

Interviewing Carol Maier: a woman in translation¹

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Resum

En un article posterior a les seves traduccions a la llengua anglesa de *Memorias de Leticia Valle* de Rosa Chacel i de *Delirio y destino* de María Zambrano, Carol Maier apunta el que penso que hauria de constituir una de les màximes més determinants en la pràctica de la traducció (1996, 209): «...it is not only in the 'text' of a work but precisely in the notes, introductions, and afterwards meant to ensure a work's recovery that the most decided re-covering often occurs.» Per a Maier, traductora literària, teòrica i professora de traducció, la responsabilitat de l'activitat traductològica no es limita a una mera (re)escriptura del text originari. Cal que el traductor i la traductora s'impliquin, abandonin les distàncies crítiques i portin a la visibilitat el que pensen sobre la teoria i la pràctica de la traducció.

I és precisament aquesta crida de Maier a l'expansió del terme «responsabilitat» en traducció la que m'invita a presentar potser d'una altra manera aquesta entrevista amb ella. Maier ens ofereix ara i aquí un espai de debat, de diàleg i de reflexió per a totes les persones que volem pensar sobre les paradoxes i les contradiccions derivades de (re)escriure una textualitat en una altra llengua. En definitiva, estic convençuda que les seves afirmacions, pensaments i comentaris sobre les interseccions entre el gènere i la traducció es guanyaran merescudament el sobrenom de «responsables» per al qual ella lluita tan enèrgicament.

Paraules clau: gènere i traducció, visibilitat.

Abstract

In an article which followed her translations into English of *Memorias de Leticia Valle* by Rosa Chacel and *Delirio y destino* by María Zambrano, Carol Maier establishes what for me should be one of the fundamental maxims for translators (1996-209): «...it is not only in the text of a work but precisely in the notes, introductions, and afterwords meant to ensure a work's recovery that the most decided re-covering often occurs.» For Maier, literary translator, teacher and theoretician of translation, the translator's «responsibility» is not limited to a mere (re)writing of the source text. Translators need to implicate themselves, abandon the pretence of objective distance and make plain their theoretical position and practical decisions regarding the text.

1. This paper is the result of two interviews which were conducted in Chicago on December 28, 1995 and in Norwich on September 10, 1996.

And it was precisely this call of Maier's, to the enlargement of the term «responsibility» in translation, which led me to interview her. Maier offers us a space for debate, dialogue and reflection open to all those of us who wish to examine the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in (re)writing a text in another language. I feel sure that her affirmations, thoughts and comments about the implications of gender in translation live up to the criteria of «responsibility» for which she is arguing so strongly.

Key words: translation and genre, visibility.

— **As a professional translator, what kind of factors do you have in mind when selecting a text to be translated?**

— Well, it depends on the situation. The most important factor for me, I think, is that I want to translate the text. Since I earn my living as a teacher of translation, the translations I do professionally are of works I select myself. I don't do this type of translation, even when I earn a little money, for the remuneration. I teach in order to live physically; but I translate in order to live emotionally or spiritually or creatively, and in order to bridge what I consider a false dichotomy between those two kinds of living. This is why I select texts that engage me in some urgent way, especially textually. I like to work on «difficult» texts that present a linguistic challenge, one that challenges the reader's expectations for verbal creation. This does not necessarily mean texts that are hard to understand, because sometimes the simplest text is very difficult to translate; but I prefer to work with texts that require active collaboration struggle in the «struggle» to write.

To some extent, the likelihood of publication is also a factor. At times this is almost secondary because I've certainly translated things just for the pleasure of translating them, but the long works I've translated are projects I both wanted to undertake and arranged to have published before I completed very much of them.

The author may be a factor as well; where the author's from, when the author lived. My university training was primarily in 20th-century Spanish Peninsular literature, and I wrote my dissertation about Ramón del Valle-Inclán's *La lámpara maravillosa*. I've also done a good deal of work with contemporary Latin American poets. This background certainly affects my choice of the work I will translate.

— **Have you ever decided not to translate an author because he was a man?**

— That's difficult to answer because any text I don't translate is one that in some way I decide not to translate. In other words, if one decides to translate a text one makes a deliberate decision to do so, but one also decides, and decides in a very real sense, not to translate others. Lisel Mueller has stated this far more precisely in her prose poem «Triage»: «To speak of one thing is to suppress another.» One can allude to other things, as Mueller

alludes to Brecht, for example, but this allusion does not avoid «suppression.»

It's a very tough question to answer in the negative. I can see answering it in the positive—yes, one translates a particular writer because she's a woman? But if one says that one does not translate a particular writer because of the writer's gender, this seems to imply that one may want to translate the writer but does not do so—one holds back, because the writer is a man or a woman. Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood says this in *Re-belle et Infidèle/The Body Bilingual*. She does not translate texts written by men, and she even goes a step further and says that translating texts written by men is harmful to women. I've thought about this a great deal. The first translations I did were of essays and poetry by Octavio Armand, and I worked with him and his with his writing for a long time. When I finished the anthology of his essays and poems that was published in 1994, I felt that I did not want to translate any more work by Armand. I felt that I wanted to translate different writers, and I wanted to translate work by a woman. Now I do not feel that I want to translate work by women exclusively. But at that point I did. I wanted to see if some of the conflicts I felt—although conflict is too strong a word—, some of the *abrasion* I felt with Armand's work had occurred because he's a man. It's more complicated, though. Did that abrasion arise, for example because he's a *Cuban* man? Was it because of what he had experienced in Cuba? Was it because of his family? I wasn't sure.

I had a great deal of difficulty finding a text by a woman that I wanted to translate. I was looking for a text that would present analogous kinds of textual challenges—a text that presented difficulties similar to the ones I had worked with in Armand's writing. I had also translated a book by Severo Sarduy, *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, which is by a man; however, in the case of Sarduy, it's a book by a man who does not identify himself solely as a man. In many ways he identifies himself as a woman, and so as a transsexual, or as a . . . it depends on how you categorize Sarduy with respect to gender, but certainly not the same way you would categorize Armand. My work with Sarduy also played on my thinking when I was looking for a text that push one's relationship to language in some of the ways that Armand's and Sarduy's texts engage the reader in a struggle with conventional expression; and by chance I began to read the work of Rosa Chacel. I felt that her work presented a great many textual challenges, and I found it work fascinating. In addition, she represented a period in Spanish history and literature with which I was rather familiar, not only as a scholar but also as a translator.

I should add here that I have an unfinished translation project—Valle-Inclán's *La lámpara maravillosa*. For a long time I believed it remained unfinished because I did not have enough time to finish it; but I found time to do other things and for some reason I had not found time for that project. It's a translation, obviously, of a book by a man, but what I was trying to do in my translation was tease out, through the translation, some of the aspects of the work writing that are generally considered «feminine»: characters such as Mari

Gaila from Valle-Inclán's *Divinas palabras*, for example, and Max Estrella from *Luces de Bohemia* both of which are poet figures that assume the same role as the bridge figure at the center of *la lámpara maravillosa*. This is the figure of the poet, a Word-figure that includes two extremes. In Spanish it is a «blanca figura,» one that is «blanca» in the sense of both «white» and «empty,» or «clear» —to use Susan Howard's description of a white or blank canvas—, one that cannot be described solely in terms of either dichotomy. In *La lámpara maravillosa* Valle-Inclán draws on, exploits, both the masculine and feminine connotations of many ambivalent words. And at the same time I was beginning to work with Chacel, I was working off and on with the translation of *La lámpara maravillosa*, trying to make Valle-Inclán's text as feminine as possible, although without allowing it to lose its decidedly masculine character, thinking of Valle-Inclán's own identification of himself as a poet figure who was feminine as well as masculine. And I was pondering de Lotbinière-Harwood's contention that translation a work by a man would damage a woman. What are the limits of safety and risk? What are the specific constraints? What, I wondered, about translating a man with when one senses a strong feminine identity in his language? I'm not talking about his person but about his language. De Lotbinière-Harwood does not address some of those questions in her book, and I wish she had. Because I think that where I got stuck with *La lámpara maravillosa* was at the definition of «woman» with respect to language and, consequently, with respect to translation; and I believe this explains why my translation of *la lámpara maravillosa* is on hold.

— **What projects are you working on now?**

— Right now, I'm involved in two translation projects—a book by María Zambrano and another by Rosa Chacel, and I think often about whether or not these two authors are best considered women writers primarily, and whether they might not be writers or philosophers first. I think I reflect on this so much is because I believe that a translator has a great responsibility, not merely to translate the words on the page but also to present a writer. Both of my translations of novels by Chacel, as well as my translations of Zambrano's book, are being published in series devoted to books by woman writers, which means they are being introduced and marketed in the United States as women writers. This is ironic, and perhaps unfair, because Chacel nor Zambrano wanted to be identified as a feminist. For both of them, their identities as a writer or a philosopher—or in Zambrano's case as both—would have been more accurate, and I wonder if I'm not guilty of misidentifying them by presenting them first and foremost as women.

— **So for you, it's not essential now, translating?**

— No I don't think so, not at the moment. Even with the first of Chacel's novels I translated, I chose the book not only because Chacel was a woman. I realized that I was drawn to Chacel's work by something much more inclu-

sive than that. For me, a text written by a woman represents an opportunity to explore what it means to be a woman, and what the implications are for the person who identifies as a woman.

— **Then you don't rule out translating a man simply because he's a man.**

— No, although I can only translate one thing at a time.

— **Does that mean you translate men or women depending on what you are interested in at the time?**

— Well, I don't know if I would say that, although at the moment I feel quite tempted to translate something by Octavio Armand.

— **After so long?**

— Yes, yes... because I had decided to put his work to one side, but I recently received a letter from the editor of a magazine saying that he had read *Refractions* and was interested in publishing an essay or poems by Octavio Armand. At first I said no, but then I began to read through several poems I had worked on some time before, and suddenly I realized that I was working on them again, and enjoying it. I made a few changes and very quickly I sent off a series of poems, and the editor liked them. So in that case, I had accepted without thinking, leaving to one side the earlier conflicts... no, not leaving them to one side rather seeing them from another perspective.

— **Perhaps two or three years ago you had more prejudices when it came to choosing men or women writers?**

— It's possible. I felt very affected by some of the profound tensions, particularly in Cuban culture—the very clearly defined roles of men and women. It wasn't a question of Octavio as a person or as a Cuban, but of the *choteo* or banter. *Choteo* is a difficult word to translate out of context and it's very important in Cuban culture; it's a particular way of teasing or ridiculing people «affectionately,» and it's always impressed me as something very male. I talked to some Cuban women to see whether this kind of linguistic, conceptual play was possible for women and they did not believe it was. For a long time I felt excluded from that bitter game, but now it's more a question of accepting it as it is, although from a distance.

— **How do you define your role as a translator? What position do you take on the debate between the critical and political nature of translation? As translation is a critical act, a political act, what kind of effect does it aim to produce on the reader?**

— The more I translate and read about other translators and their work, the more I think it is the responsibility of translators to reflect on their thinking in

political terms, to reflect on their motives and on the effect their work might have on the reader. So I would say that, yes, translation is a political activity, but our responsibility as translators is to be aware of that effect, insofar as that is possible, to make deliberate, informed decisions. If someone asks a translator «Why did you translate this or that work?» and the translator's answer is simply «Well, that's the way I translate», I don't find the answer adequate, especially in the case of a literary translation. And being able to explain one's approach does not mean that one is translating «for the reader,» but considering the possible implications and the consequences of the way one's work is marketed and distributed. What I ask is not so much that translators act according to a particular political conviction, or that their work take a specific approach, but that they as aware as they can about what they're doing. No one can ever be aware of every single point of view, of every single aspect of a given context; it's absolutely impossible. As one of Chacel's characters says in *La Sinrazón*, there's always someone pulling your strings, but «there's always someone pulling the strings of that someone.» But this is no excuse for not thinking about who's pulling your strings and about who's pulling his or hers.

— **What kind of relationship do you have with the authors you translate?**

— That depends on the writer. For example, I had a close relationship with Ana Castillo when I translated her poems. At the time, each of us was beginning to publish her work, I as a translator and she as a writer. Our relationship was very important to me, including its abrasions which were no doubt inevitable, seeing that we were an academic and a writer, an Anglo and a Chicana trying to collaborate. Severo Sarduy and I corresponded when I was translating *Escrito sobre un cuerpo*, but when Suzanne Jill Levine translated *El Cristo de la Rue Jacob*, Sarduy was no longer alive. Rosa Chacel I met twice before her death, and I never met María Zambrano. With Octavio Armand, I have enjoyed a very close relationship. So, it really depends on the situation. I believe that it can be extremely helpful to translators to work with writers, although I also want to say that it can also be very difficult, for many reasons. Sometimes the writer's knowledge of English is excellent, and the writer wants to participate in the translation, and this can be wonderful, provided the translator is willing to collaborate with a writer in that way. At other times, a writer doesn't know the language as well and may have very strong misconceptions about the language and may not want the translator to work in the way the translator finds most appropriate. For example, writers can be quite free and open about their play with language and the use of texts by other writers, but when it comes to their own work, «fidelity» can become very important; and then things can quite pretty dicey. Even so, I think most translators would agree that if translators have a chance to speak with «their» writers, it's a chance not to be missed, despite the possible misunderstandings and disagreements. There are too many things translators can learn from writers, and they owe it to their translations to find out those things.

— **For you, what is a woman-identified translator and how does she work?**

— I'll answer with two comments. First, I would not want to be prescriptive and say how any translator should work. Second, I would stress my preference for «woman-identified translator» over «feminist translator.» I don't think there that have been enough «women-identified translators»—that there is a tradition that goes back far enough—to let one say how translators work. But I would think that a «woman-identified translator» would first of all identify him or herself affirmatively with «woman» in some way and that she would make many of her decisions as translator on the basis of that identification. I also believe, however, that one could argue convincingly that the «woman-identified translator» would not necessarily have to identify herself *as* woman, that the identification I mentioned a moment ago could be more a question of identifying *with*. Probably the most important thing is not so much how one identifies oneself with respect to gender, and maybe not even how the writer is identified with respect to gender, as the translator's method or approach, in other words, the extent to which the translator makes decisions in the context of gender, and which decisions are made in that context. And in those decisions I would include such things as the selection of a publisher, and the choice about accompanying materials, afterwords and forwards. for example.

— **What do you think about using strategies such as footnotes, prefaces and linguistic manipulation so as to make the woman translator more visible?**

— I think it's important for all translators to make the fact, or rather the activity of translation visible in some way. The extent of that responsibility depends on the situation. Sometimes footnotes are appropriate, sometimes visibility best occurs in a preface, sometimes it's linguistic manipulation: all of them are justifiable, legitimate, if they are appropriate to the translator's purpose.

— **What difference, if any, do you see between woman-identified translation practice and feminist translation practice?**

— I believe there are many differences, although once again I would say that there are not enough translations of either type to document those differences fully. In general, though, «feminist» seems to suggest a distinctly politicized orientation and the presence of defined feminist strategies and goals, whereas «woman-identified» suggests a primary concern and not necessarily a feminist concern. I also believe it is important to point out that, increasingly, people tend to use both of those terms only with qualification because their meaning vary so greatly that neither of them can be used appropriately in a global context.

— **What do you think of Sherry Simon's idea that a feminist translation practice is a «framework» rather than a «method»?**

— Sherry expressed that idea some time ago, before very much had been written about feminist translation practice, even though there were feminists, espe-

cially Canadian feminists, working as feminist translators. Sherry's use of «framework» suggests to me that she anticipated both the contribution feminist translators would make to translation theory and practice and the possible limitations implicit in a translator's strict adherence to any «ism.»

— **To finish, what do you think about Mona Baker's words on cultural studies (1995): «And because of its political agenda, cultural studies also threaten to revive the prescriptivism tradition in translation studies. The fashionable use of 'cultural' cannot mask the fact that by exhorting translators to translate in specific ways (e.g. foreignizing, resistant, feminist), scholars such as Godard (in Bassnett and Lefevere 1990) are in fact substituting one type of prescriptivism for another.»**

— I believe that Mona is absolutely right with respect to the prescriptivism one often finds in cultural studies. I do not agree, however, that none of the works under the rubric «cultural» has enhanced our understanding of translation. Too many creative, thought-provoking translations have been done in the last ten years or so that one might discuss in those terms. For instance, I find de Lotbinière-Harwood's writing about translation to be prescriptive, but I believe that her translations (such as her work with Nicole Brossard's *Le desert mauve*) have definitely «enhanced out understanding of translation.» I would say the same for some of the «experiments» with race and gender realized by the contributors to Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney's *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823*. Determining what contributes to the present state of translation studies is more than Mona's comment seems to indicate; neither is there a single understanding of «translation» itself.

— **Thank you.**