

Translating Kate O'Brien's Teresa of Avila: A Comparative Viewpoint

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Abstract: *This essay attempts to offer a comparative viewpoint of biographies of Teresa of Avila vis à vis the one written by the Irish writer Kate O'Brien. After examining some biographical productions on the Spanish poet, we show that a resistance to the monolithic male discourse marks O'Brien's biography of Teresa of Avila. Whereas other Teresa's biographers produce their texts with a certain degree of formality, according to the data they collect, O'Brien crosses the frontiers of conventional models, subverting the paradigms.*

The biography of Teresa of Avila written by the Irish writer Kate O'Brien (1897-1974) in 1951 is part of the different paths which her literary vein tracked. O'Brien started writing in 1926; her first three pieces were not novels or biographies but plays. Not happy with the level of their dramatic compositions and the weak influence upon the readers, she decided to embrace different genres – historical novels, memoirs, travel books and the biography of a renowned figure of the Spanish tradition – Teresa of Avila.

Becoming attracted to what is different seems to be part of the nature of every human being. Kate O'Brien does not seem to break this natural rule. Although she was born in Ireland, she fell in love with Spain and everything related to its geography, history, politics and culture, as well as its historical figures. It is not surprising that, due to the precarious economic situation of most Irish families in the 19th century and in the early 20th century, many Irish families were obliged to send their daughters to work as governesses in Spain. It was that situation that favored the friendship between the two countries.

O'Brien is a good example of this friendship. She lived in Spain from 1922 to 1923, where she was hired to give private English lessons to the Areilza's children – a rich family who lived in the village of Santurco, on the Biscaia coast (Bilbao). As soon as she became acquainted with the place, she was able to identify many familiar aspects of Ireland in Spain: the mud in Bilbao in the winter time, the poverty, and the degree of misery in some districts. In the Spanish skin, she could recognize her compatriots of the West of Ireland – those people resulting from the miscegenation between the Irish and the Spanish at the time of trade between these countries, as it happened in the Middle Age.

Those and other identifications that O'Brien collected from Spain were soon translated into their fictional sceneries and characters, such as the ones we can see in *Mary Lavelle* (1936) and *That Lady* (1946). Spanish political issues and its representative figures are explored in her books *That Lady*, *Farewell Spain* (a travel book), as well as

Teresa of Avila (a biography). In short, the Spanish landscape, the people, the style of living and her own experience there influenced both her spirit and her literary production.

As far as Kate O'Brien's biographical production on *Teresa of Avila* is regarded, it is worth remembering that the Catholic are often familiar with books on the life of the famous Saint Teresa of Avila or Teresa of Jesus. In Brazil, we have a great deal of her biographers. In this work, I will choose just a few biographers to analyze. The first one is the Spanish edition – *Vida* – written by Teresa herself in 1592. The second is *Livro da Vida: Santa Teresa de Jesus* (1983) – translated from Spanish into Portuguese by Maria José de Jesus, who belongs to the Convento Santa Teresa, Rio Janeiro. The third one is a Spanish edition – *Teresa de Jesus* (1981) – by Efrén de La Madre de Dios. The fourth one is *Teresa de Ávila*, translated by Rosa Rossi from the Italian source *Teresa D'Ávila: Biografia di una Scrittrice* (1983). Finally, *Teresa of Avila*, by the Irish writer Kate O'Brien.

There is another biography written by Teresa's great companion during her journey to the foundation of the Carmelite's Order, Saint John of the Cross. *Itinerário Espiritual de São João da Cruz* was translated into Portuguese by the Carmelo Imaculado Coração de Maria e Santa Terezinha, Cotia, São Paulo. There we can see a chapter about the close relationship and alliance between Teresa and the friar John during their long journey to enlarge that great religious enterprise – at that time under the spirit of the Reform.

After translating the biography of Teresa of Avila by O'Brien and reading the above mentioned books, I could see that the Irish writer based her translation not only on the Spanish source, that is, Teresa's autobiography, but also on Efrén de la Madre de Dios and San Juan de la Cruz. It is easy to recognize the equivalences when we confront the texts in both versions – Spanish and English alongside the Portuguese biography written by Rosa Rossi. Indeed, we have to consider the differences that operate in the language when one transfers from one semiotic system to another. Within this line of thought, we can point out the visual difference among many others, that is, the extension of the Spanish texts and the concise number of pages in English – ninety-six pages – which O'Brien produces to analyze a life of dedication, deprivation of world vanities, hardship and tenacity which the admirer of Teresa determines for her biographic work. On the other hand, the reader can soon see the complete lack of engagement with the source text or convention of any kind. On the contrary, the Irish writer takes advantage of her free thought and her restless nature before the injustices that women underwent along the centuries to write about that great genius of the Spanish tradition she most admired.

The biographic work O'Brien writes is as relevant as her other works, for it is a way to integrate different discourses and recover voices which have suffered serious injunctions for being marginalized. Thus, she reacts to the exclusion of women from the conventional systems of an andocentric and prejudiced society.

My first concern here is to point out the recurrent aspects of the Spanish culture of Teresa's time, that is, the sixteenth century O'Brien stresses in her text, such as the

exclusion of women from the world of thought. After that, I will try to examine the way she interprets Teresa's and her counterparts' attitudes and behaviors in her discourse, alongside the views of the society and history of her time – metonymic reconstructions and translations within a particular and single view of individuals, time and space.

As we can see, when O'Brien uses the Spanish edition to construct and mold the portrayal of Teresa within the target culture and the expectations of receptor pole, she concisely manipulates the source text and presents another text, free from the ritualistic elements and the enchantment that surrounds the original. The demise of the aesthetic aura, as Scott Lash and John Urry state, is something which prevails in O'Brien's translation, mainly when she cites part of Teresa's speech. It is clear that she read not only *Life* – the source book written by Teresa (taking her confessor's advice) – but also Efrén de La Madre de Dios's *Teresa de Jesus* (Spanish version), and S. Giovanni della Croce's *Itinerario spirituale* (Italian version), considering the most important biographical data which intermingle in her text. Thus, although it is also undeniable the parentage ties which O'Brien captures from these texts, there is no strict formal correspondence. That is, she just presents some fragments of source text with a particular view of the whole. If we compare, for example, O'Brien's and Maria José's texts, we see that whereas the latter seems to negotiate with the whole ideas of the source text, O'Brien just uses some literal part of it to support her free ideas, in a constant dialogic interaction with the ideas of her time, interpreting individuals' behaviors and attitudes.

Tomé todo el daño de una parienta que trataba mucho em casa. Era de tan livianos tratos, que mi madre la había mucho desviado que tratase em casa. Parece adivinaba el mal que por ella me había de venir. Y era tanta la ocasión que había para entrar, que no había podido. [...] A esta que digo me aficioné a tratar. Con ella era mi conversación y plásticas, porque me ayudaba a todas las cosas de pasatiempo que yo quería, y aun me ponía en ellas y daba parte de sus conversaciones y vanidades. Hasta que traté com ella, que fue de edad de catorce años, no me parece había deseado a Dios por culpa mortal ni perdido el temor de Dios, aunque le tenía mayor de la honra. Este tuvo fuerza para no la perder del todo, ni me parece por ninguna cosa del mundo en esto me podía mudar ni había amor de él que a esto me hiciese rendir. [...] (De La Madre de Dios, Efrén, 17-18).

I had a sister much older than myself, from whom, though she was very good and chaste, I learned nothing, whereas from a relative whom we often had in the house I learned every kind of evil [...] I became very fond of meeting this woman [...] she joined me in all my favourite pastimes and talked to me about all her conversations and vanities. Until I knew her [...] I do not think I had ever forsaken God by committing any mortal sin, or lost my fear of God, though I was much more concerned about my honour. This last fear was strong enough to prevent me from forfeiting my honour altogether [...] nor was there anyone in the world I loved enough to my honour for [...] I went to great extremes in my

vain anxiety about this, though I took not the slightest trouble about what I must do to live a truly honourable life [...] [...] the result of my intercourse with this woman was to change me so much that I lost nearly all my soul's natural inclination to virtue, and was greatly influenced by her, and by another person who indulged in the same kinds of pastime [...] (O'Brien 22-23).

Tinha uma irmã mais velha do que eu, no entanto, nada aprendi com a sua exagerada sensatez e virtude. Foi com uma parenta que freqüentava muito a nossa casa que aprendi todo o mal. Tinha modos tão levianos que minha mãe fizera tudo para afastá-la da nossa convivência. Parecia adivinhar o mal que me causaria. Mas havia tantas ocasiões de estar conosco, que não conseguiu impedir. Afeição-me ao seu trato. Com ela conversava continuamente e me entretinha, porque me ajudava em todos os passatempos de meu agrado e ainda me atraía a eles, tomando-me também por confidente das suas conversas e vaidades. Até essa ocasião em que convivi com ela, por volta de meus quatorze anos e creio que mais (para ser amiga, digo, e ouvir suas confidências), não acho que tenha me afastado de Deus através do pecado mortal, nem perdido o santo temor em ofendê-lo. Mais forte que o temor a Deus era o sentimento de honra, o que me deu forças para não perder de todo. Coisa alguma do mundo me levaria a transigir.[...] Tinha extremos nesse vão apego à honra, quanto aos meios para conservar, de nenhum modo me inquietava. [...] Certo é que essa amizade de tal maneira me mudou, que, da natural inclinação à virtude que minha alma tinha, quase nada ficou. Ela e outra, que possuía o mesmo gênero de passatempos, pareciam imprimir em mim Seus defeitos (de Jesus 16-17).

[...] tinha uma irmã mais velha que eu, de quem, embora fosse muito boa e casta, nada aprendi, enquanto que de uma parenta que morava na minha casa, aprendi tudo o que é de ruim [...] gostava muito de estar com ela [...] ela se juntava comigo em todos os meus passatempos; também me ensinou outros e me contou todas as suas experiências e vaidades. Até o dia em que a conheci [...] eu não acho que tenha me afastado de Deus, através do pecado mortal, nem perdido o seu temor, embora eu me preocupasse muito mais com a minha honra. Esse temor a Deus era bastante forte dentro de mim, o que me deu força suficiente para me impedir de ser privada totalmente de minha honra [...] não havia ninguém no mundo que eu amasse tanto que me levasse à perda da minha honra [...] persegui os extremos na vã ansiedade de mantê-la, embora não tivesse o mínimo problema em relação ao que deveria fazer para viver uma vida verdadeiramente honrada [...] o meu relacionamento com essa mulher desencadeou uma mudança muito grande dentro de mim, levando-me quase a perder a natural inclinação da minha alma à virtude, [...] e deveu-se grandemente à sua influência e à de outra pessoa que me fazia cultivar também os mesmos passatempos (Borges 8).

Now, considering my own translation, as one can see, I have chosen and bent on O'Brien's prescription of keeping the sense, even though we have then another linguistic

code, for it is impossible to fulfill the whole coherence of the source text in the process of building meanings. I believe that this confuse strategy makes us able to understand the identity of the sixteenth-century women, that is, the time in which strict religious principles and mortal sin were the break the Church imposed to refrain transgressions of any sort. Then, putting all translations together - De La Madre de Dios's, O'Brien's, Maria Jose's and my own – what we see is “the transformation of the same in another one, where the transparency meets interdiction, making it impossible to see any univocal voice, as Rosemary Arrojo states (1993, 57). What we can also say here is that even between the translations done by Brazilians and foreigners, the linguistic interchange happens differently, that is, one takes as one's own the other's meaning and translates to one's own language through new linguistic and cultural labels and within the particular perspectives and discourse disposition of the addressers.

In the beginning of Teresa of Avila's biography, O'Brien makes the reader understand her admiration for the woman Teresa as well as her intention to focus not on the saint who was canonized, but on the genius.

The present attempt is a portrait, or rather, it is notes for a portrait; it is an apology not for Teresa but for this writer's constant admiration for her.

.....

I write of Teresa by choice, which is passionate, arbitrary, personal. No one need agree with anything I have to say – but they must not either, be hurt thereby. I am free not writing of the canonized saint. I propose to examine Teresa, not by the rules of canonization, but for what she was – saint or not – a woman of genius. (O'Brien, Kate, p.9-10)

Este trabalho tem como objetivo apresentar apenas um retrato, ou melhor, deixar algumas idéias que possam retratá-la. Na verdade, trata-se de uma apologia não à Teresa, mas à fiel admiração que esta escritora aqui tinha por ela.

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Escrever sobre Teresa d'Ávila é uma questão de escolha pessoal, arbitrária e apaixonante. Ninguém precisa concordar com o que tenho para dizer, mas as pessoas não podem também se sentir ofendidas diante do que lhes espera. Sinto-me à vontade aqui para falar livremente sobre essa grande mulher. Mas não vou falar da santa que foi canonizada. Pretendo examinar Teresa, não através das regras que a canonizaram, mas pelo o que ela foi – santa ou não – uma mulher de grande genialidade. (Borges 1-2).

When O'Brien recovers and revalues the original space and time, she identifies particular aspects that marked the enunciation of that time – the sixteenth century – as well as the social, religious and political leaning of their enunciators. As she is writing in the middle of the twentieth century, effervescent ideas of feminism run in her vein,

showing that she was not indifferent to issues which were connected to the difficulties women had, particularly, in Teresa's case, the difficulty she had to assert and make her wishes and purposes come true along the sixteenth century.

Especially important here is the kind of intermediate job O'Brien projects into her biographic text, by recalling representative images of a feminine identity who crosses frontiers and builds her own subjectivity and history through battles of all sort, that is, inner and outer ones. Thus, following O'Brien's narrative, we see that throughout her life, Teresa had to face not only feelings of guilt for having lived situations contrary to her honor and God's laws, but also health problems, the loss of her mother and other hardships. All these difficulties kept her from achieving her projects of reformation and foundation of the Carmelite Order.

By following the development of O'Brien's work, we see not only how much she admired that great sixteenth-century woman, but also her interest in understanding another culture. Among her different interests we have the female genius of the Spanish and European sceneries. Her discourse brings about a kind of purpose to destabilize the homogeneity, the monotony of symmetry and sameness within the andocentric culture, while she exalts the glory of intelligent figures such as Virgilio, Lucrecius, Dante, Ronsards, Shakespeare and Racine, among others. By regretting the exclusion of women from the European scenery, she revises history and recovers a few feminine names of genius, those who were able to assert their own space, such as Jane Austen, Emily Brontë and Safo in ancient times.

It is the resistance to the monolithic male discourse that marks O'Brien's biography on Teresa of Avila. Whereas other Teresa's biographers produce their texts with a certain degree of formality, obeying the data they collected, O'Brien crosses the frontiers of conventional models, subverting the paradigms, as we can see in her text and my translation below:

[...] That dying Europe is thick incrustrated with glories of male intelligence and may presently vanish before women has had time or chance to make her possible impression on a superb, doomed effort – that is clear enough. But, before catastrophe cracks in all our dreaming faces, let us enumerate our precious things and people. Let us say our personal says. I say, with great regret, that within the two thousand or so years that my very poorly trained vision can take in, genius has hardly ever flowered in a woman. We can jump back beyond those two thousand years and boast of Sappho. Bu we have fragments, rumours of her – and in any case we have to wait for a woman to match her until England and the nineteenth century. It is strange; all the variable, definable furies, styles and freedoms could pass over Europe – we could have Virgil, Lucretius, Dante, Ronsard, Racine, Madame de la Fayette and Miss Jane Austen – but there was still no tracking down of a woman who could be called genius until Emily Brontë's burning shadow flung out. Not as broken, not as indefinable as Sappho's, but

strangely sympathetic to her legend, and just as unsatisfactory. And they are the only female geniuses of our recorded knowledge in literature (O'Brien 10-11):

Essa Europa agonizante encontra-se densamente incrustada de glórias da inteligência masculina e pode em breve desaparecer, antes que a mulher tenha tempo ou oportunidade de deixar sua inegável impressão através de um esforço supremo e determinado – o que já se torna, inegavelmente, evidente. Mas antes que a catástrofe se descortine diante de nossos olhos sonhadores, vamos tentar enumerar coisas e pessoas importantes. Quero aqui deixar a manifestação das minhas idéias pessoais. Expresso, lamentavelmente, que dentro desses quase dois mil anos que meus pobres olhos já contemplaram, a genialidade dificilmente desabrochou na mulher. Se retrocedermos há mais de dois mil anos, vamos nos ufanar de Safo. Mas encontramos apenas fragmentos, rumores a respeito dela. De qualquer forma, tivemos que esperar o século dezenove na Inglaterra para encontrar uma mulher que a igualasse. E parece estranho. Todos os ventos variáveis de frenesi, de estilos, de liberdades puderam passar pela Europa. Pudemos ter Virgílio, Lucretius, Dante, Ronsard, Shakespeare, Racine, Madame de La Fayette e Senhorita Jane Austen, mas nenhum sinal sequer de uma mulher que pudesse ser chamada de gênio, até que a sombra incandescente de Emily Brontë se lançasse repentinamente. Não tão fragmentada e tão indefinida como Safo, mas surpreendentemente complacente com a sua lenda e, portanto, insatisfatória. E estas são as únicas mulheres de genialidade que se tem conhecimento na literatura (Borges 2).

It is impossible to analyze O'Brien's narrative without focusing on the subjects involved, that is, her interlocutors, the different, the same. Among the different we have Martin Luther – the male figure that seems to oppose to Teresa of Avila, because of the panic he disseminated with his beliefs, destabilizing the world with his compartmentalizing religious ideas. In the 1550s, those Lutheran's hegemonic ideas invaded Spain, causing unrest and fear, despite the alienation and addition of certain Spanish alumbrados/illuminated to the dogmas of that religion. When Teresa knew about Luther's death in 1546, she rejoiced and thanked God, for she considered him the archenemy of the civilization. Nevertheless, O'Brien recognizes that Teresa had gifts and attitudes as arbitrary as those of that German figure, which she knew as poorly as the people of Avila. She also recalls that Teresa was as passionate, untamed and impetuous and a writer as brilliant and fluent as Martin Luther. Like him, she also used to dominate her followers and, when the situation demanded, she was as authoritarian as Luther. Teresa and Luther were both moved by the same purpose of serving God.

When Teresa tried to share the same space men used to occupy and dominate, better saying, when she tried to reform the Carmelite Order and found new monasteries in Spain, she opened paths for conflicts, quarrels and punishment.

As we can see, the visibility of O'Brien's text comes from the interventions she makes in the source text, by exploring aspects related to the matter of power and

knowledge she found there. It seems that she intends to decentralize the male counterpart or even make that figure equal to the female, without losing sight of the question of grandiosity of the Spanish female genius – an aspect that trespasses the whole narrative.

Although O'Brien develops the biography of that great Spanish woman of the sixteenth century in a very concise way, she does not lose the chance, within the limited number of ninety-six pages, to stress attitudes and behaviors of the time. Thus, she calls the reader's attention not only to the singularity, audacity and genius of the religious woman in face of the circumstances, but also to the way she challenged world pleasures, discontentment and *status quo*. In short, she often evinces Teresa's impetuosity in facing situations which could stop her projects towards God and her sanctity, as we can see in the extract below:

Teresa was all her life sociable, and enjoyed the enjoyment which she could cause in others; it is impossible to read her letters without being made aware of her social gifts, her sense of comedy, her fluent irony, and her warmth of heart. Moreover – she is insistent upon this – she was in vain, desired persistently to be liked, desired to please. [...] “On the one hand, God was calling me. On the other, I was following the world. All the things of God gave me pleasure, yet I was tied and bound to those of the world. [...] I suffered great trials in prayer, for the spirit was not master in me, but slave. I could not, therefore, shut myself up within myself (the procedure in which consisted my whole method of prayer) without at the same time shutting in a thousand in a thousand vanities. [...] It was indeed a long battle, so long and so hard on her that the forces engaged must have been well matched. Now Teresa was always, whatever her other impulses, most poetically and irresistibly attracted to her own vision of God, and to the difficult idea of living in His love and His presence. (O'Brien 43-45). Teresa sempre fora muito sociável e gostava do prazer que proporcionava aos outros. É impossível ler as suas cartas e não perceber sua sociabilidade, seu senso de humor, sua frouxa ironia e o seu coração amoroso. Ademais – ela insiste nisso – era uma pessoa vaidosa; desejava que as pessoas gostassem tanto dela quanto desejava agradar. [...].

Por um lado, Deus me chamava, por outro lado, seguia as tentações do mundo. Todas as coisas de Deus davam-me um prazer incrível, embora estivesse amarrada e presa às coisas do mundo. [...] Sofri grandes tentações ao rezar, porque o espírito não era mestre, mas escravo. Não poderia, portanto, fechar-me em mim mesma (procedimento baseado em todo o meu método de preces) sem, ao mesmo tempo, fechar-me em mil vaidades (Borges 12).

Another important fact to be considered here is that not only in the pagan world but also in the religious one, Teresa was seriously threatened by the *Office of the Inquisition*, mainly after the publication of her books *Life and The Way of Perfection*.

However, she never felt intimidated before that possibility. On the contrary, according to O'Brien, it was this indifference that kept her from being molested.

It is relevant here, before concluding, to refer to the figure of Saint John of the Cross, who, differently from those who were against her work, represents her most faithful friend and ally. Together, they built projects for the foundation of the Carmelite Order. Together, they suffered all sort of adversity in their enterprise, without losing faith and courage, despite The Fathers Provincial's and the Mothers Superior's prohibitions and determination to put a stop to her work. Instead, Teresa would only listen to one voice – His Majesty's.

Summing up: all of us, especially writers and translators, speak about a real, live and particular world and so points of view, perspectives, codes, and positions are inevitably lined up. Not even painters, photographers and the most realistic writers are able to capture the 'real world' in its wholeness and fluid entirety, its partial and apparently concrete nature, without using a particular language, code, angle of vision to filter that reality. Every writer assumes a style and the reality is seen through rather particular dimensions, lenses and perspectives, according to what he/she experiences within the society he/she lives in.

The different historical and cultural backgrounds between the sexes state that male practices are much more prioritized and hierarchical than those of the females – a kind of inequality women have been facing. What is currently seen, and what O'Brien also recognizes, is the construction of a feminine identity, which brings a libertarian and emancipating tendency, for it questions absolutist and totalizing conceptions that circumscribe feminine experiences. The subject is constructed within systems of meanings and cultural representations through reading or 'culturalized' narrative of the real, in which the relations of power interpenetrate, counteract and support the subject's own constitutive mechanisms. Taking those principles into account, O'Brien contests the Western logocentric tradition, with its misogynist and imposing status. She then enters the public space, the space of knowledge, and relocates, questions and radically transforms the feminine subject, defending the relativism of feelings and reason, body and mind, active and passive, proposing the co-existence of multiple feminine roles.

According to O'Brien's point of view, we see that theories do not support and express the true nature of the real, but they are just propositions to be evaluated before the intrinsic asymmetry peculiar to the systems of gender. It is from that conflicting and imposing situation, founded in hierarchy between the genres, that bursts the claim of the rights of those who suffer imposition. As it happens in every situation of imposition, the agent can, for a while, ignore, repress or come to be revolted to the point of having a need to invert the situation, that is, to occupy the position of the other, installing a new phase – a phase of displacement, of an identity which loosens ties of cohesion and opens the possibility of another logic different from that that sets opposition. This impulse of going beyond – disrupting the chains of binaries – is a renewed approach which O'Brien embraces and meets resonance in Stuart Hall's, Derrida's and Heidegger's proposals. That strategy of dislocation disrupts classic assertions about feminine, by

including a new transaction between the elements of man/women relations – the desire for the same sex. Either the relationship within the same sex or with the opposite, there is always the disruption with the ontologic dialectic position – man/woman – disarticulating frontiers. The metaphysical limit of opposition breaks the distance – the abyssal structure that operates not only in the relationship within the same sex but also within the opposite sex – promoting the expropriation of a fixed identity.

If the translator is often considered an invisible person, O'Brien seems to break that invisibility, when she rejects a neutral position before the source-text and holds a dialogue with it, making her presence clear as an agent and promoter of a feminist view, while giving emphasis to aspects which come to deconstruct other biographies of Teresa of Avila – a way of destabilizing the supremacy of the *logos*, subverting the question of fragility of the feminine sex.

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