The Book I Couldn’t Translate

By *Camille Luscher*

Translated from the French (and German) by *Imogen Taylor*

> *Wie soll man über Zorn reden? Man muss ihn in sich spüren. Das habe ich dem Untersuchungsrichter geantwortet, als er mehr über diesen Zorn wissen wollte. […] Ich mochte ihn, den Untersuchungsrichter, und wahrscheinlich hätte ich ihn auch nicht geprügelt, wenn ich Gelegenheit dazu bekommen hätte. (*Angeklagt, *S. 318)*
>
> *How do you talk about anger? You have to feel it inside you. That’s what I told the magistrate when he asked about this anger, wanting to know more. […] I liked the magistrate, and probably wouldn’t have beaten him up, even if I’d had the chance.*

This is an extract from a book I didn’t translate. And yet everything had got off to a good start. I had known Mariella Mehr’s books for years.

Daskind (‘Thechild’) had been recommended to me in 2011 when I was looking for a book told in a child’s language for my translation of *Hinter dem Bahnhof* by Arno Camenisch.[1] I read Monique Laederach’s French translation, *Lamioche*, and found myself confronted with a startling, distressing language—a language made for speaking of unbearable things, of the hellish circle of violence.

> *So ist das Leben des Kindes im Hause Idaho, umsorgt von Derfrau und Demmann – Pflegemutter und Pflegevater -, ein Silbertodimmerzu. (*Daskind, *S. 10)*
>
> *This is the life led by the child in Idaho House, looked after by Thewoman and Theman—her foster mother and foster father—a Silverdeath that goes on and on.*

In the months that followed, I ordered all Mariella Mehr’s books. Some were impossible to get hold of, even in the original German; three had been translated into French, but they were all out of print. Mehr’s French publisher Demoures had been forced to close down by an office fire. Translations of the first two books in a trilogy—*Daskind* and *Brandzauber* (‘Fire Magic’)—had been published just in time, but not the third, *Angeklagt* (‘Accused’), a novel which—weird coincidence—takes the form of the defence speech of an arsonist.

Once I had collected all the books, I put them on a shelf in my bookcase, arranging them carefully, in order of size. But I didn’t open them. I only glanced at them now and then; the furthest I got was flicking through one of the books of poetry.
Who was this Mariella Mehr, whose fascinating books both attracted and repelled me?

'Swiss writer of Yenish descent,' the briefest biographies tell us. A first way in. I approached Mehr's work by learning about this important nomadic community that wasn't recognized as a national minority in Switzerland until 2001, when the government pledged to 'promote the Yenish language […] and raise the awareness of Yenish, Sinti and Manouche history and culture'.[2] Before reading Mehr's books, I read *around* them, circling them. Like hundreds of other Yenish children and families, Mehr was a victim of the 'Children of the Open Road' campaign run by Pro Juventute with state support between 1926 and 1973. Her entire family—mother, aunt, father, brother—had their identity brutally denied by the state. Thrown into homes and placed with foster families who often mistreated her, little Mariella was humiliated, abused, beaten, and then moved on again, to psychiatric asylums or borstals. It was probably her writing that saved her. She wrote her first poems at the age of sixteen and went on to produce a steady stream of articles, columns and reviews. She championed the cause of the Yenish and Roma, tirelessly fighting alongside the weak and the persecuted until, as she put it, 'going into exile' in Tuscany in 1996, fleeing Switzerland and the hostility that had always dogged her.

Interested in the historical magnitude of her life's journey, appalled by her biography and intrigued by her writing—or what I had read of it—I began to put out feelers for potential publishers. In 2016 I was given the opportunity to translate five of Mariella Mehr's poems for the *revue de belles-lettres* (*rbl*). In 2017, the Limmat Verlag, a Zurich publishing house, reissued the 'Trilogy of Violence' and an anthology of miscellaneous texts: prose, articles, reviews, poems. My moment had come. But instead of going for it, I continued to circle. The books remained unopened on my bedside table, on my desk, in my bag.

Eventually, in 2020, Marion Graf, who knew about my keen interest in Mehr, suggested that I put together a feature on her writing for the *rbl*, the same journal that had published some of her poems in 2016. I took this as an opportunity to immerse myself in her work, picked out some poems and short prose pieces, and even got stuck into her correspondence which is kept in the Swiss Literary Archives. Such direct confrontation with Mehr's private life, the suffering that found its way into her letters, the state monstrosity revealed by my research—all that got to me, I can't pretend it didn't. But there is a certain analytical distance to working on a literary feature, writing an introduction, choosing texts—you are detached from everything, looking down at it from above.

It was afterwards that things started to go wrong. On a roll after the feature, I translated a few pages of *Angeklagt*, the third novel in the 'Trilogy of Violence', as yet unpublished in French. These pages were printed in a journal; a publisher expressed interest in the novel. I seemed to be getting somewhere. But then I couldn't go on. I felt a sense of unease every time I opened the book. I had nightmares—and for the first time in my life I was crippled by the famous 'fear of a blank page' which until then I had thought translators immune to. I stared at the empty screen, my mind drained. The words refused to fall into place; they remained shapeless, elusive.

Angeklagt is a first-person novel in the form of a long monologue. An arsonist talks to a psychiatrist who is charged with assessing her criminal responsibility, the extent of her madness. When the narrator's account becomes particularly violent, she accuses the psychiatrist of being afraid, wanting to run away.

> *Aha, so we're suddenly all shivery, our spine's running cold. And why, if I may ask?*
> *[…]*
> *Just look at us sitting there, all gooseflesh. Wishing we could just say: Oh dear, how awful. Turn up our collar and go out for some fresh air.*
> *We'd like to escape, wouldn't we?*
> *Run away.*
> *Know nothing of all this.*
>
> *(*Angeklagt*, p. 366)*

Projected into the novel in this way, the reader feels caught out. The translator even more so. Like the psychiatrist in the novel, I was in the ambivalent position of trying to understand the incomprehensible, trying to respond to engulfing, consuming violence. A reader always has the option of closing the book or skipping parts of it and I found myself doing just that—I skim-read, I jumped about.

My problem was that I was on the shrink's side, sitting there listening, curious but on the alert, always ready to run away, my finger on the emergency button.

But translation requires such close reading that you are forced to linger, to weigh each word in turn, to shoulder the burden of the other's language.

Translation inscribes the text in your flesh; you have to digest it before you regurgitate it. You have to step through to the other side of the looking glass and find the words to say *I*.

> *I know you can't follow me.*
>
> *There was a boy in my class. We all liked him. And yet we called him sheepface. You only had to say sheepf and he'd start bleating. As if he were wrapped in barbed wire, as if it were strangling him. How quick we are to ravage and damage in this world. To slash and smash, mar and maim. Burn and poison. How quickly the shreds of flesh fly. Sheepf knew this and he bleated.*
>
> *Not you—you are silent. But your eyes see; they try to understand.*
>
> *(*Angeklagt*, S. 337)*

I began to realize that it was going to take more than just brainwork to translate a book like this. It was going to take guts; it might even cost me part of my sanity. Either that or—like the shrink—I would have to dissect and analyse it, using technical terms to make sense of it, but also to keep it at a distance. But how would I translate all those strong emotions if I remained at a remove, safe on the other side of the table?

> *A little closer if you please when you arch away from me like that I can't touch your heart you slut*

> *yes I said slut*
> *and do you think we could avoid trying to sneak off mentally it's your body not mine so do me the favour of looking at it and think about getting it out of here only the soul has no trouble leaving barefoot everything else needs assistance every obstacle removed and all contingencies provided for.*
>
> *(*Angeklagt*, S. 379)*

In an essay recently published in the online magazine *TraLaLit*, translator Lara Vergnaud writes of the physical pain she feels when translating accounts of particularly brutal violence.[3]

That is something you have to reckon with. It takes courage, commitment, even sacrifice. At this particular stage of my life I had a number of personal reasons for not putting myself through all that. I was reminded of a woman who had told me about translating Elfriede Jelinek when she was pregnant, mortified at the thought of what she was inflicting on the child inside her.

But as I pondered my inability to take on the text, there was a flurry of debates and discussions on the privileges and legitimacy of social position. I felt a sudden suspicion. Were my reasons for resisting the text not also (predominantly) social? If I wanted to embark on such an undertaking, didn't I need to feel an inner necessity to do so? Didn't the subject have to speak to me personally? Didn't I, in fact, have to identify completely with the author?

The word was out—'identification'. Over the course of the last few months it had assumed a whole new dimension in the world of translation.[4] Mehr's take on identification is unequivocal. She has consistently sided with the persecuted, the stateless, those whose identities have been denied and destroyed by a xenophobic system. For years, she has prided herself on being their spokesperson, finding a kind of family in the poets of Chernivtsi and the survivors of the Shoah. It is probably fair to say that this is one of the motors of her writing. All her texts, prose and poetry, build on this experience:

> *Mein Aschenengel*
> *Eben noch streunte er hungrig*
> *durch Stundenschrunden,*
> *ein Weh ohnegleichen*
> *im alternden Blick.*
>
> *Nun hat ihn die Nacht erlöst*
> *(im Körbchen ausgesetzt vielleicht)*
> *als junges Schneekorn,*
> *oder als Vogel im Haar*
> *des Ausgefremdeten.*
>
> *(…)*
>
> (Widerwelten, Drava Verlag, 2001)

> *My ashen angel*
> *Just now he was roaming hungry*
> *through cracks in time,*
> *unequalled grief*
> *in his aging eyes.*
>
> *Now night has released him*
> *(abandoned in a basket, perhaps)*
> *as a young snow grain,*
> *or a bird in the hair*
> *of the exalienated one.*
>
> *[…]*

A spokesperson of the persecuted. It is a fine mission, but also an exhausting, consuming one. Mehr would not contradict me; it was, after all, one of the reasons she chose self-exile in Tuscany.

If, as I have said elsewhere, translation for me means *recreating the author's voice*, to translate the work of Mariella Mehr is to make myself the spokesperson of a spokesperson. But since no translation is transparent, since it is always a process of appropriating—or, to return to the metaphor used earlier, of digesting—and thus transforming the text, there is no avoiding the question of legitimacy. The violence experienced by Mehr—the violence she writes about—was inflicted on her by society, a society that I am part of. Does condemning that violence give me the right to lend my voice to her experience?

In fact, the question goes beyond that. I may be desperate to make Mehr known and heard, but because I haven't experienced the same violence—because it isn't inscribed in my flesh as it is in hers—I am afraid that I won't find the energy or anger I need to bring the text to life. Where, in my sunny childhood of fairy tales and my cushy everyday life, am I to find the resources to express such violence?

Of course, identifying with a text and what it says is not a necessary condition of translation, or even of writing. In extreme cases like Olivier Mannoni's translations of Goebbel's diaries or *Mein Kampf*[5], it is possible to imagine that the absence of identification might even be a requirement. This brings us back to the topical and controversial question whether a work can be considered separately from its author.[6] Is it possible that certain texts demand 'more identification' than others? Are there cases where the translating voice is required to be authentic, just as a degree of authenticity is expected of a text that claims to be autobiographical?

The current debate about Amanda Gorman shows, I think, that the *context* (and not, it should be stressed, the mere *text*) can justify the demand that author and translator belong to the same social group. Tiphaine Samoyault, the author of a wonderful book entitled *Traduction et violence* ('Translation and Violence'), rightly points out that some works of literature are made up of a set of signs:

> ‘To translate Amanda Gorman is to translate a sign, or even a mythology, a whole set of signs; after four years of Trumpism, Black Lives Matter, etc., it is no small thing to have a young Black woman reciting her poem at the inauguration of the new president of the United States. Translating this sign demands a certain logic; you have to remember you are translating a sign and not simply a text.’[7]

In Mehr’s case, however, the challenge, as I recognized as soon as I started work on the *rbl* feature, was more to avoid reducing the texts to their author’s biography. Mehr’s life story is arresting and even gripping. It resonates and shocks; it demands to be told. But it mustn’t be allowed to obscure the universal aspect of her work, which emerges from but goes beyond her biography, so that she can say with Michel Foucault, whom she quotes in the epigraph to *Angeklagt*:

> *Female killing is a step out of female speechlessness. It means nothing other than: I speak. I am speaking.*[8]

Paradoxically, too much identification can create misunderstanding. If I translate something I would like to have written, I am at risk of overlooking the otherness that is an inherent part of every text. All translators have been there at some point: it’s when the text seems to translate itself that the danger of mistranslation is most acute. What’s more, empathy can take a number of different routes. From personal history to family history to private inner images and the construction of an identity—there are many ways to a community of shared experience. There is also, as Pierre Bayard reminds us in his recent book on the phenomenon of fake news,[9] a *subjective truth*. And then, of course, the act of translation is itself a gradual movement towards a voice that is other. As I am fond of pointing out, I am never a better reader than when I am translating. This means that translation, for me, can be a way of domesticating thoughts and feelings that were at first alien to me.

Some time ago, I came across this passage in a fine essay by one of Gertrude Stein’s French translators:

> ‘There is also affinity involved […] in a translator’s work on a foreign poem; it takes shape right there, within the other’s thought patterns. There is no *a priori* of affinity; there is just one way of thinking trying to converge slowly with the other’s way of thinking. Maybe it will join it, maybe it won’t, but it *works at achieving* affinities (plural!).’[10]

Writing this text at the invitation of TOLEDO (for a series entitled ‘Berührungsängste’!) is another way of rubbing up against Mehr’s work, of testing its resistance, and already I can feel the urge coming on again to get her into my language, to work on creating the affinities that will allow my way of thinking to converge with hers. Translation is all about finding the balance between analysis and intuition, pragmatism and emotion. For now, I am not ready to let rip with my intuitions and emotions. Perhaps someone else will be ready before me, someone with the right degree of experience or sensibility—or simply enough time. Or perhaps I should just wait and see; perhaps, just as there are books that wait for the right moment to be read, there are translations that have to

wait for the right moment to come to fruition.

Jean-Pierre Lefebvre once wrote:

> ‘It is only long after the poets are dead and their songs have been sung in the streets that the translating language can hope to match up to the translated language.’[11]

When Mehr finished *Angeklagt* (working title: ‘Malik’) in 2002, she wrote to Bern poet Kurt Marti:

> ‘It feels good to have carried “Malik” to full term at last. For more than two years I have been thinking about violence and ways of responding to it; now I can turn back to life.’[12]

Endnoten

1 *Derrière la gare*, éditions d’en bas 2012, reissued by Quidam in 2020. There is an English translation by Donal McLaughlin: *Behind the Station*, Dalkey Archive 2015.
2 https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/eda/fr/documents/aktuell/news/4e-rapport-minorites-Suisse-15022017_FR.pdf
3 https://www.tralalit.de/2021/04/07/finsternis-uebersetzen/
4 Notably in the debates on the European translations of Amanda Gorman’s poem. ‘*Who* translates *whom* in what context matters; our biographies affect our translations,’ says Canan Marasligil in an article published on Diacritik. As I see it, this debate is less about translation as an act of interpretation than about the representation of certain communities in our cultural landscape, our institutions, our society. I was given the opportunity to discuss this elsewhere (FORUM) and others have done it better than me.
5 See Olivier Mannoni speaking about his translation of *Mein Kampf* (which to my knowledge will be published not in 2018, but in 2021): https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3l2ujt.
6 ‘In whose name does the author write? The author of an oral or written discourse can speak […] as an oracle, a medium […] or as the spokesperson—voluntary or involuntary, conscious or unconscious—of a group to which she has ties.’ Gisèle Sapiro, *peut-on dissocier l’oeuvre de l’auteur?* (Seuil 2020, p. 11).
7 Lise Wajemann, ‘Traduire Amanda Gorman, la question qui fâche’, in: *Mediapart*, 15 March 2021: https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/culture-idees/150321/la-traduction-d-amanda-gorman-une-question-qui-fache.
8 This is a translation from the German, as the French quotation has so far proved impossible to track down. If anyone knows the original, I’d be delighted to hear from them!
9 Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des faits qui ne sont pas produits?* (Éditions de Minuit 2020), p. 26.
10 Christophe Marchand-Kiss, ‘Traduction, expérimentation’, in: Dominique Buisset et al. (eds.), *Traduire, en poésie?* (Farrago 2002), pp. 51–61.
11 Jean-Pierre Lefebvre, ‘Traduire les poèmes: Ce que le temps apporte-emporte’, in: Martine Broda (ed.), *La Traduction-poésie: à Antoine Berman*, Presses universitaires de Strasbourg 1999, pp. 112–113.
12 Letter from Mariella Mehr to Kurt Marti, 21.1.2001, Schweizerisches Literaturarchiv (SLA), Bern.



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Born in Geneva in 1987, **Camille Luscher** translates prose, drama, poetry and young adult literature from German into French, with a focus on Swiss authors. Her bibliography reflects her interest in polyphonic and poetic texts that push at the limits of language. In addition to her freelance work, she is active at the Centre for Literary Translation in Lausanne and collaborates with a number of organizations as a literary mediator. As of January 2019, she also runs the Éditions Zoé imprint ‘domaine allemand’ in Geneva. Camille Luscher was awarded the 2019 Pittard de l’Andelyn Prize for her translation of Annette Hug’s *Wilhelm Tell in Manila*. Her translation of Arno Camenisch’s ‘Alpine Trilogy’ (*The Alp*, *Behind the Station* and *Last Last Orders*) was published in 2020 by Quidam Éditeur who will publish more by Camenisch in 2021.

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