The Knife and the Wound.

Transgressing Boundaries with Wolfgang Hilbig

By *Isabel Fargo Cole*

My editor diplomatically queried the word *maw* for the female genitalia. It didn't feel quite right, it seemed to him like an awfully fraught term.

In German it's *Schlund*, which is every bit as fraught, I typed testily. And anyone who lets themselves in for a novel about an East German writer's midlife crisis, complete with alcoholism, depression, relationship dramas and porn addiction, damn well ought to be able to take it.

A moment later I deleted the outburst. How come I can take that ugly word in stride, but not my editor's sensitive query? I wondered. Have I gotten callous? When I first read Wolfgang Hilbig's *Das Provisorium* (The Interim), did words like that bother me? Bother me *as a woman*? Did they make my desire to translate Hilbig seem problematic? I can't remember – twenty years have passed since then. At the time, the idea of "gender identity" didn't automatically intrude as a crucial aspect of translation. For me, Hilbig was simply a voice that made it possible to grasp an alien world, the East, as a physical reality with all its ugliness and awkwardness – intertwined with moments of poignant beauty.

Do I translate *as a woman*? Do I translate the author *as a man*? At this point in the current debate, these questions make me adopt an attitude that I'm not quite sure is really mine – it's so heavily shaped by the discourse. Maybe I'm imitating one of the attitudes on display. Or maybe I'm automatically assuming the opposite attitude, out of orneryness or (a nicer way of putting it) a compensatory instinct. The expectations associated with my "female identity" – in fact, the very notion of "identity" in that sense – feels like something imposed on me from outside, an awkward foreign object that I have trouble finding room for, but can't turn down for fear of being rude. And so, *as a woman*, I feel detached from myself, and that takes my thoughts in deviant directions.

Why am I subjecting my poor editor to this word? I ask myself in this contorted stance. That *maw* contains the entire toxic history of male hysteria which a generation of young feminists like him is struggling to dismantle, word by word. With *The Interim*, I've saddled him with another 100,000-words of toxic masculinity that he'll have to answer for. It's my guilty conscience that makes me so ornery.

It's the little voice – echo of internet debates – that asks me why I'm working on a male writer when I could be championing an underrepresented woman. But when I started out, Hilbig had no one to plead his case either, I retort. Besides – twisted self-justification – who better to champion him than a woman? "As a woman" I have better standing to translate toxic male utterances faithfully, without having to defuse them. "As a woman" I can cover Hilbig's back, and my editor's – assuming, that is, that my back is covered by my "female identity."

Of course, those tactical considerations are just alibis after the fact. What's at stake is something else. The longer I think about literary identity discourses and the more my consciousness is raised, the more the claims of "identity" intrude between me and the book I'm reading. The now-standard expectation that I ought to identify with a female voice per se has a troublingly paradoxical effect – it covers up those voices with a kind of smooth membrane. The proposition of frictionless identification can be a dead end – not just for the reader, but also and especially for the translator. The assumption of innate affinity can cause blindness, makes it all too easy to project yourself onto the other. You end up standing in your own way.

"In fact, we can enter into resonance with people or things only when they are, as it were, 'semi-accessible,' when they hover between total accessibility and utter inaccessibility,"[1] argues the sociologist Hartmut Rosa. "The fundamental mode of vibrant human existence is not that of *accessing* things, but that of entering into resonance with them, of having the means – the self-efficacy – to elicit a reply from them and, in turn, respond to that reply…"[2]

It's as though Rosa were describing the relationship of the translator to her text – and urging everyone to live life as translators. What is translation if not the playing field of semi-accessibility?

It's a field in which questions of identity quickly turn paradoxical. Translation is by definition about distance – about the attempt to overcome distance, and the inevitable, yet creative impossibility of that attempt. After all, as a rule, you translate from the foreign language into your own. But even a completely bilingual person, even a person translating herself, will find that the closeness of a language does not necessarily make it accessible. You are always ferrying the text across from whichever shore is the far one. In the process, both shores – source *and* target language – recede into the distance. And the unpredictable currents mean that you never land quite where you expected to. And a good thing, too: otherwise, no true transformation – "adaptive transformation," Rosa calls it – could take place.

In other words: To make room for resonance, Wolfgang Hilbig should never be translated by a male East German factory worker with an alcohol problem.

Or, to put it less polemically: To make room for resonance, we should guard against using such easily quantifiable – i.e., accessible – criteria to assess the degree of "closeness" or "distance" between Hilbig and the translator.

The same is true of all writers, but especially of someone like Hilbig, whose typical protagonist is tormented by a fundamental lack of human closeness – an "I" or a "he" roaming the margins of society like a homeless, alien being. In *The Interim* Hilbig first uses the term "identity" in grappling with this sense of alienation. The writer C. – clearly Hilbig's alter ego – is an East German writer who has emigrated to West Germany, where his East German identity prevents him from feeling at home. But even back in East Germany, working in a factory, he had been tormented by the contradiction between his identity as a writer and his identity as a worker. That deeper tension between literary and industrial production modes and ways of life shapes Hilbig's work from the beginning – in his early work, however, he never addresses it in terms of "identity," at least in the sense of a group identity. Ironically, in *The Interim* Hilbig copes with his alienation from the West by resorting to Western discourse of identity. He translates his problems into a new language. The attempt seems a bit

forced: In the end, his protagonist's alienation eludes identitarian concepts – it is much too absolute.

Hilbig's protagonists exemplify a kind of internalized social distancing, an atrophy of the ability to touch or be touched. They experience all human encounters as inscrutable and menacing. Certain encounters with women, however, make them painfully aware of this state, and inspire them to rebel against it.

In the story "The Dark Man," the narrator pays one last visit to his former lover Marie, now terminally ill. Hardly a word is spoken; Marie shows him the scars on her abdomen. "I had sensed that this thin body was now subject to doubt, already in the process of dissipating. […] I had tried to encompass this body with my gaze, as though compelled to imprint it on my brain… How much longer would it be possible to see her?" he ponders later on.[3] In his mind's eye, he subjects the scarred body to tender, implacable scrutiny.

The end of the story reveals how closely this deathbed scene parallels a past erotic encounter in which the narrator also attempted to "encompass" Marie using only his gaze. In similar erotic situations in *The Interim*, the protagonist sees himself confronted with a *maw* – expressing a certain male hysteria, the word serves less to dehumanize the woman than to expose the man's inability to cope with her humanity. In "The Dark Man" the imagery is more subtle: The woman's vulva is a mouth, expressively countering the narrator's gaze:

> I said not a word, entranced by the sight of what faced me, female, alien, mocking all appellations […] I was hypnotized by the expression of a mouth drawn slightly crooked, filled with covert irony, offering itself to me and yet in some unfathomable way refusing itself. […] What are you doing down there, she said softly, out in the cold . . ..[4]

Years later, sitting at the bedside of the cancer-stricken woman, the narrator finds his eyes drawn to her breasts:

> Smiling, eyes alert, she had acknowledged my gaze; there was irony in her eyes […]. […] Why hadn't I given in to impulse and laid my hands on her breasts? As ever, the target of Marie's irony had been my suppressed desire…[5]

It is an unsettling moment. The narrator's impulse seems – in a conventional sense – "inappropriate" on multiple levels. And even in retrospect he is not ashamed of his erotic response; on the contrary, he regrets having suppressed it:

> Why hadn't I gotten up […] and lain down beside the white body whose contours slowly slipped into nothingness? — There was some incomprehensible darkness inside that had stopped me, and to the end of my life it would fill me with profound regret…[6]

By transmuting an “inappropriate” impulse into the only appropriate response, the scene achieves a fascinating power. Boundaries are violated – but in the face of death, how could they not be? If the narrator thought only appropriate thoughts, if he were appropriately ashamed, the scene would miss the mark, it wouldn’t ring true. But as it is, its almost unbearable tension unites multiple truths. Maybe the narrator feels the “right” desires and regrets; maybe he feels the “wrong” ones. Maybe he is misinterpreting the irony expressed by every part of Marie’s body. Maybe he has understood it at last. Maybe Marie is reduced to her body by his male gaze. Or is it her impending death that leaves her as a mere naked husk, while the narrator salvages a sense of the soul that inhabits it?

Hilbig’s protagonists experience occasional moments of redemption at the thought of physical closeness – often involving vulnerable bodies, and the kind of touch that ordinarily arouses disgust. The protagonist of *The Interim* has a kind of epiphany during his first night at a rehab clinic for alcoholics:

> His sweat seemed to mingle with the bitingly acrid and sweetish secretions of all those who had occupied that cot before him. After a while he calmed himself, reflecting that he’d slipped into a sort of cyclical process in which all distinctions were suspended.[7]

In these moments the boundaries of his isolated figures dissolve: generations converge, the oppressors merge with the oppressed, the male merges with the female. “Identity” gives way to painful interpenetration. *I am the knife and the wound*, wrote Hilbig’s idol Baudelaire. The task of translation is not to heal the wounds of the text, but to reopen them. That openness makes room for encounters like the one with Marie on her deathbed.

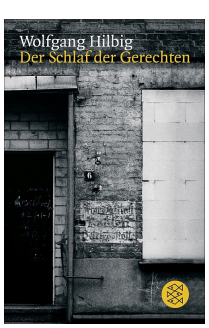
After a year that has left physical closeness fraught with a sense of fatality, and in which the dying have been isolated from the contaminated touch of their loved ones, this encounter feels even more powerful than before. Marie’s nakedness exposes the narrator, the writer, the reader, the translator. I want to linger in this painful nakedness, like the narrator lingering at his lover’s bed. Can I do justice to the encounter, will I misinterpret it, will it give me inappropriate ideas, will it harm me or someone else, and if so, who is at fault? There is no final, “right” answer. The absence of an answer opens up the space in which life can still go on.

Endnoten

1 Hartmut Rosa, *Unverfügbarkeit*, Frankfurt am Main, 2020: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch. P. 48.

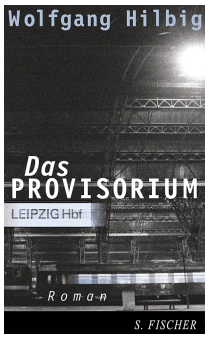


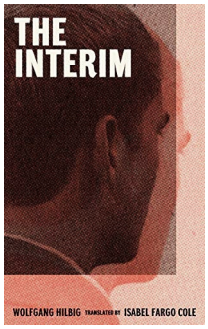
2 Ibid, p. 38.
3 Wolfgang Hilbig, *The Sleep of the Righteous*, translated by Isabel Fargo Cole. Two Lines Press, 2015. P. 130





4 Ibid, p. 146
5 Ibid, p. 128
6 Ibid, p. 131
7 Wolfgang Hilbig, *The Interim*, Two Lines Press, 2021. P. 37





#Gender



© Anja Kootz

Isabel Fargo Cole was born in the US and has lived in Berlin since 1995 as a writer

and translator of such authors as Wolfgang Hilbig, Franz Fühmann, Klaus Hoffer, Adalbert Stifter and Annemarie Schwarzenbach. She writes in German, and her novels "Die grüne Grenze" (2017) and "Das Gift der Biene" (2019) are published by Edition Nautilus. She is also the initiator of the project www.waldschaffen.de.

Dies ist ein automatisch generiertes PDF der Webseite www.toledo-programm.de. TOLEDO ist ein Programm des Deutschen Übersetzerfonds.
https://www.toledo-programm.de/talks/2886/the-knife-and-the-wound
Veröffentlichungsdatum: 22.04.2021
Stand: 29.03.2024
Alle Rechte vorbehalten.