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Beginning Again

Sherry Simon

Concordia University, sherry.simon@concordia.ca

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BEGINNING AGAIN Sherry Simon

Translating Women edited by
Luise von Flotow. Ottawa:
University of Ottawa Press, 2011.
Pp. 341. \$39.95 paper.

“It is time to write about ‘women and translation’ again,” writes Luise von Flotow at the start of her introduction to this collection of essays. Why again? The 1980s and 1990s saw a rash of writing about feminism and translation, born out of the effervescence of a period rich in questions about identity and language. First came occasional brief essays by women translators and then more serious attempts at theorizing translation and gender—in the form of essays and then books. Von Flotow recalls this history, giving a particular nod to feminist Bible translators who had already been addressing gender issues. She might also have mentioned the influential work of Gayatri Spivak, whose singular works on translation and gender were published during the 1990s.

Years have passed, though, and overviews of work in translation studies routinely make reference to questions of gender of translation, but always to the same—now very dated—sources. Thus, von Flotow’s stimulating and well-edited collection is timely, giving fresh energy to a field that was being reduced to a life in citation.

What kind of new work has emerged? In this collection, three historical essays examine British women translators of botanical texts in the early nineteenth century, the nineteenth-century Russian writer/translator Karolina Pavlova’s translations from the German, and the

eighteenth-century Helen Maria Williams's celebrated translation of *Paul and Virginia* (1787). But the bulk of the fifteen essays are devoted to examinations of contemporary or near-contemporary writers translating or translated—Adrienne Rich, Simone de Beauvoir, Alejandra Pizarnik, Ulrike Meinhof, Marie Vieux-Chauvet, or the gender issues involved in translating Tahar ben Jelloun; or again Emily Dickinson and Japanese Sei Shônagon in contemporary translation. Pilar Godayol contributes a valuable look at the tradition of the Catalan women's translating tradition—a tradition she herself has contributed to by her numerous anthologies in Catalan.

Sandra Bermann's essay on Adrienne Rich draws the portrait of a poet who found "words, forms, inspiration and connection" (102) through non-English languages and cultures. Her reading of non-English poets, her early translations from the Dutch and Yiddish (including Rachel Korn), and her participation in the "ghazal" project had an immense impact on her writing: "I can't emphasize enough how much my poetry has been stretched, enlarged, strengthened, fortified by the non-American poetries I have read, tangled with, tried to hear and speak in their original syllables, over the years" (98). In her poem "The Art of Translation" (1999), however, Rich shows the translator at the

heart of political action. The translator is

stopped at passport control:
*Occupation? No such
 designation—
 Journalist, maybe spy?*
 That the books are for
 personal use
 only—could I swear it?
 That not a word of them
 is contraband—how could I
 prove it?

(109)

Luise von Flotow's thoughtful essay on translation as remembering is devoted to Ulrike Meinhof, a figure who was at the very heart of political action in the 1960s and 1970s in West Germany, but it is the journalist and humanitarian that Flotow wants us to read. Von Flotow admires the feisty humanitarian, anti-Nazi, one of the foremost left-wing voices in 1960s West Germany, and argues persuasively for the voice of the writer before she became known only as the terrorist. Her account of reviving the early writings of Meinhof does nothing to reduce the complexity of translating socially and politically embedded writing. Translating is not just memory but an active process of re-remembering.

Anne-Lise Feral's readings of translated chick lit into French emphasize the ways in which the permissive sexuality of the

genre is diminished in French translation—in contrast to the freer sexual expression of the more sophisticated erotica of French literature. It opens onto the intriguing questions about stereotypes of sexual behavior on both sides of the Atlantic. Bella Brodzki's discussion of the cross-Atlantic traffic in ideas, in particular gender ideas, is a useful companion to Feral's piece—as Brodzki also investigates the ways in which ideas about gender and sexuality in the theory world have crossed from one continent to another. Rather than looking at the initial travel of French feminist ideas to America, the more usual focus of such an investigation, Brodzki moves forward to the return voyage of American feminist theory to France—and what she identifies as the resistance on the part of the French to American ideas of gender. The problem of translating “gender,” she concludes, is not a narrow or tangential issue, “to be worried about only by literary theorists obsessing over an arcane detail. Some critical distinctions do count, and we should be diligent about minding the gap between them” (279).

Not all the essays are necessarily positive. Madeleine Stratford

wonders about the influence that Susan Bassnett might have had in writing herself into her translation of Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry; Kate Sturge wonders about the authority Ruth Behar might have given herself in her ethnographic account, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story* (1993). Whereas in the latter case, there is a clear relation of power that gives authority to the ethnologist over the subject of the story, there is no such relationship in the Bassnett–Pizarnik volume and the basis for critique here seems much more dubious.

“It is through translation that the most contentious and productive aspects of intercultural exchange are worked through and made manifest,” writes Bella Brodzki (263). The trick is to find a way to write about translation that can deliver on this promise. Gender seems to provide a particularly revealing focus for understanding the way translation acts in contemporary culture.

Sherry Simon is a professor in the French Studies Department at Concordia University and author, most recently, of Cities in Translation: Intersections of Language and Memory (Routledge, 2012).