

A COMPARISON OF TWO TRANSLATIONS OF JOHN DONNE'S "THE FLEA"

Uma Comparação de duas Traduções de "A Pulga"
de John Donne

Ein Vergleich zwischen zwei Übersetzungen von
"Der Floh" von John Donne

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SUMMARY

This study will make a comparison of two translations of John Donne's «The flea» by translators often considered to have very contrasting styles — Paulo Vizioli (PV) and Augusto Campos (AC).

RESUMO

Este estudo fará uma comparação de duas traduções de «A pulga» de John Donne por tradutores de estilos notoriamente diferentes — Paulo Vizioli (PV) e Augusto Campos (AC).

THE FLEA

By JOHN DONNE

1 Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
2 How little that which thou deny'st me is;
3 Me it sucked first, and now sucks thee,
4 And in this flea, our two bloods mingled be;
5 Confess it, this cannot be said
6 A sin, or shame, or loss of maidenhead,
7 Yet this enjoys before it woo,
8 And pampered swells with one blood made
9 And this, alas, is more than we would do.
10 Oh stay, three lives in one flea spare,
11 Where we almost, nay more than married are.
12 This flea is you and I, and this
13 Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is;
14 Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
15 And cloistered in these living walls of jet.
16 Though use make you apt to kill me,
17 Let not to this, self murder added be,
18 And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.
19 Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
20 Purpled thy nail, in blood of innocence?
21 In what could this flea guilty be,
22 Except in that drop which it sucked from thee?
23 Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
24 Find'st not thyself, nor me the weaker now;
25 'Tis true, then learn how false, fears be;
26 Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
27 Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

A PULGA

1 Repara nesta pulga e apreende bem
2 Quão pouco é o que me negas com desdém.
3 Ela sugou-me a mim e a ti depois,
4 Mesclando assim o sangue de nós dois.
5 É certo que ninguém a isto alude
6 Como pecado ou perda de virtude.
7 Mas ela goza sem ter cortejado
8 E incha de um sangue em dois revigorado:
9 É mais do que teríamos logrado.
10 Poupa três vidas nesta que é capaz
11 De nos fazer casados, quase ou mais.
12 A pulga somos nós e este é o teu
13 Leito de núpcias. Ela nos prendeu,
14 Queiras ou não, e os outros contra nós,
15 Nos muros vivos deste Breu a sós.
16 E' embora possas dar-me fim, não dês:
17 É suicídio e sacrilégio, três
18 Pecados em três mortes de uma vez.
19 Mas tinges de vermelho, indiferente,
20 A tua unha em sangue de inocente.
21 Que falta cometeu a pulga incauta
22 Salvo a mínima gota que te falta?
23 E te alegras e dizes que não sentes
24 Nem a ti nem a mim menos potentes.
25 Então, tua cautela é desmedida.
26 Tanta honra hei de tomar, se concedida,
27 Quanto a morte da pulga à tua vida.

Translation by Augusto de Campos in *O anticritico* but first published in «John Donne, 72».

From *John Donne, The complete English poems*, edited by A. J. Smith

* USP

A PULGA

1 Nota esta pulga, e nota, através dela,
 2 Que o que me negas é uma bagatela;
 3 Tendo sugado a mim, e a ti depois,
 4 Nela se mescla o sangue de nós dois;
 5 Sabes que isso não pode ser chamado
 6 Defloração, vergonha, nem pecado;
 7 Ela, no entanto, rude e ousada,
 8 De sangue duplo se deforma empanturrada,
 9 E, perto disso, o que desejo, ai! não é nada.

10 Pára! Três vidas poupa este momento,
 11 Onde houve quase... oh, mais que um casamento.
 12 Somos a pulga, e a nós ela é perfeito
 13 Templo de núpcias e de núpcias leito;
 14 Contra ti e teus pais, a união se deu
 15 Nesse claustro murado em vivo breu.
 16 Matando-me pela honradez,
 17 Praticarás o suicídio a uma só vez,
 18 E o sacrilégio, três pecados pelos três.

19 De púrpura manchaste, sem clemência,
 20 As unhas com o sangue da inocência?
 21 Essa pulga seria tão daninha,
 22 Só por te haver sugado uma gotinha?
 23 Porém exultas, porque após tal morte
 24 Nenhum de nós se mostra menos forte.
 25 Bem, vê como o temor é ruim;
 26 Perderás tanto de honra ao vires para mim,
 27 Quanto de vida porque a pulga teve fim.

Translation by Paulo Vizioli in *John Donne, O poeta do amor e da morte*

Considerable differences in the two translations can be noted right from the first line, *Mark but this flea, and mark in this*, AC using the more didactic *repara* and *aprende bem* and PV the less formal *nota*, repeated, as is *mark*. However, neither manages to include the second meaning of *mark*, *squash, kill*, which will indeed happen at the beginning of the third stanza. AC continues to distance Donne and his mistress in 1.2 where he adds *desdém* to *negas*. In Donne's poem the lady is refusing the poet but with no disdain or condescension. The emphasis is on the littleness of what is being refused, not on the attitude of the lady. *Bagatela* gives more this idea of smallness. In his notes to "The flea" in *John Donne, the complete English poems*, A. J. Smith mentions that in Donne's time the letter *s* was sometimes still printed in its old form (*f*), which could easily be read as *f*, giving the obvious quibble of *fucks*. Even if this were not the case, the sexual innuendo of *sucks* with *s* is lost by both translators by using *sugar*. Would not *chupar* have been better? And in the same line, 1.3, isn't AC somewhat redundant in *Ela sugou-me a mim*? Does the alliteration add anything? Line 4 has two similar renderings, but neither AC nor PV gets the internal rhyme, *flea, be*. In the next couplet, 1.5-6

Donne's coaxing attitude towards his mistress reappears, *Confess it, you know but you are just pretending, you're just playing a game that will end in lovemaking* with the mock purity of religious-confession. AC returns to his earlier formality of 1.1-2 with *alude* in 1.5 and no imperative to show that this line is directed to the lady. AC also fails to include a Portuguese equivalent of *shame*. *Sin* and *loss of maidenhead* can be kept to herself; however, it is a much greater worry if others see her as a whore. In Stanza 2 *though parents grudge* links her worry of what the world will think. PV's *Sabes* is much nearer to *Confess*, though weaker, and though changing the word order for the sake of rhyme, manages to include three worries. The clear sexual innuendo of *enjoys* in 1.7 is translated as *goza* by AC but PV weakens it to *rude e ousada*. Incidentally, AC's English version of 1.7 gives *woe* for *woo*, a reading I have not come across in any edition of Donne. Such a reading would entirely change the line, if not the whole poem. As AC uses *sem ter cortejado*, *woe* must be a misprint, one of a large number of English misprints in this otherwise beautiful book. The result of this precocious enjoyment is in 1.8 *pampered swells with one blood made of two*. Pregnancy is obvious, but a voluptuous, happy swelling fed on the sweet blood of the lady. The Oxford English Dictionary gives *luxuriously fed* for *pampered*. AC's *um sangue em dois revigorado* is more appropriate than the physical ugliness of PV's *se deforma empanturrada*. In a note to *empanturrada* PV comments that "A descrição da pulga, que, empanturrada, se deforma com o duplo sangue encerra grotesca sugestão da gravidez, outra deformação física provocada pela 'mistura de dois sangues'." I fail to see grotesque element in Donne. And surely the poet wants to persuade his mistress to make love, not to put her off. In the last line of this stanza, 1.9, Donne gives the clear idea that they, unlike the flea, have not managed to join their bloods, the *this* referring back to the previous two lines, 1.7-8, where the flea has been able to join their two bloods and profit by it. PV's version is confusing here: *O que desejo, my wanting to make love with my mistress is nothing compared to the flea's ability to se deforma(r) empanturrada*. But surely what the I of the poem wishes is to join their bloods in exactly the same way as the flea was able to. PV's line 9 also seems excessively fragmentary, with four pauses, making the final conclusion much more hesitant. AC's final line is happier but *logrado* is something of a distortion. Donne is saying this is more than *we* (particularly you) *dared to do*. *Logrado* says that *this is more than we would have succeeded in doing if we had started*.

A certain distance in the attitude of the poet to his mistress is again noticeable in AC at the beginning of the second stanza. While Donne eulogises his flea, *where we almost, nay more than married are*, taking delight in the elaborateness of the conceit as it grows from *almost* to *more than married*, AC detaches the poet. The flea is only

capaz de nos fazer casados. There is none of the poet's delight in the afterthought of *quase ou mais*. PV keeps syntactically closer to Donne but with a certain awkwardness. Donne's tone is always conversational. He is talking, persuading, wheedling, coaxing. *Oh stay* is more *stop and think* than *Pára!* and *oh* seems a little melodramatic when we compare it to the *nay* of Donne's change of thought direction. And where, other than for reasons of rhyme, does *este momento* come in? Does it not give the idea that although she should not kill the flea at that precise moment, there would be no harm in killing it later? Thus much of the sacrilegious element of Donne's mistress killing her flea is lost. With the simple *Poupa três vidas nesta* AC here is happier. What does the second this of line 12 refer to? The title of the poem is "The flea". All the references are to the flea so surely Donne is not going to introduce an extraneous element? Surely *this* will not mean their bed and room, the place where they are? If it does, much of the wit is lost. And this conceit clearly fits in with the rest of the poem. In the flea they are joined physically as in a *marriage bed* and with the permanent bond of the wedding service in a *marriage temple*. The *este* of AC would have to be *esta* to agree with *pulga* and therefore must refer to something else, thus weakening Donne's conceit. Moreover, AC omits the *marriage temple*, PV keeps closer to Donne, but the switching of position of *núpcias* in *Templo de núpcias e de núpcias leito* signposts rhyming necessity for the readers. In the next two lines, 1.14-15, Donne's argument is *there's nothing at all we can do about the situation. Although you and your family may not like the idea, we have already come together inside the flea, therefore why don't we make love?* Inferred from these two lines we have the sexual coming together of *we are met*, which of course runs right through the poem and also the monastery-like holiness of *cloistered*, linking back with the *marriage temple*. Again there is sexual innuendo as the cloistering in the *living walls of jet* can be read as the poet's entering the lady's vagina. PV's *a união se deu nesse claustro murado* is sufficiently ambiguous but AC changes the subject and gives *Ela nos prendeu*. Of course the flea did the sucking but the we subject of Donne points to a voluntary imprisonment on their part. Why does AC use the vague *outros* for *pais* in line 14? It can only be for extra assonance, to give an accumulation of *o* sounds in *ou, os, outros* and *nós*. Both translators use *B/breu* for *jet* in line 15. The Oxford English Dictionary gives *jet* as a *deep glossy black*, which adds further to the ambiguities of this line. They are separated and secluded as in a monastery but at the same time they are not still as the walls are alive, moving and shining. And what is moving is not something unattractive, pitch or tar, but something glamorous, another irony on the insignificant flea. *Breu* gets the colour but not the positive associations of *jet*. Donne's next line, line 16, *Though use make you apt to kill me* has a number of different readings which play on different interpretations of *use, apt* and *kill*.

1. *You are so accustomed to me that you don't realise that you can hurt me enough even to kill me.*
2. *Being used sexually would enable you to bring me to orgasm.*
3. *Being used sexually would give you the skill of bringing me to orgasm regularly.*
4. *As you will get used to me sexually, you will readily be able to bring me to orgasm.*

AC's version takes into account only the first reading whereas PV's *Matando-me pela honradez* retains Donne's ambiguities. As PV points out in his note, the final two lines of the second stanza draw the parallel between the flea, containing three bloods, and the Holy Trinity, emphasised by the repetition of *three... three* in line 18. AC's addition of *de uma vez* adds to Donne's finality and definiteness, *by killing the flea you are killing three lives at the same time*. But PV's *a uma só vez* seems to be out on a limb and ambiguous where unambiguity is the order of the day, giving the possible redundancy of *she will commit suicide completely, she will not just half kill herself and leave the rest till later*. Isn't this kind of suicide rather messy and difficult?

At the beginning of the third stanza the lady has squashed the flea. Donne ironically accuses her of being *cruel and sudden*. PV gives the equally strong *sem clemência* and AC the weaker *indiferente*. The colour of the nail which killed the flea is *purple* in Donne, *púrpura* in PV and *vermelho* in AC. In this stanza Donne stresses the innocence of the flea and the smallness of what it has done; the lady's giving up her virginity to him will be as small a thing as the flea's biting them. Thus Donne uses *purpled* with its connotations of royal blood rather than *red*, which would point to the ceremonial act of loss of virginity, which he is trying to make into something insignificant. PV's *púrpura*, however, does not fit in with his more sexual *manchaste*. AC makes his *vermelho* even stronger with the semi-permanent *tinges*. My personal experience of squashing fleas is that they leave a small purple-black mark which can easily be rubbed or washed off. Maybe neither translator has much experience of killing fleas. And as fleas are quite tiny, only one nail is needed to kill a single flea. So PV's *as unhas* is unsuitable. In line 20 Donne glorifies the flea to represent the quality of *innocence* which the lady has attacked and defiled. And if her attack on *innocence* causes so little worry, why should she worry about the loss of her own innocence, her virginity? PV gives the abstract quality of *inocência*, but AC reduces this to the *inocente* flea. In the next couplet, 1. 21-22 PV's use of the diminutive *gotinha* to rhyme with *daninha* gives a colloquial playful tone and contrasts with AC's more formal *incauta*, which also has no equivalent in Donne's text. In lines 23-24 the lady thinks she has gained the upper hand as Donne has told her all about the

mingling of their bloods in the flea and that by killing it she herself would feel some pain. However, she has felt nothing and Donne tells her *thou triumph'st, exultas* in PV and the weaker *te alegras* in AC, which fails to give the idea of her victory. For weaker AC uses *menos potentes*, in so doing introducing a sexual connotation which doesn't exist in Donne. When we examine the link with the next three lines, 1.25-27, we find *potentes* unsuitable. Donne says that *she will not lose as much honour or blood as was given up to the flea when she yields to him*. Following through AC's *potentes* along these lines of reasoning, *she thinks she will feel less potente, less sexually able, by yielding to him*. It may make her weaker in terms of the loss of blood, the physical energy used up, and the opinion of society which will consider her less chaste, but it is much more likely to stimulate her sexual appetite than to weaken it. Line 25 may have two readings depending on whether or not there is a comma between *false* and *fears*: *then learn how false all fears are; or learn how those fears which are false are implying there are also fears which are not false*. AC follows A. J. Smith's edition, placing a comma between *false* and *fears*, thus obliging him to use the first interpretation. PV has no comma. AC translates *false* (,) *fears* with *cautela*, which gives the idea that the lady may, although surreptitiously, give in to him. However, *desmedida* compensates for the change of direction of *cautela*. In PV, by contrast, we have the strong *temor* and the weak *ruim*. Donne's final two lines, 1.26-27, show his wit conquering that of the lady. *When thou yield'st to me* shows us that she will certainly not resist. AC's *se concedida* makes this more doubtful while PV's *ao vires* keeps the certainty. AC's *hei de tomar* makes the poet take a more active role than in *will waste* of Donne or PV's *perderás*, which leave the initiative with her or show that she will give in to abstract forces.

In terms of metre Donne uses alternating octosyllabic and decasyllabic lines for the first six lines of each stanza. The seventh line has eight syllables and the last two have ten each. The rhyme scheme is aabbccddd. AC uses decasyllabic lines right through each stanza. In PV lines 1-7 are decasyllabic and the last two lines are duodecasyllabic. Both translators maintain Donne's rhyme scheme. AC's very regular metre has a considerable smoothness and sophistication, which is increased by somewhat formal vocabulary. *Alude* 1.5 and *incauta* 1.21 have already been mentioned. An air of urbanity is also given by the considerable amount of assonance and alliteration such as line 12 *somos nós e este* and *este é o teu* and line 24 *nem a ti nem a mim menos*. This is all very different from Donne's colloquial jerkiness. Donne often hesitates in the middle of a line and changes thought direction.

AC gives a continuous stream of polished thought. Compare lines 10 and 11.

Donne: Oh, stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, nay more than married
are.

AC: Poupa três vidas nesta que é capaz
De nos fazer casados, quase ou mais.

Donne stops and starts. He calls the lady, shouts an emotional plea to her, begins to make an elaborate comparison and then modifies this conceit. The rhyme gives flow, but the breaks and different line lengths prevent any slickness. By contrast, AC's rhyming couplets seem to belong more to the urbane rhyming couplets of the Augustans. PV's metre is a little more faithful to Donne. Metrical variety is added by the duodecasyllables of the final two lines of each stanza. And PV tries to retain Donne's conversational style. Let us look at his version of lines 10 and 11.

Pára! Três vidas poupa este momento

Onde houve quase... oh, mais que um casamento.

Like in Donne, there are four changes of direction and similar exclamations. But it seems that this leads to a certain clumsiness in Portuguese. This is the case in the second line where the *oh* contains a gushiness very different from the reflective *nay*. This is equally the case with the last line of the first stanza, line 9.

Donne: And this, alas, is more than we would do.

PV: E, perto disso, o que desejo, ai! não é nada.

Ai! is a much more melodramatic pouring out of the soul than the sighing of Donne's *alas*.

This analysis has shown the very different styles of translation of AC and PV. PV attempts to be; in general, close to the rhythms and content of Donne, though not without certain problems. AC takes a freer hand. To what extent can AC's translation of "The flea" be regarded as a creative translation? In "The Women of Trachis and Creative Translation" (p. 287) H. A. Mason examines Ezra Pound's translation of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis* and makes the following comments "creative translation at its best brings a sword: a disturbing breach with the past and a disturbing new view of our present selves. Unless the translator has come to see our life in disturbing new terms he can have no profound need to assume the Greek tragic mask." These remarks particularly refer to the creative translation of tragedy but the importance of the translator's own viewpoint is clear. R P