

Introduction

Clarice Lispector is widely regarded as a luminary of contemporary Brazilian literature who is recognized for her enigmatic yet incisive fictions. Born in post-World War I Ukraine and raised in the Brazilian metropolises of Recife and Rio de Janeiro, Lispector rose to prominence at the young age of 23 after the publication of her first novel, *Near to the Wild Heart*, in 1934. The widely praised work catapulted Lispector into the world of literary acclaim and established her as a distinctive voice in fiction; from that point on, she became known for her unusual and unexpected uses of grammar and vocabulary as well as a stream-of-consciousness style that lends a psychological complexity to her work.

Many of Lispector's stories involve quotidian life, centering themselves on characters as average and unobtrusive as the strangers we pass everyday, be it on the bus, at the market, living down the street or getting off the elevator in our apartment building. It is through these unassuming protagonists and the mundanities of their day-to-day lives that Lispector chooses to explore the strange, often inexplicable revelations that can occur in seemingly trivial contexts, and the striking effects they can have. Her writing is often concerned with the intense internal reflections that a singular incident or event can provoke as opposed to the action of external plot points, allowing her readers to engage with the psyches not just of specific characters, but of anyone that recognizes themselves in the routineness of life. Such is the case with the short story I chose to translate, "The Departure of the Train," which juxtaposes two contrasting points of view in its exploration of such themes as identity, agency, and the passage of time.

In this paper, I will analyze the style, grammar, tone, rhythm and pacing, and uses of figurative language that work in tandem throughout my five-page translation of "The Departure of the Train." Over the course of my translation process, it became clear that my primary aim and

most difficult challenge was to reach the intrinsic humanity of Lispector's work while simultaneously maintaining the strong sense of self that she imbues in her writing. This demanded particularly close attention to the tension between domesticating and foreignizing her language, which was crucial to balancing the comprehensibility and fluency of my translation. In conjunction with this, I strove not to appropriate her voice, but to constantly and meticulously chisel it out of the foreignness of the English language. Drawing on translation theorists Roman Jakobson, Walter Benjamin, and Friedrich Schleiermacher, I reflect on the choices that make my translation what it is and the implications they have for my audience and my work as a whole.

Background and Theoretical Underpinnings

First published in the collection *Where Were You At Night* (1972), "The Departure of the Train" tells the story of two very different women brought together by a shared seating arrangement on the same train coach. Dona Maria Rita is an affluent, well-dressed older woman who is dropped off by her uncaring daughter to live on her son's farm. She is concerned with her elderly appearance, contemplative of her place in the world, and unsettled by the gentility that her fellow passengers show her, one of whom is Angela Pralini. Angela, a thirty-seven year old woman, is running from an unfulfilling, tumultuous relationship and traveling to her uncle's farm, seeking to reclaim a sense of identity and agency lost in the relationship she is leaving. One woman is defined by her old age, the other by her ex-lover's perception of her, but while Dona Maria Rita's struggle is with the weary acceptance and defeated admission of her state of existence, Angela chooses to abandon her previous way of being and grapple with the reconstruction of her sense of self on her own terms.

Like much of her writing, "The Departure of the Train " showcases Lispector's unique command of the Portuguese language, one which makes her work both easily recognizable

and

broadly impenetrable, and that creates a challenge of a translation. In some way or another, Lispector renders virtually all aspects of her work – whether grammatical, stylistic, or tonal – with a distinctiveness and deliberateness that is marked by a keen lucidity of thought. This lucidity can be felt in the visceral reactions her writing often evokes in her readers, but at times her commitment to her own unadulterated self-expression can form a sense of opacity around the meaning of her words. In this way, she exemplifies Roman Jakobson’s concept of intralingual translation, or the cognitive translation of thoughts into words. With her combined focus on the abstract and the psychological as well as her use of strange and unconventional language, Lispector’s writing seems like an intimate expression of thoughts and ideas that, while natural and fluid to the author, gives the impression of already necessitating a translation from internal thoughts to written words. Drawing upon ideas of translation theorist Friedrich Schleiermacher, this quality creates an amplified tension between foreignizing and domesticating choices: the interlingual translation quality of Lispector’s writing leads not only to a foreignization of her own language, but the potential for amplified foreignization when translating from Portuguese into, in this case, English.

It is important to note that this “foreign” speech is not the result of Lispector’s European birth or any deficiency of Portuguese, for she undoubtedly has a mastery of the language that is purposeful in its strangeness. Rather, it is a mark of the omnipresent, authorial sense of self that steeps her work and that demands a thoughtful consideration of her own characteristic nature as well as her relationship with the Portuguese language. It becomes all the more remarkable, then, that despite the ambiguities and idiosyncrasies of her writing (or perhaps precisely because of it), Lispector is able to imbue her work with a raw humanity that transcends any class, nationality, or

language. Her characters lead isolated yet parallel lives; they could never be anyone else, yet they are also all of us. Here lies the paradox of Lispector and the crux of all the translation challenges I faced: her writing is an expression of her own unique way of “seeing and drawing connections” (Schleiermacher 44), saturated with her own characteristic understanding of the world while simultaneously arriving at observations and truths that resonate with an unmistakable universality.

It is for this reason that I turned to translation theorist Walter Benjamin and his assertion that all translations are attempts to arrive at a single “language of truth.” Ultimately, the aim of my translation became to carve out the “meaning that is not exclusive to a language, but that is based off of the shared humanity of all people” (Benjamin 81), allowing the universality of the insights that her characters experience to shine through. This philosophy is what led me to translate the five-page excerpt of the story that I selected from the middle of the work; beginning with Angela’s point of view and ending with Dona Maria Rita’s, it is comprised of thoughts and observations that alternate from ruminative to mundane, providing the opportunity to tackle sweeping, enigmatic epiphanies as well as plain faced observations. Thus, my goal became not to rewrite the story, but to “set free...the pure language spellbound in the foreign language” (Benjamin 82), enabling the humanity intrinsic to Lispector’s work to make itself understood while maintaining the particularities with which she colors them. Equipped with this theoretical framework, I set out to undertake a thoughtful translation of “The Departure of the Train” and encountered a multitude of challenges, starting with the story’s inconstant rhythmic pace.

Rhythm and Pace

Much of Lispector’s *oeuvre* is written in a stream-of-consciousness style, and this short story is no exception. “The Departure of the Train” was written towards the end of Lispector’s

career, however, and is characterized by a more erratic pace largely due to the narrative structure

of the story. Lispector takes advantage of an omniscient, third-person point of view to bounce back and forth between Angela's thoughts, Dona Maria Rita's thoughts, and an objective outside perspective. This enables readers to understand both the imagined essence of the characters through their thoughts, memories, and internal monologues, as well as the outer personas they create for themselves through their perceptions of each other. It also allows Lispector to jump from dialogue to descriptions of dialogue and from descriptions of the characters to characters' thoughts. Yet this constantly alternating point of view can create a dizzying lack of linearity and a fickleness of ideas. Descriptions of everyday events are peppered intermittently with sudden introspective thoughts, and there is often a lack of immediate connection from one thought to the next; a careless translation would make it all too easy to create a disjointed story where the full weight of the characters' thoughts are eclipsed by their potential incongruency. Take, for instance, the following passage, where Dona Maria Rita wades through both an existential train of thought and a contemplation of her children:

A velha sempre fora um pouco vazia, bem, um pouquinho. Morte? era esquisito, não fazia parte dos dias. E mesmo “não existir” não existia, era impossível não-existir. Não existir não cabia na nossa vida diária. A filha não era carinhosa. Em compensação o filho era tão carinhoso, bonachão, meio gordo. A filha era sequinha como seus beijos rápidos, a “public relations”. A velha tinha certa preguiça de viver. A monotonia, porém, era o que a sustentava. (Lispector 18)

There is a velocity in reading through the paragraph that is punctuated by the varying lengths of the phrases, the cadence of the combination of words, and the abrupt shifts in subject matters, all of which seem purposeful in their mimicry of the natural flow of thoughts.

To maintain the deliberateness of the pace and mitigate any unintended awkwardness, it

was important for me to keep as close to the melody of the passage as possible by paying attention to its minute details.

The old lady had always been a bit empty, well, just a little bit. Death? was strange, it wasn't part of the day to day. And even "not existing" didn't exist, it was impossible to not-exist. Not existing didn't fit into our daily life. Her daughter wasn't loving. In compensation her son was so loving, good-natured, slightly chubby. Her daughter was as dry as her quick kisses, the "public relations" one. The old lady had a certain laziness about living. The monotony, as such, was what sustained her.

Identical to the original Portuguese, the first sentence is composed of 18 syllables and, unlike the most recently published English translation (Dodson 2017),¹ leaves out the article "it" after the question of Death. I translated the Portuguese "tão carinhoso" to "so affectionate" in describing Dona Maria Rita's son, choosing to maintain the single syllable adjective over the more traditional "very affectionate" and matching the 5 syllables of the original. And while the 2017 English version translates "era impossível não-existir" as "not-existing was impossible," I stick to the word ordering used in Portuguese by writing "it was impossible to not-exist," carrying over a stronger sense of incredulity from the original in the process. By striving to match the rhythm and pacing of the original, as well as respecting entirely its punctuation, these choices reflect my attempt to allow the momentum of some thoughts and the interruption of others to flow as they may. This rhythmic ebb and flow goes hand in hand with Lispector's grammatical choices, which presented their own set of challenges.

Grammar and Tense

One thing that characterizes Lispector's work is her use of the *préterito mais que perfeito*, or the past perfect, a verb tense that is rarely used in spoken or written Portuguese today. It lends an elevated, almost archaic quality to her writing that can create a bulkiness and a redundancy in English if directly translated. In an earlier instance of Angela's inner monologue, for example,

Lispector uses the phrase “depois de ter tido,” which becomes “after having had” when

¹ The old woman had always been slightly empty, well, ever so slightly. Death? it was odd, it played no part in her days. And not even “not existing” didn’t exist, not-existing was impossible. Not existing didn’t fit into our daily life. Her daughter wasn’t affectionate. In compensation her son was incredibly affectionate, good-natured, chubby. Her daughter was as brusque as her cursory kisses, the “public relations” one. The old woman didn’t feel quite up to living. The monotony, however, was what kept her going. (Dodson 470)

translated literally. Such wording would have distracted from the flow of the phrase, but

changing the verb tense in this context would have changed the sense of the sentence. To bypass

both issues, I decided to use the phrase “after she’d had”; although the original Portuguese

doesn’t explicitly specify to whom the verb “had had” is referring, I include the pronoun “she” to

keep the fluidity of the sentence. Contractions and pronoun specifications like these litter my

translation, especially because unlike English, the Portuguese language is often able to omit the

use of referents. These instances provide an example of the subtle domestications of phrases that

were necessary to maintain both the comprehensibility and the fluency of Lispector’s writing.

Counterbalanced with this archaic tense and the domestication it demands are the unusual, creative grammatical liberties that Lispector takes with her use of things like incomplete phrases and invented word compounds (e.g. “not-existing,” “love-adoration,” “each-one’s own life”). She

forms fragmentations of sentences that create ambiguity around the exactitude of their grammatical sense and oblige readers to go back and reevaluate what it is she’s saying. Perhaps the most prominent example of this can be found near the end of my translation, with the phrase “Although Dona Maria Rita had hoped her daughter would stay on the train’s platform to wave goodbye to her but that didn’t happen.” Upon first glance, it seems that the sentence is simply grammatically incorrect. Indeed, the most recent English translation (Dodson, 2017) takes the liberty of rectifying this apparent error by writing, “As much as Dona Maria Rita had been hoping her daughter would wait on the train platform to give her a little sendoff, it didn’t

happen.” If, however, Lispector’s intention was to be as baldly comprehensible, why then does the original Portuguese remain as much of a fragment? In this case, I interpreted the seemingly improper sentence not as a grammatical fault, but as a deliberate unconventionality. Instead of domesticating it, I left it foreignized, choosing to trade explicit intelligibility for a more thought-provoking, classically Lispector take.

Figurative Language and Tone

Just as the back and forth perspectives of Angela, the narrator, and Dona Maria Rita create a disjointed, almost rambling narrative cadence, so too does it forge a scattered tone marked by a sense of intimacy, doubt, and existentialism. Throughout the story, the motifs of death, agency, and the multiplicity of the self lend a complexity to what would otherwise be merely a log of two women’s internal monologues. Unexpected uses of metaphors and figurative language² imbue a depth and a brute force to the original Portuguese that required close consideration of foreignizing and domesticating decisions. Take, for example, the intriguing metaphor, “plenitude is one of those truths that is found.” Although in Portuguese there is a sense of specificity given to “truth”³, translating it to “one of *the* truths found” felt overly foreignized and left a jarring and confusing effect, while domesticating it to “*a* truth” would have strayed too far from the sense of the original metaphor. “Truth” had to lie in the middle ground between the abstractness of “*a*” and the particularity of “*the*”; I chose to use “those,” which evokes a sense of loose familiarity with whatever noun followed, and strikes a balance between domestication and foreignization.

One instance in which I maintained a more foreignized approach can be seen in the the comparison Lispector makes between the end of Angela’s romantic relationship and the removal of female reproductive organs: “But the necessary breakup had been an ablation for her, just as

there are women from which uteruses and ovaries are removed.” Unlike the 2017 English translation, I chose to adhere more closely to the original Portuguese by retaining the verb

²For example, a relationship is cut off by the “fatality of the desire to survive,” an old woman’s world is “a sigh,” truth becomes “mentally unpronounceable.”

³A plenitude é uma das verdades encontradas

“ablation” as opposed to the more familiar “amputation.” The infrequency of the word “ablation”

obliges readers to examine its definition more closely, a process that lends the word a further prominence and reinforces the strange sense of inhospitality that pervades the entire simile. I also opted to preserve the original version’s use of the passive voice in referring to women “from which uteruses and ovaries are removed.” By using the passive voice in the context of this graphic comparison, Lispector draws attention to a keen sense of impotence and even tragedy that characterizes Angela’s flight, one which is as necessary as ovariectomies often are. Because of this, it was important for me to distinguish this phrase as one that merited a more exact, if more clunky, indication of Angela’s agency or lack thereof in the comparison of her breakup to the absence of female reproductive organs.

A final example of the tension between foreignizing and domesticating that I encountered in Lispector’s eccentric use of figurative language is visible in the following figure of speech: “It was as if she wasn’t up to the act of death.” The line describes Dona Maria Rita and the incongruity she sees between herself—average and unextraordinary—and death, which she considers surprising and abnormal. Here, we see an example of a phrase that demands more of a domestication of its semantics in order to maintain its metaphorical sense. Translated directly from Portuguese, the line would go something like, “It was as if she wasn’t at the height of the act of death.” By conjuring up an image of a physical disparity between the old lady and death, Lispector evokes the idea that Dona Maria Rita struggles to comprehend death and its surety.

However, because a more literal translation retaining the idea of physical size would have obscured the sense Lispector conveys, I chose to change the phrase “at the height of” to “up to.” While the decision results in a more domesticated version of the line, it ultimately preserves the original’s idea of physical distance while making use of a more common phrase in English. At the same time, it keeps the sense that there is perhaps an insufficiency, or a weariness, about Dona Maria Rita that in either case maintains an incompatibility between her and death.

Conclusion

Choices like these, as well as innumerable others that comprise my translation, heightened my consciousness of the responsibilities that translators have—to readers, to form, to sense, and to the author themselves—and, in the process of wrestling with them, solidified my recognition of the futility that comes with attempting to answer to them all. Like any approach to literature, there is no singular, perfect translation of “The Departure of the Train,” because there is no single interpretation of it. Inevitably, my relationship to the Portuguese language, my personal experiences and background, and the context in which I approached the text colored my interpretation, resulting in what could never have been anything other than my own translation.

With a constant and acute awareness of this phenomenon, I found myself falling back on Benjamin’s “language of truth” throughout my time with the story, weaving it into the strategy of my translation. While I relied on theoretical and technical rationales to inform my translation, ultimately I strove to reach the “expression of the most intimate relationships among languages” that “relate to each other in what they want to say” (Benjamin 77-78): that essential, shared humanity of Lispector’s words and insights that is as affecting and inscrutable in English, or in any other language, as it is in the original Portuguese. I hope that, through my translation, readers find themselves drawn to examine their own interpretations of the mystery and universality of

Lispector's work, and to see their own musings, suspicions, and epiphanies reflected back to them.