On Fear and Touch

By *Iryna Herasimovich*

Translated from the German by *Sinéad Crowe*



Antonina Slobodchikova: *If I Were You, I'd Have Hit Him. If You Were Me, You'd Have Cried.*

The word *Berührungsangst* is one of those tricky-to-translate German compound nouns that carry a range of associations and nuances. It can be translated literally into Belarusian and Russian as "fear of touching something" or "fear of touch". But these translations focus on phobias related to physical contact, whereas the German word can also refer to the fear of addressing something that might be unpleasant or even dangerous.

When I first learned German, I was fascinated by how often the word *Berührungsangst* is used. To me, it represents both a mindful way of dealing with one's own fears and a sensitivity to the fears of others. I quickly integrated it into my own vocabulary. In the post-Soviet sphere, addressing fear is a fraught business. Many believe it is shameful to speak publicly about your fears, even during a political crisis such as the one we are currently experiencing in Belarus. People talk about overcoming fear, but never about the fear itself. It's as if the fear never existed. You might say that people have *Berührungsangst* when it comes to fear; they are afraid of "touching" it.

The words "touch" and "fear" have been intimately connected for me since I was a small child. I remember the moment well: I was six years of age, travelling somewhere on a night train with my grandmother, who had struck up a conversation with the woman sharing our compartment. It was just a chance encounter, but the two

travellers got on well, and by midnight, they were sharing very personal things. I pricked up my ears, eager to eavesdrop on the grown-ups' conversation. The woman was talking about how after her mother died, she'd been terrified of the corpse until someone told her that the fear would dissipate if she just touched the body. It was an old custom, but it worked. Though I was horrified by the thought of touching a body, the message stayed with me: if you're afraid of something, touch it. Then my grandmother began to share her story, a story in which touch was absent, as her mother had been captured and shot dead by the Nazis. There wasn't even a grave to visit. As my grandmother started to cry, I understood how hard it must have been for her. Not being able to touch something is far worse, I thought, because there's no way to release the fear. Perhaps it is because of this night on the train, when I witnessed two stories truly "touch" each other, that I believe in the power and importance of touch.

I have the privilege of moving between two languages and two cultures. As I bring the two together, I aim to be mindful of my own fears while attempting to overcome them. In fact, I do this every time I translate. I can't remember encountering a single text that didn't make me experience *Berührungsangst* at some point. My fear can be triggered by a range of things, from difficult, unfamiliar themes through complex styles to the translation process as a whole. But once I've "touched" a text, I know I have to keep going, to battle through difficult phases when I am out of ideas and keep making mistakes, persevering even if I don't like the author or I've gone off the text. Touching something creates a commitment. Touching something entails risk – in translation as in life itself.

To feel truly alive, we need to touch others and be touched. So what do we do when we're denied physical contact, as is the case during the current pandemic? Do we simply adapt to a life of touch deprivation? Absolutely not. We're all missing direct contact with others, yet at the same time we find ourselves widening our understanding of what it means to touch others, noticing how words, glances, even thoughts can fill the place of touch. When I was asked to write this piece, I was excited about the theme and delighted to have the opportunity to share my thoughts with my translator colleagues. But then *Berührungsangst* set in. I was afraid of the blank page in front of me, of my own experiences, of the labyrinthine space inside me where my languages come together and overlap. And then there was the self-doubt: am I being too personal? Does what I've written make any sense? There were days when I couldn't bring myself to touch this text. But I persevered.

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Born in Minsk in 1978, **Iryna Herasimovich** has been a freelance curator and translator since 2009. She has translated work by Lukas Bärfuss, Georg Büchner, Monika Rinck, Nora Gomringer, Mehdi Moradpour, Jonas Lüscher, Michael Köhlmeier, Franz Hohler and Franz Kafka into Belarusian and has led the Belarusian-German ViceVersa translation workshop three times. Herasimovich has curated the translation programme of the Literature Intermarium forum in Kaptaruny Art Village since 2018.

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