Przekładaniec. A Journal of Literary Translation 24 (2010): 179–192
doi:10.4467/16891864ePC.12.008.0570

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TO LIBERATE CHARYBDIS, TO FALL IN LOVE WITH SCYLLA: ON THE MONSTROSITY OF TRANSLATION

My mind now turns to stories of bodies changed
Into new forms.
Ovid (2010: 5)

Gender is a site of cultural translation.
Judith Butler (2000a: 753)

Abstract: The essay outlines a "critical genealogy" of the notion of resemblance which structures the hierarchical relationship between the impeccable Original (Man, the source text) and its ultimately imperfect, failed copy (woman, translation). I examine the analogy between translation and the female that has prevailed in modern scholarship, and reveal its other, subversive side. The displacement of meanings in this repetitive analogy clarifies the relationship between the source and the target text in the light of the Butlerian notion of "critical mimesis": a subversive play of meanings that takes place in the performative continuum of cultural translation.

Keywords: Aristotle, Judith Butler, translation as imitation, translation as mimétisme, gender (in) translation, cultural translation

Meanders of power

Since the 1970s there have been numerous discussions on such issues as ideologization of translation, its political aspects and cultural invisibility of translators. The starting point for a reflection highlighting the ideological-

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ly invested position of translators would obviously be polysystem theory that shed light on the mechanisms of translation manipulation that goes beyond its purely linguistic dimension (if there is any such thing at all; Wallace 2002: 65–74). Since then the attention of both translation scholars and practitioners has been directed not only towards the *techné* but also towards the *épistémè* of the "manual control" of the text by the translator, who, like Odysseus, has to meander between the Charybdis of political (in) correctness and the Scylla of the culturally grounded lack of accord (or perhaps **con**cord) on the part of the readers. This gave rise to the interest in such issues as power relations in translation as well as the linguistic, cultural, and gender identity of translators.

If we follow Michel Foucault and claim in our own right that "translation is the discourse of power!",[1] we will obtain a concise albeit somewhat simplified version of the basic axiom invoked by the intellectual ferment forming within the field of Translation Studies once questions about the "lost in translation" appeared: both female translators and authors that had either been trimmed into the canon or removed from it altogether. As a result, partly or completely forgotten female authors and translators have been gradually introduced into the system of cultural circulation, but, what is equally important, there have been diverse critical attempts at re-reading the texts already existing in translation. The main goal of such interpretive endeavours would be to bring to the fore their deliberate omissions, errors and de-**via**tions,[2] whose direct cause was the manipulation of the text in order to strengthen the dominant patriarchal code.

The significance of translation is not limited here to an allegorical sign of equality made between woman and translation; the very existence of that sign is first and foremost the evidence of prevalent essentionalist conceptions of both female nature and the nature of translation.[3] This analogy

[1] Cf. "History is the discourse of power," Foucault (2003: 68).

[2] The best known example of a translation deliberately smoothing out a nonconformist text is obviously the 1952 English version of Simone de Beauvoir's *Le deuxième sexe*, from which its translator, Howard Parshley, deleted the names of women in power, lesbian themes and the descriptions of harsh reality that women had to struggle with. See Simons (1999: 61–71).

[3] I.e. bons mots on the mutual exclusiveness of beauty and faithfulness; I discuss the source of the metaphor linking women and translation in the sections below. The sexist overtones of that metaphor are succinctly described by Louise von Flotow, who claims: "translation has long served as a trope to describe what women do when they enter the public sphere: they translate their private language, their specifically female forms of discourse (...) into some form of the dominant patriarchal code" (1997: 12). See also Chamberlain (1988: 454–472).

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will be the object of my scrutiny, critical reflection and transformation in the following sections. The influence of translation should nonetheless be considered 1. on the diachronic plane, where attention should be given to uncovering the historical importance of translating in female writing,[4] and consequently, to the **re**working and deconstruction of the existing canons 2. on the synchronic plane, where it should concentrate on working **out** of such modes of reading that would allow for "a transfer of reality into a new context";[5] construction of meanings eluding the dominant linguistic code so suffused with patriarchal ideology that it becomes almost transparent; construction of such an identity in language and through it that would allow one to express oneself. All that should be undertaken with one aim in mind: so that women can speak with their own voice, not only **in defence of** their dignity, originality and creative freedom they have been refused for so long, but also so that they can **manifest** them. To quote the Canadian translator Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, who provides the following explanation for her translatory choices: "no act of writing or translation is neutral" (qtd after von Flotow 1997: 27), therefore one should use "every possible feminist translation strategy to make the feminine visible in language. Because making the feminine visible in language means making women seen and heard in the real world. Which is what feminism is all about" (von Flotow 1997: 29).

We can elaborate on feminist translation strategies that allow translators to actively construe the sense of the text on equal footing with the author: supplementing, describing translator's ideas in a preface and in footnotes, "hijacking" the translation from the author, etc.,[6] but what is important for the purposes of the present study is the premise on which all of these strategies are grounded: the basic notion of dehierarchisation of the author/translator power relations and giving both of them an equal right to speak in their own voice – which obviously is a literal *trans-fer* into the discourse of

[4] Historically speaking, it has been a widespread belief that translation was the only form of expression in which women could realize their writerly potential, as they were not able to enjoy the "privileges of full authorship" (Simon 1996: 39), but e.g. Sherry Simon claims that this kind of activity could indeed have an emancipatory character (1996: 36–46).

[5] Which according to Mellissa Wallace is what the feminist discourse in translation is about (2002: 70).

[6] For details about the practical application of the particular feminist translation strategies, see e.g. Luise von Flotow (1991: 69–84).

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Translation Studies of the feminist endeavours to transform gender-related hierarchical power relations observed in the patriarchal society.[7]

Mimeticity of translation

Basically speaking, the feminist urge to transform traditional power relations should be read as a critique of the ontological order that is made manifest in the subordination of beings to one another. This hierarchical arrangement, which in the Middle Ages took the form of the *scala naturae*, is supposed to be the outcome of a natural state of things, but in reality is an effect of a classification according to a preconceived criterion. In this case the criterion will be the notion of resemblance that operates in conjunction with the principle of opposition: it is exactly this notion that has structured the whole of the Western culture since the times of Plato and Aristotle, who conceived of it as a bedrock of representation understood as the imitation of an original. Imitation, *mimesis*, should then be treated as the primary principle governing not only the structure of a literary work, but organizing the whole reality into a great chain of beings, whose place in the chain (or literally the "ladder") depends on the ratio of their resemblance to the original (Kelly 1998: 233).[8] Lynda Lange writes in "Woman is Not a Rational Animal: On Aristotle's Biology of Reproduction":

> Aristotle's facts, it seems clear, come dressed in the full regalia of Greek philosophy and social practices. Thus he explains all, but challenges nothing, and all heaven and earth is marshalled in interlocking hierarchies patterned after the structure of Greek society (1983: 14).

The mimetic order is the order of strict hierarchical representation, where the maximum of similarity is met with unequivocal positive valorisation owing to a high level of overlap between the incomplete part (which gradually loses its resemblance to the whole) and the complete whole. It is this order that results in the primacy of the public over the private; the community over the individual, the animate world over the inanimate world; master over slave, man over woman, etc.[9] What is of paramount importance

[7] By transformation I mean a quantitative and qualitative change which is not equivalent to a simple reversal or opposition.

[8] Cf. "'Resemblance' signals the epistemological side of mimesis" (Diamond 1997: ix).

[9] Cf. Welnak (2005: 166–189).

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here is the fact that the principle of mimeticity operates also in the sphere of the body, where the male body is the measure of all things, and where the valorisation of resemblance extends to the rules of reproduction and heredity. In *On the Generation of Animals* Aristotle explains his view that every animal, including humans, receives its form (soul) from the father, whereas from the mother it obtains only the supplementary matter (material nourishment) that she has not absorbed and which is usually excreted from her organism: it is the passive maternal matter in which the father actively imprints his form. Hence man is supposed to fulfill a productive, active function, whereas woman is to remain in her passive, **re**productive role.[10] Aristotle admits that sometimes the bad condition or immaturity of the paternal prototype leads to a situation in which the excess of matter gets out of control. This results in more or less visible deviations from the normative model; still, the real incapability to develop individual traits in offspring who as a result display only the residual generic features, is attributed wholly to the woman who is made responsible for the lack of resemblance if she cannot be controlled:

> The first departure indeed is that the offspring should become female instead of male; this, however, is a natural necessity. (For the class of animals divided into sexes must be preserved, and as it is possible for the male sometimes not to prevail over the female in the mixture of the two elements, either through youth or age or some other such cause, it is necessary that animals should produce female young) (Aristotle 2004: 100).[11]

The continuum of resemblance, which places at the top the impossible and paradoxical absolute identity of the copy and its original, whose perfect embodiment would be the Father's son (his identical twin?), ends with the extreme of the absolute lack of resemblance. This lack, however, also has its own continuum, whose very beginning is a daughter:

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[10] In *Metaphysics* Aristotle explains the difference between a natural act of conception (*genesis*) and an artificial act of creation (*poiesis*); nonetheless, these two are connected by a shared inclination towards imitation and the striving for complete resemblance to the original: "no 'this' would ever have been coming to be, if this had been so but that the 'form' means the 'such', and is not a 'this' – a definite thing; but the artist makes or the father begets, a 'such' out of a 'this'; and when it has been begotten it is a 'this such' (...) In some cases indeed it is even obvious that the begetter is of the same kind as the begotten (not however the same or one in number, but in form)" (1928: 795).

[11] For a more thorough discussion on the subject, see, e.g., Uliński (2001). Cf. Devin (2006: 425–455) for a very detailed study of the principle of resemblance in the Aristotelian mechanism of heredity.

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> Some children (...) though resembling none of their relations, yet do at any rate resemble a human being, but others are not even like a human being but a monstrosity. For even he who does not resemble his parents is already in a certain sense a monstrosity; for in these cases Nature has in a way departed from the type (Aristotle 2004: 100).

It is true that a significant departure from the original is not an ordinary case because it happens as a result of partial or complete loss of control over the female matter; nonetheless, "imperfect organisms" are an almost mundane "natural necessity." Such is the mode of creation of a daughter, a female monster of the primary kind. Let us remember: "we should look upon the female state as being as it were a deformity" (Aristotle 1953: 775a).[12]

The question of resemblance of a daughter/copy to the Father/Original is a trope familiar to all translators. The sphere of creativity and innovation, highly valued in modern culture since the times of the Enlightenment,[13] is the sphere reserved exclusively for the male/Original and results from what Lori Chamberlain calls "a gender-based paradigm concerning the disposition of power in the family and the state." As she moves on to claim: "the opposition 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" (1988: 454–455).[14] The Original is then the Aristotelian perfect and whole model, whose partial and defective imitation is a derivative outcome of insufficient control, and therefore by "a natural necessity" will be inferior to it. Metaphorical identification of woman and translation leads here to a consolidation of the Aristotelian mimetic order, where translation/daughter serves the Original as its crude version and the translator/mother is to take all the responsibility for any defects or shortcomings on the part of the Author/Original. The resemblance between the copy and the Original is thoroughly **re**productive: owing to the Aristotelian logic of heredity every deviation from the perfect model is a deviation

[12] Admittedly, in the previously cited, more recent version of *De generatione animalium* the citation takes a somewhat subdued form, as we read: "we must look upon the female character as being a sort of natural deficiency" (Aristotle 2004: 115).

[13] And not since the Romantic era, as it is commonly believed. See Sternberg (1999).

[14] This is also the source of the now widely discussed lack of respect for the unpaid domestic work of women (after all, it is a mechanical [sic] activity that does not demand any particular skills), and at the same time lack of respect for translation as such that is visible also in the academic circles.

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from the norm; the blame for all the potential deformations and the absolute monstrosity of the lack of resemblance (the result of betrayal) is to be borne by no one else but the uncontrollable, imaginative mother.[15]

Monstrosity: *mimétisme* and impurity of translation

Critical genealogy of the metaphorics of translation and Translation Studies is facilitated by the body of "gender-troubled" poststructuralist theories that question the normative character of all metanarratives and absolute truths, including the authority of the Original.[16] Poststructuralist entanglement into gender issues, resistance to the naturality and normativity of imposed hierarchies as well as a persistent focus on those who have been pushed aside, into the margin, are the themes fully articulated in the writings of Judith Butler, one of the main critics of the essentialist bias operative in constructing gender in Western culture. Butler's writing is consciously material and makes use of the surplus of meaning; it exposes the conventionality of all norm and is not at home anywhere: in the U.S. it "runs the risk of Eurocentrism," whereas in France "it has threatened an 'Americanization' of theory" (Butler 1999: 10). The work of the American philosopher is the embodiment of "live theory"[17] that undergoes constant supplementation, is subject to experiment and transformation, and uses the metaphor of translation as a *tertium datur*, the space in which there come together ideas usually considered binary oppositions. Already in one of her earliest works, *Gender Trouble* (1990),[18] Butler finds for translation a spe-

[15] See a discussion on the link that Aristotle created between female imagination and monstrous births, Huet (1993). Not without a reason would Douglas Robinson title his book *Translation and Taboo* (1996): in this work he puts forward a somewhat exaggerated but valid thesis concerning the fear of violation of the text. It is taboo, analyzed here in the light of the Aristotelian analogy, that can be treated as the fear of incestuous complication of the mimetic order. Cf. Gavronsky (1977: 53–62).

[16] A particularly well documented example of the interweaving of poststructuralist translation practices with poststructuralist theory will be the *enfant terrible* of French theory, the *oeuvre* of Jacques Derrida, that can be thought of as a(n) (un)desirable twin of the radically constructive Third Wave feminism, with all the metaphorical implications such an analogy gives rise to. Cf. Schwartz (1998).

[17] Here I am alluding to Kirby's work (2006).

[18] The Polish translation of *Gender Trouble* was published by *Krytyka Polityczna* (Political Critique) only in 2008. The Polish version is titled *Uwikłani w płeć* (lit. entangled into gender); both the long waiting for the Polish translation as well as the problematic "en-

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cific place that stems from the very character of her book and the theses on the performativity of gender that she puts forward. The translatory dimension of that work resides in the act of rendering the theoretically-oriented poststructuralist thought in a language at once concrete and political in nature, and thereby places Butler at the (negotiable and arguable) intersections of cultural studies and critical theory, in one line with Homi Bhabha or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak:

> There is a new venue for theory, necessarily impure, where it emerges in and as the very event of cultural translation. This is not the displacement of theory by historicism, nor a simple historicization of theory that exposes the contingent limits of its more generalizable claims. It is, rather, the emergence of theory at the site where cultural horizons meet, where the demand for translation is acute and its promise of success, uncertain (Butler 1999: ix).

In the above excerpt the word "translation" acquires even more metaphorical meaning, but already at this point we can see the significance of the cultural dimension of the gesture of translation clearly borrowed by Butler from Bhabha and Spivak. In Butler's case the cultural dimension of translation points on the one hand to its critical (existing in crisis, "at the site where cultural horizons meet") meaning, and on the other, to its performative, temporary and repeatable nature (whenever "the demand for translation is acute"). According to Butler, cultural translation is the only way of avoiding violence, including the violence that exists in language and because of it. As a "theory and practice of political responsibility" (2000b: 36), this kind of translation is operative in the primary spheres of human cognition and understanding, which define our own distinct sense of individuality and at the same time determine the universal character of humanity:

> We can (...) rearticulate or resignify the basic categories of ontology, of being human, of being gendered, of being recognizably sexual, to the extent that we submit ourselves to a process of cultural translation. The point is not to assimilate foreign or unfamiliar notions of gender or humanness into our own as if it is simply a matter of incorporating alienness into an established lexicon.

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tangled into gender" rendering of its title point to the singularly Polish, difficult context in which feminisms have to function. In the public media and in the academic circles feminism still tends to be treated as a *lusus naturae*, abrasive if not downright repulsive intellectual malformation, which obviously sits well with the leading monstrous thought/metaphor of this essay.

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> Cultural translation is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they encounter the limits of an available episteme: what is unknown or not yet known (Butler 2004: 38).

Thus, translation provides us with one of the most fundamental modes of existence and functioning in the world, which is marked by the readiness to reformulate cultural norms and epistemological truisms in a negotiation with whatever is (still) unknown, the Other, be it another human being or another language. Translation is in this case an effect of incessant negotiation efforts, and that is to say it is anything but passive.[19] In this sense it seems to be an act of constant re-positioning of oneself ("where the demand for translation is acute"), which questions its own assumptions. However, this questioning is not tantamount to a negation of these assumptions, but it is rather a gesture of "uncovering" them in a moment of crisis provided by the encounter with the Other. This shifting, nomadic position demands repeated articulation in new terms, in – one might say – an ever-growing, mutable and hybrid translation series. From this point of view cultural translation is a never-ending project of unconditional openness that results in a transformation both on the individual and societal level. Simultaneously, what is inscribed into its very structure is a certain lack of closure and a disappointing imperfection (by some dubbed linguistic untranslatability), but these two are the *sine qua non* of the change allowing for the perception of the Other's alterity:

> It is crucial to recognize that the notion of the human will only be built over time in and by the process of cultural translation, where it is not a translation between two languages that stay enclosed, distinct, unified. But rather, *translation will compel each language to change in order to apprehend the other*, and this apprehension, at the limit of what is familiar, parochial, and already known, will be the occasion for both an ethical and social transformation. It will constitute a loss, a disorientation, but one in which the human stands a chance of coming into being anew (Butler 2004: 38–39).

In one of her last books, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, which is a polylogue of sorts between her, Slavoj Žižek and Ernesto Laclau, Butler connects cultural translation with the notion of universality, working it out as a concept that encompasses contingency, a permanent (but positively valorised) crisis as well as a coming together of different positions and

[19] After all, etymologically *negotium* is *nec-otium*, the opposite of inertia.

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perspectives that seems to be enforced by the insertion of variously understood minorities into the discourse of universality. The space in which this exceptional and particular universality is to occur (but is not "realized", as at the core of this notion resides a lack understood, among other things, as a lack of completeness and finality) is set by the incessantly repeated performative gesture of cultural translation: the "in-between" or a cultural hybrid that creates a "non-place" for the active resistance of the minority to the hegemonic majority and reveals in the act the underlying premises of the dominant discourses/ideologies (Butler 2000: 14–15):

> Translation can have its counter-colonialist possibility, for it also exposes the limits of what the dominant language can handle. It is not always the case that the dominant term as it is translated into the language (the idioms, the discursive and institutional norms) of a subordinated culture remains the same upon the occasion of translation. Indeed, the very figure of the dominant term can alter as it is mimed and redeployed in that context of subordination. Thus, Homi Bhabha's emphasis on the splitting of the signifier in the colonial context seeks to show that the master – to use Hegelian parlance – loses some of his claim to priority and originality precisely by being taken by a mimetic double. Mimesis can effect displacement of the first term, or, indeed, reveal that the term is nothing but a series of displacements that diminish any claim to primary or authentic meaning. There is, of course, no such translation without contamination, but there is no mimetic displacement of the original without an appropriation of the term that separates it from its putative authority (Butler 2000: 37).

The key to the impure and contaminated cultural translation is provided by a special kind of *mimesis* that constitutes a parody – or perhaps a catachresis[20] – of the Aristotelian term and takes the form of *mimétisme*, a category used by Luce Irigaray as a specific reflection of *mimesis* in the androcentric Platonic worldview. Butler refers to Irigaray's notion of "mimicry" on different occasions and in her own discussion on the continuum of masculinity and femininity she comments on the act of imitation visible in Irigaray's "critical imitation" of Plato as a gesture of deliberate subjection to the rules of the dominant language aiming to disclose its phallogocentric

[20] Catechresis is one of the terms Butler uses on a regular basis to discuss mutual incompatibility, including the incompatibility of concepts to each other or concepts to things. For example, when asked whether she was a woman, Butler answered in the affirmative, but her statement was accompanied by embarrassed laughter which she interpreted in the interview as a signal of catachresis. She writes about the notion of "humanity" in a similar manner, as catachresis of the concept happens every time another minority group is subsumed by the term (2000a: 743).

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basis. As undertaken by different minorities, critical imitation or repetition of the gesture of hegemonic universalization leads to a displacement i.e. the already discussed ethical and social change. Cultural translation is the means to achieving this change: as a "play with mimesis" it points out that an original without a copy could not take the position of the original it creates for itself. In this way, from Butler's point of view, cultural translation opens the space for recontextualisation and attribution of new senses to language that tends to be immersed in androcentric (totalising, closed and untranslatable – or perhaps rather masking a lack of wholeness, openness and translatability[21]) narratives about the world.

One might say that feminist translation practices which are often interpreted as "othering" or "queering" of translation (its "monstrification") provide an example of "play with mimesis" or "mimicry" that reaches for the exaggerated and "deformative" translatory repertoire exactly in order to undermine the ostensibly irrefutable mimeticity of translation. In doing so they relativize the traditional approach towards translation as an activity that does not necessarily need to be based on the normative notion of resemblance. In this way feminist-oriented translators perform a connecting operation between "inauthentic," "passive" **re**production of a text and its "authentic," "active" **pro**duction. Ultimately, as Butler claims: "social transformation occurs (...) precisely through the ways in which daily social relations are rearticulated, and new conceptual horizons opened up by anomalous or subversive practices" (2000b: 14). This performative, socially transformative, subversive gesture is nothing else but a consciously mimed monstrosity in the etymological sense of the word: a sign or a portent of future change.

Epilogus/a

As Ovid has it, Scylla and Charybdis were punished by gods because there was one feature they had in common: it was their excess. Scylla's exorbitant beauty led jealous Circe to poison the lake in which she was to bathe and Charybdis's extreme valour drew the attention of angry Zeus to the rebellious daughter of Gaia and Poseidon.[22] The surplus of (bodily? mate-

[21] Cf. Butler (1993: 47–49).

[22] We encounter here an interesting example of mythological backlash of powerful gods and goddesses against women; this demands a commentary that backlash has history as old as the Greek hills.

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rial?) meaning and absolute political engagement are the primary characteristics of feminist translation. Should we punish it for them? Why? Because it can be beautiful and it abounds in bodily metaphors? Because instead of masking it unmasks its ideological footing? Because it is to be understood as a performative act, an instantiation of Butlerian critical *mimesis* that does not fall into the trap of Aristotelian resemblance but engages it in a play which uncovers its discriminatory presuppositions? I am not Odysseus, who would meander between those monsters of excess,[23] sacrificing a number of faithful companions on the way. Before I cast my critical judgement on a translation work and start to discipline and punish, I will try to question the assumptions I have cherished so far. I will make an effort and strive to understand translatory monsters, and then I may end up liberating Charybdis and falling in love with Scylla.

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[23] Or perhaps rather monsters created by hegemonic jealousy, as they were "bodies changed / Into new forms" by male envy / envy for a man Ovid (2010: 5).

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