Being Everyone

Von *Olga Radetzkaja*

Translated from the German by *Sinéad Crowe*

For a long time, I wanted to be someone else. Maybe everyone feels this way at some point; I'm sure a lot of us did when we were kids, at least.

It wasn't that being me was bad. Apart from the occasional (or regular? I don't remember any more) bout of loneliness and boredom – and these weren't two separate things, by the way, but a single feeling: lonedom, boreliness – everything was fine. I was extremely shy, but I was cared for and loved, and my life wasn't one I desperately needed to escape.

Yet while I was a preschooler, I entered a peculiar phase that would go on until I was in first or second grade, a phase that continues to provide my family with anecdotal material ascribed to a genre called "Iamher". "I *am* her": these were my words whenever I encountered a person, usually in a picture, who triggered in me a burning desire to cast off my old identity and assume a new one.

I was generally drawn to rather banal figures: models in mail order catalogues, for example, or in the sewing magazines my mother bought. My theory today is that the irresistible appeal of these innocuous figures lay solely in the fact that they were so different from me: grown-up, beautiful, and with long hair that yielded to both brushes and gravity – in marked contrast to my own short curls, whose response to every hairdresser's attempt to tame them was to stand on end. These figures had no histories, no dramas hiding behind their smooth faces. They were all surface, and I liked to imagine slipping in and taking my place behind this surface.

Closely connected with "Iamher" was a name game: "Susie Tina Claudia! That's my name, I am her!" The game originally stemmed from my desire to be "normal", but I soon associated it with the magical effect described in the previous paragraph. Only when I slipped on the new name and made it my own was the transformation complete. Sometimes my family played along, laughing and making fun of me, and sometimes they refused to play along, which was annoying, but the game continued nonetheless. It could go on for minutes, even hours, but it never lasted the night. The performance took place mostly in my head, where it released a short but thrilling sense of freedom.

A short time later (I'm reconstructing here), this prolonged distorting mirror phase passed and was replaced by reading. Books, which I discovered at a young age, saved me from lonedom, rescued me from my dull self, provided me with a route out of my all too familiar own life and into another one. We lived directly opposite a library, so at the age of just six, the world opened up to me, and I exploited the opportunity to excess. (Other snapshots from the album of family anecdotes are of the child reading on the grass beside the lido, at the dining table, in bed in the morning, in bed in the evening, while brushing her teeth, on the way to school, walking along with a book in her hand.)

As well as being a greedy reader, I was radically identificatory. Nils Karlsson-Pyssling, Kater Mikesch, Momo, Winnetou, Winnetou's sister, Harriet the Spy, the paraplegic girl, the orphan, the teenager who accidentally falls pregnant – I was all of them. I was constantly carrying my piles of new identities across the street and back, and before long I had graduated from the children's section into young adults. Time passed, and with friends appearing on the horizon and my shyness abating somewhat, the push factors driving me from my own life weakened. But the pull factors remained as strong as ever. Now, though, I wasn't drawn so much to the magical aura of beauty and perfection that surrounded others, but to interesting lives, intense emotions, new thoughts, deep colours.

The young adults' section on the first floor was separated from the adults' by nothing but a step. I was a blissfully uninformed reader, basing my choice of book on the title or a quick flick-through; I know that the mildly surprised librarian once contacted by parents to check that they were aware of my reading material. Some doors opened for me right away, others resisted or remained locked, and it became decidedly more difficult for me to identify with the characters I encountered.

At the age of fourteen or fifteen, I think, I happened upon the first volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, just one of the doors to an unfamiliar universe that proved extremely stiff. "Swann in Love" felt like a visual disturbance, an illness: none of the points I tried to fix my gaze on held what they promised; everything kept changing colour and temperature, size and shape. It confused and exasperated me. But a few years later, during a second attempt, I immediately fell for the first volume, followed quickly by all the others. This time I was genuinely ill. In a holiday home in the Alps, unable to utter a word and barely able to swallow a thing, I lay in bed for days on end and read. And lay and read and lay-read in the elastic, pulsating Proustian/Rechel-Mertensian syntax, luxuriating in the optical effects that had once made me nauseous. This wasn't my first experience of a very different kind of desire, but it was an intense one. The object of my desire was no longer a person, a figure from a fictional world, but rather the way in which this figure and his world were formed out of language right before my eyes. It was a textual desire.

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Long story short: there can be little doubt that the appeal of learning another language is bound up with the allure of becoming someone else, and I adopted this new vice with equal relish. What a con, what a high-wire act, what a magnificent opportunity to switch to alien tones, sounds, pitches, idioms, curses, nuances, sweet nothings, quips. Today I'll speak as her! And tomorrow as someone else! The golden trumpets of betrayal, as Kundera put it.

And, of course, it's not too much of a stretch to suggest that the profession I gradually made my way into some time later is bound up with the same passion. The theme tune of translation is played by the same golden trumpets; it's a performing art, a chameleon act, deceptive by nature.

A performing art? Let's examine this idea more closely. When I translate, I play a role. Not in the sense that I as a person play the author, but rather my language plays the role of another language, deploying all the resources it has to hand, linguistic mind and linguistic body. The text I write plays another text: I*am*it.

The notion of role play raises the question of which roles I am eligible to play: how do I choose them (when I have the choice, that is)? What have they got to do with me? Does a successful translation require the world depicted in the text to overlap with mine? My provisional answer would be: it makes the work of translating easier, yes. It shortens the routes to the right words, perhaps. And if the dissimilarity is too great, bridging the gap becomes so arduous, forcing me to search for language too far removed from my own familiar radius, that I can no longer make the leap into the unknown with grace.

But.

It's not a complete coincidence that I have alternated between translating dead male authors and translating living women over the past ten years. I don't systematically select scenery and voices that are far removed from myself and my everyday life. Nevertheless, the differences far outnumber the commonalities, even in the case of my living women authors: a Soviet schooling; different public holidays punctuating the calendar; a Jewish background; a migrant experience … Alone the fact that the authors grew up in another language, thinking, speaking and writing it since they were children, is such a fundamental point of difference that the things we share (being contemporaries; having the same gender; having curly hair; having children) pale by comparison – at least while I'm translating. But this otherness doesn't stand in the way; in fact, it's a prerequisite for translation.

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We have seen, writes Yuri M. Lotman in his semiotic theory of culture, "that the elementary act of thinking is translation. We can go further and say that the elementary mechanism of translating is dialogue. Dialogue presupposes asymmetry." [1] The generation of information, of meaning, runs at full speed along a boundary such as the boundary between two cultures (what Lotman refers to as the boundaries of "semiospheres"). The boundary functions like "a filtering membrane which so transforms foreign texts that they become part of the semiosphere's internal semiotics while still retaining their own characteristics."[2] This process of infiltration and transformation – one might even describe it as "cultural appropriation" (Iamher?) – ensures that no semiosphere (which might be a national literary canon, a literary genre or a conceptual system) runs out of oxygen. And this is exactly what translation does. In making the foreign (never completely) its own ("dialogue presupposes asymmetry"), it is a source of cultural productivity.

Let's return to the practice of translation with six sentences, randomly chosen, from six books I have translated in recent years:

> "After several train changes and with two typhus fever patients in tow, I eventually arrived in Kherson."[3]
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> "My aunt taught me how to charge over the hills in hot pursuit of a fleeing family of ceps and to streak along the trails through the pine trees, slashing down entire colonies of Slippery Jacks as I went – 'bish-bash-bosh and then you just squeeze here.'"[4]
>
> "On Sundays, wearing a cheap new suit and shoes in an obscene shade of

> yellow, I slept on the grass on the former fortifications."[5]
>
> "That's the Peter and Paul Fortress, my mother said, where Babushka Sarra was locked up."[6]
>
> "At around 1 p.m., we saw the SS on the other side of the barbed wire distributing guns among the kapos, including the political ones."[7]
>
> "We stand on the wasteland – the future doctor, the former officer, the grey wolf and me – and read poetry."[8]

Six bits of life transformed into language, six first-person perspectives, none of which I have ven remotely experienced. What triggered *Berührungsangst,* a fear of touch, of contact, of engagement? Nothing, or just one thing – and it wasn't really fear it triggered, more timidity: the "SS people", the sentence by David Rousset recounting the end of his incarceration in a concentration camp in Germany. My timidity stemmed not from a lack of personal experience, but from the *presence* of this pivotal German experience, from the unfathomable complicity that is preserved in my language, German, and can never be purged from it. Translating Rousset's account of the German concentration camps into the language of the perpetrators – the language from which it was, in a sense, wrested – was a logical, necessary, but delicate undertaking.

If the other works mentioned above instilled fear, then it was more a fear of doing something wrong – of failing to really "touch" or engage with a text, or of engaging with it incorrectly. Can I do this, am I good enough, do I have the right tools, will I find the right way? Will the book shine or will it be a fiasco? Stage fright.

What do we need to "touch" a text? What determines the success of our attempt to leap over the divide, to cross the boundary? In my view, it's not biographical commonalities – as mentioned above, I don't play the experiences of my author or her figures, I play her text – and it's got nothing to do with belonging to the same group. It's something much more specific yet imponderable. For me to find my way into a text, to establish the right points at which to leap and land, I need a rhythm to suddenly enter my clauses, an interplay between gravity and levity that feels vaguely familiar, a flash of joy in the back of my mind, an urge to laugh or a suppressed sigh that tickles my throat and inspires ideas. In what follows, we mustn't lose sight of this very individual yet fundamental kind of connection.

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The question of biographical proximity and distance raises one more important point, and to address it, I want to return to the idea of role play and transformation.

Is theatre at its most powerful when the actor on stage can no longer be distinguished from her role because she is basically playing herself? When the widow is played by a widowed actor, the mother with many children by an actor with many children, etc.? Is the ideal for there to be virtually no perceptible differences, not just on stage but outside the theatre too? Or do the most powerful theatrical moments occur when we perceive a certain flickering around and beyond the character, a flickering that comes from the knowledge or sense that things could be different, that the person on stage, a

person who is utterly herself up there, might at any moment turn into someone completely different?

It may well be a matter of taste, but for me, the answer to this question is clear: not only does the difference pose no hindrance; it is absolutely necessary. In translation, the text's new life, its vitality, stems largely from the tension between non-equivalence and the illusion, the "acting", of equivalence. The Eros of the non-identical vibrates within this tension, as does a primal human experience: the longing for connection triggered by the awareness of separateness. Difference is the lifeblood of art and the essence of beauty. Art's mission is to "create non-equivalences," according to Victor Shklovsky, which "it does by following the path of comparison". And in so doing, it brings "the world to new life."[9]

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Postscript

The invitation to contribute to this collection of essays raised a question that some of the authors have already addressed: the question of legitimacy. Up to this point, my text has provided an implicit answer. I'd like to conclude with a couple of explicit sentences.

Are translators entitled to translate whatever text they like?

And if not, why? What reasons are there for denying translators the right to translate certain texts, and what is to be gained by this?

From what I have seen of the debate, there are three main arguments.

The first has to do with legitimacy in the sense of authenticity or authority, the idea that you should only speak about things you have been through yourself – in this context, these tend to be experiences of discrimination. A person who has never experienced discrimination cannot imagine how it feels to be discriminated against and therefore cannot adequately convey this experience in translation, the argument goes.

At the risk of repeating a trivial point, the fact is that no individual can ever *know* how another individual feels. By the same token, a person who experiences discrimination cannot know how a person who has never experienced discrimination feels. But I see no compelling argument as to why the former should not translate the latter's texts.

The second argument has to do with economic and discursive power. After all, when we decide who gets to translate which texts, some important benefits are at stake, including contracts, publicity, fees and grants, and cultural and social capital. Why not ensure that these benefits are distributed within a certain group instead of leaving this group to fend for itself, especially if the group is disadvantaged? There is nothing wrong per se with promoting certain interests, but this should be done in a transparent manner. The interests of our profession as a whole – which continues to be economically disadvantaged – is more important to me personally than those of specific members.

The third strain of the "identity rule" ("only A may translate A") seems to be

psychological in nature: things are simply less stressful when we stick to our own kind. It may well be the case that there are readers who feel more comfortable when they stay within a relatively homogeneous environment. I can imagine club-like publishers or at least literary niches being established to produce works by the same kind of people for the same kind of people.

To be honest, though, what I *want* is the opposite – and as much of the opposite as possible: the greatest openness, the widest readership. To be even more honest, I'm just not interested in literature that sticks to its own kind. To be completely honest, I shudder when I hear about female colleagues trying to deny their male colleagues access to this or that; I find it no less disturbing than I would if the situation were reversed. Not just because something about it is at odds with my idea of good relationships and an open society, but because the ethos of "sticking to your own kind" is diametrically opposite to my professional ethos, or, to put it more simply, my understanding of what I do every day and why. Let's venture out, look at each other, talk, sing, play each other and play with each other, stumble into misunderstandings and work our way out of them, listen closely and more closely still, take a risk! The significance of our work is rooted in its transformative power: everyone can be everyone.

Endnoten

1 Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman. Bloomington 1990, 143.
2 Ibid., 137.
3 Viktor Schklowskij, *Sentimentale Reise*. Berlin 2017, 295; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe.
4 Polina Barskova, *Lebende Bilder*. Berlin 2020, 123; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe.
5 Boris Poplawski, Apoll Besobrasow. Berlin 2019, 8; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe.
6 Maria Stepanova, *Nach dem Gedächtnis.* Berlin 2018, 402; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe
7 David Rousset, *Das KZ-Universum*, co-translated with Volker Weichsel. Berlin 2020, 96; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe.
8 Marina Zwetajewa, "Ein Wort über Balmont," in *Der Dichter und die Zeit.* Berlin 2020, 426; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe.
9 Viktor Schklowskij, *Sentimentale Reise* 295; this extract translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe.



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