That which touches, that which frightens

By *Frank Heibert*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

The art of literary translation requires empathy – you have to express, in a different language, how the artist has expressed his- or herself in the original work of art. You also need to be capable of empathy for the Other, the potentially foreign, as Olga Radetzkaja so beautifully and accurately explained in her essay *Being Everyone*. In addition, literary translation requires, right out of the great linguistic toolbox that each of us has assembled, the right stylistic devices for the respective original text and a linguistic inspiration for the individual tone of a very particular original text. But when we speak of *Berührungsängste* – fear of being touched – in the context of translation, it is not only and not primarily about the kind of language that we come into contact with. And there could also be desires of being touched while translating. Both are rather tied to the Other to whom we have to and want to enter into a relationship.

Of course, our life experiences and who we are play a role here. There has been a necessary delineation of identity issues in literary translation within the context of recent debates. In several public statements on the subject matter, I have emphasized that we have the potential to empathize with anything and anyone. It is part of our job description. I have also said that for translation it may be helpful to have access to "shorter paths to empathy", which may be the product of one's biography.

But today I would like to illustrate the fact that this isn't something that happens automatically. This became strikingly clear to me again through two examples, two requests that were lying on my desk. The foreseeable contact with the spirit and mindset behind the voice of a text can indeed provoke fears, and it is our personal decision, a decision made with all facets of our personality, as to whether we get involved or not. And in that sense, the following text is also more personal than anything I've shared so far about literary translation.

Example number one is the Italian author Curzio Malaparte. I read one of his two major works, *The Skin* (1949), when I was 21 and a student in Rome. Malaparte (1898-1957) is a colorful, not necessarily sympathetic figure in 20th-century Italian cultural history. He was an idiosyncratic, dandyish diplomat, war correspondent, and writer who flirted with the fascists but was also inconvenient to them (which earned him banishment to the island of Lipari, from 1933-38), and who became a Catholic and a Maoist after World War II. He even bequeathed to China his spectacularly futuristic villa on Capri, for which Mussolini's foreign minister Ciani had given him an impossible to obtain building permit in 1938 and which later became the setting for Godard's film *Contempt*.

The Skin is an extremely tense book based on Malaparte's impressions of Italy in 1943 and 1944, when he was traveling with an officer from the U.S. occupying forces in southern Italy as a liaison officer in the Italian Army. Mussolini has fallen, the Germans

are still present and fighting in the country, and Italy is torn: What are we, the war's winners or losers? Where is Europe during and after this war? These great questions occupy Malaparte every day.

Horror and despair underlay the book's sharp-tongued, often trenchant reportage style, which has the feel of an autobiographical account (one that involves a first-person narrator named Curzio Malaparte with characteristics closely corresponding to the author's own biography), but is peppered with surreal, fantastic scenes that are either historically unprovable or barely provable, and for which he was heavily reproached by contemporaries. Malaparte frequently rants in this work. About the Italians, who throw themselves at the victors, about the Americans, who think that money can buy everything, about the inhuman Germans, about all kinds of shadowy string-pullers – according to his occasionally conspiratorial narrative – that are responsible for the world being off-kilter.

Cynically you could say that a classic case such as homophobia cannot be amiss here. Especially since that corresponded to the spirit of the times; back then, it didn't really shock anyone, it was more or less explicit social consensus. (The other classic case, anti-Semitism, is completely amiss, by the way, almost surprisingly so.)

When I first read the both indignant yet polished clamor at the age of 21, it was initially with an amused detachment, and even a certain pleasure in response to the power of the language of this prickly 'diplomat'. But when it came to the text's homophobia, I began to feel very uneasy. You can't do that, I thought. The 2013 English translation by David Moore is telling, as is the German translation by Hellmut Ludwig, first published in 1950:

"Inverts, as is well known, constitute a sort of international brotherhood, a secret society governed by the laws of a friendship that is both deep and tender, and not at the mercy of the foibles and the proverbial fickleness of sexual feeling. The love of inverts is, thank God, superior to the sexual feeling of men and women. It would be a perfect sentiment, free from any of the shackles that encumber humanity, from the virtues as well as from the vices that are peculiar to man, if it were not dominated by the caprices and hysterias and by certain sad, ignoble faults that are part and parcel of the old-maidish nature of the homosexual"[1]

It's astonishing how he claims to know what he's talking about, I thought. And then I thought, are things really like that? At 21, I had not yet encountered this brotherhood. Later, in a particularly grotesque scene, he refers to them (in a rather twisted argument) vis-a-vis his American officer as "heroes of freedom" and says:

"You don't know what that splendid breed of heroes can do! You don't know what a cowardly, evil breed they are! They would get their revenge, they would have me jailed, they would ruin me, Jack. You don't know how cowardly and evil pederasts are when they start posing as heroes"[2]

This made me feel really anxious. After we had studied the Nazis in history class when I was 15, I had looked warily at my neighbors, teachers and classmates and thought, "If there's a regime change the day after tomorrow, which of you would NOT denounce

me and take me to the camps?" Now, while reading Malaparte, I thought, "so that's what you think about us, about me?" I won't even start commenting on the "treacherous riffraff," "feminine shrieks and loud wails," and other kinds of hefty descriptions.

In short, I was distraught. Reading *La pelle* (in Italian) in 1981 had frightened me so much that I'd read a few more chapters and then put the book away and repressed it. Completely. When, 38 years later, Rowohlt Verlag asked me to re-translate *La pelle* and Malaparte's second major work, *Kaputt*, I remembered Malaparte's astonishingly strong literary language, the intense historical snapshots, and in general, grotesquely surreal scenes. I honestly did not remember the rampant homophobia and my defensive repression response.

I signaled interest and tentative agreement, and set about reading it again. Then came the 4th chapter, "The Roses of Flesh."

"At the first news of the liberation of Naples, as if summoned by a mysterious voice, as if guided by the sweet smell of new leather and Virginian tobacco, that smell of blond women which is the smell of the American army, the languid hosts of the homosexuals, not only of Rome and of Italy only, but all of Europe, had crossed the German lines on foot (...)"[3]

My memory opened up like a floodgate, washing the old uneasiness over me. Fucking shit, I thought, this time I'll push through. And what can I say ... a kind of serenity had replaced the fear. There had been 38 years without reverting to a regime of terror, and naturally some changes toward a more open society does have some sort of effect. I can see Malaparte for what he probably was: a man of his time, torn by despair and existential questions of his own belonging, thoroughly envious of all for whom belonging looked easier than for him (whether the "simple", "clean" Americans or the "decadent", "lusty" homosexuals). And a fascinating, unique stylist whose literary excesses I don't find mannerist or loftily pompous, but an expression of a genuine struggle to penetrate and describe his time with all its monstrosities. He no longer frightens me; I often feel empathy for his inner turmoil – and genuine historical interest in that time eighty years ago. After the publisher approved the explanatory afterword that I had suggested, I agreed to translate the novel.

In other words, I did not politely ask Rowohlt to find a more suitable, homophobic and desperate translator ... (Yes, I know. Nor would this have been demanded by anyone who calls for equal access for all discriminated minorities to, for instance, translation jobs. No one whose struggle for equal opportunity I support regardless of questions of identity).

I am in the process of translating this Malaparte. It is intense and wild and often difficult, but it does not make me uncomfortable.

And indeed, there are sometimes coincidences that would sound too improbable for any novel. A publisher (whose name I won't mention here because this chicken hasn't hatched) asked me if I would like to re-translate *De Profundis* by Oscar Wilde. There's no need to mention that my matter-of-factly, openly-gay life might have played a role in this casting consideration. A publisher might nowadays be reluctant to expose itself

to potential criticism by having an Oscar Wilde retranslated by a heterosexual person.

Incidentally, I would not consider that to be problematic or inappropriate. Wilde describes his experiences and feelings so vividly – this was after his life has been destroyed by public humiliation and imprisonment – that no one needs to fathom any mysteries of homosexuality to know exactly the sort of empathy that this literary voice requires. As is fundamentally always the case, it depends on whether the person translating the text feels inspired to do so and is actually able to fashion and transfer a convincing equivalent of that literary voice into another language.

I had also read *De Profundis* in my twenties, i.e. in the 1980s. Then, it hadn't been so long ago, biographically speaking, that I had to decide whether I wanted to take the risk of being a life-long outsider, which was still a threat at the time. On television back then, there was only the narrative of homosexuality as doom; if the "inclinations", often described as "secret" or "forbidden", came up at all, everything had to be in order by the end of the movie: in other words, the gay or lesbian figure was dead, in jail, or at least hopelessly unhappy. For all the political rebellion of the rainbow movements, there was at best an acquiescent "leave us alone with it" mentality. AIDS was still viewed as a "gay disease" or "God's punishment", governments like the Ronald Reagan administration in the U.S. were engaging in very real acts of neglect, and people's hearts and political views were still far from shifting to compassion and greater openness. That came later, after other segments of the population were also affected, including beloved celebrities, etc.

Correspondingly, reading a book like *De Profundis*, which documented a true story, was simply agonizing at the time. It shows the complete dismantling, exposure, and destruction of a brilliant mind, which was perhaps also revenge on a sharp-tongued, sharp-witted social critic. In other words: the total loss of bourgeois existence. That, for me, was the second horror category, next to the pink triangle badge and the concentration camps (and the third, AIDS). *De Profundis* depressed me, outraged me, and also roused me into not shrinking away, but participating in the effort to make it self-evident that sexuality must not be a basis for discrimination.

The commissioning editor who contacted me a few weeks ago had emphasized how much he cared both for the great, harrowing love story in this work and for its accusal of the unimaginable injustice of Wilde's society at that time, and thus, of any repressive society. Two issues that I would immediately get behind! Can there be anything more gratifying than, from the perspective of a present day that isn't repressive, to revive and illuminate once again this tragic fate, to find my own language for the polished words of the great Oscar Wilde, who wrote with all his heart and soul?

I read the book again. Oscar Wilde is desperately trying to understand what has happened to him. He heaps reproaches upon, then declares his love to his beloved Bosie (Lord Alfred Douglas), who is to blame for the break-up of their relationship. He sounds increasingly crushed by the merciless severity of the punishment. He writes of humility and means humiliation, which he amplifies (in letters and other material that form part of *De Profundis*) through appeals to the authorities for mercy, in which he accuses himself of perversion and tries to partially excuse it through his self-definition as an artist, one that includes nervous aberrations. And finally, since there is no more salvation in this world, he throws himself into the arms of Christianity. Wilde, the critical free spirit, falls for a religion of whose church(es) and misdeeds we know well

enough to be able to assess the additional tragedy and virtual mockery in this turn of events. It is unbearable.

And in the end of this story, well, in the end “everything is in order” – the pervert is where he ‘belongs’, as is the case in the old movies and books. He is devastated, he grovels, whimpers for mercy, which is denied to him, he struggles for remnants of his dignity as an artist and human being. Once he’s no longer considered fun, the court jester has to take the fall. Wilde must have been only a shadow of himself, a broken man during the final period of his existence, in exile in Paris, in ‘liberty’. From the point of view of the ‘normal’ British world, the ‘vermin’ was not a threat any longer, in two ways: abroad and destroyed.

While I re-read *De Profundis*, everything in me screamed that I didn’t want to slip into this feeling, I didn’t want to get back into this horror of statements like “we don't want someone like you,” especially since, in this book, it wouldn’t be the fear of it, but the situation after that fear had become a reality. The confident composure towards Malaparte, whom I no longer perceive as an attack, disappears when it comes to empathizing with a maltreated ‘brother’.

It has surprised me how violently I react to this book. And it has helped me understand one thing: Yes, I have experienced discrimination (and the fear of it), and although that happened in infinitely smaller doses, I believe I know exactly what this book is about – but this is exactly why I am the wrong person to translate it. It hits far too close to home for me. I probably could find the words. But I don’t want to look for them, don’t want to pull them out of me, let them pass them through my body and soul. I don’t want to become that voice.

And I hope the publisher will combine the new publication of *De Profundis* with a newly translated collection of the most brilliant aphorisms and some of Wilde’s equally brilliant essays and fairy tales, for example, in a boxed set – so that all readers can see for themselves what sort of intellect was destroyed by the inhumanity and mendacity of these authorities. And then, the readers could, like me, rejoice that we live in better times, whose values are worth fighting for. Just like the activists are fighting against discrimination and for equal opportunities.

Endnoten

1 Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*, trans. David Moore. New York 2013, 135. The original version of this essay refers to the translation from Italian into German by Hellmut Ludwig, first published in 1950. The quoted passages are taken from the 4th and 5th chapters. The usage of the old German translation is intentional, though the more recent English version is also revealing.
2 Ibid., 151.
3 Ibid., 86.



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Frank Heibert, born in Berlin in 1960, translates literature and plays from English, French, Italian, and Portuguese. He also leads translation seminars, and is an author, critic, and jazz singer. His translations of over 100 novels and collections of short stories, 10 works of non-fiction, and 110 plays include works by Don DeLillo, Richard Ford, George Saunders, Lorrie Moore, William Faulkner, Raymond Chandler, George Orwell, George F. Walker, Boris Vian, Raymond Queneau, Marie Darrieussecq, Yasmina Reza, Michel Marc Bouchard, Karoline Georges, and many more. He has received numerous awards, most recently the Straelener Übersetzerpreis 2017 (shared with Hinrich Schmidt-Henkel).

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