst towards disjunction and critical distance. The polyphonic nature of Plath's discourse which I have signalled as a distinctive feature of *Three Women* and which I consider to have been my strongest challenge as a translator, is undoubtedly part of this. Plath herself is aware of it. One need only listen to her own critical assessment of "Lady Lazarus" (one of her most quoted poems and central to the suicidal "Plath myth"), to acknowledge it. As part of the "Script for BBC broadcast 'New Poems by Sylvia Plath'", she writes concerning the poem:

This poem is called 'Lady Lazarus'. The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman ⁷.

Here both critic or translator have to agree with her daughter, Frieda Hughes, on the dangers of 'killing her again' and endlessly perpetuating the poet's 'myth of herself': 'Their Sylvia Suicide Doll, / Who will walk and talk/ and die at will,/ And die, and die/ And forever be dying.' ('My Mother', Frieda Hughes, 2004, p.14).

Against this ventriloquism, Plath's words, like 'axes' forever alive, will continue to echo:

⁷ Appendix II of Plath's *Ariel*, (Facsimile Manuscript, edited by Frieda Hughes), 2004, p.196.

It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of something that is not flat! They are
jealous gods
That would have the whole world flat because they are.
I see the Father conversing with the Son.
Such flatness cannot but be holy.
'Let us make a heaven', they say.
'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls'.
(*Three Women* p.26)

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