Berührungslust

By *Alexandre Pateau*

Translated from the French by *Imogen Taylor*

Like all of you, I suspect, who agreed to join your voices in this chorus of translators that grows clearer with every song, I spent a lot of time repeating the word *Berührungsangst* to myself, murmuring it, chanting it, silently pondering it from every angle—semantic, phonetic, rhythmic—comparing the singular, *Berührungsangst*, with the plural, *Berührungsängste*, trying to get a grip on the word, to pin it down, make it 'mean something'. This (often premature) gut reaction is the first stage in the process of translation, before a translator has worked out what resonances the word has for her, what place it holds in the mystery of her language. The next step is to find an eloquent equivalent, but my search for a free and supple rendering of *Berührungsangst* yielded nothing musical enough and—repeatedly, pathetically—I found myself resorting to a lifeless literal translation, reduced to the flat-footed *fear of contact*, a hollow-sounding solution, far too close to the original for my liking, so that eventually, I was forced to admit defeat and accept that for the time being at least, I was incapable of finding a translation that resonated.

But the more I listened to the harmonics of *Berührungs a n g s t*, the more clearly I began to hear another chord emerging—*Berührungs l u s t*. It seemed to me that this chord might be a little more easily rendered, that I might find in its ending the opportunity for a new beginning, a blossoming.

Berührungslust. We could, for the sake of convenience,[1] translate this as: 'the desire to touch and be touched'. This word, too, has its plural, *Berührungs l ü s t e*, a more harmonious plural, perhaps, than Berührungs ä n g s t e, thanks to the almost poetic weight and rhythm of those twin Üs, but also a rather mannered word—fraught with desires that are, perhaps, a little *too* plural,[2] scattered before they come to anything—so that it is the singular, the lovely, rounded singular that insinuates its melody into my ear, reminding me of the first time that I felt such a desire—a *desire* that, no sooner touched on, turns to *lust—Berührungslust…*

> *Und fast ein Mädchen wars und ging hervor*
> *Aus diesem einigen Glück von Sang und Leier*
> *und glänzte klar durch ihre Frühlingsschleier*
> *und machte sich ein Bett in meinem Ohr.*

> C'était presque une enfant et qui surgit pareille
> de l'unique bonheur de la lyre et du chant,
> brillant si claire sous ses voiles de printemps
> et là elle se fit un lit dans mon oreille.

> [Almost a girl she was and issued forth
> from this united joy of song and lyre
> and shone out clearly through her veils of spring
> and made herself a bed inside my ear.][3]

Some years ago, when I made my first valiant efforts in amateur poetry translation, I decided to retranslate or, as German more powerfully and precisely has it, *nachdichten*—to *recompose*, *post-poeticize*, *after-write*—Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, because I knew of no French version that reproduced even a modicum of the clarity or force of the original.[4]

After months turning over in my mind the lines of a single quatrain—nervous and overeager in my attempt to confront my *Berührungs a n g s t*, but already carried away by *Berührungs l u s t* —I arrived at a translation that seemed capable of standing on its own two feet without too much wobbling, and prepared to launch myself into the complete cycle of fifty-five sonnets, beginning with the poem that contained my fetish lines.

Yet one last doubt remained. Was there a translation I had overlooked—a translation new and radical enough to warrant postponing my project, or even abandoning it altogether? I did some final research to set my mind at rest, and immediately discovered, as if it had been waiting for me all along, that natural phenomenon, that cataract of verse that is Charles Dobzynski's *Sonnets à Orphée*.[5] To set my mind at rest! Which of us has not prepared to submit the manuscript of a long-matured translation only to be hit a revelation so tremendous that it upsets not only this or that patiently thought-out solution, but our vision and understanding of the text itself?

> *Und schlief in mir. Und alles war ihr Schlaf.*
> *Die Bäume, die ich je bewundert, diese*
> *fühlbare Ferne, die gefühlte Wiese*
> *und jedes Staunen, das mich selbst betraf.*

> Et tout fut le sommeil de celle en moi dormant.
> Ces arbres admirés quelque jour, ce sensible
> lointain et la prairie à éprouver tangible
> et ce qui m'atteignait de chaque étonnement.

> [And slept in me. And all this was her sleep:
> the trees that I had always marvelled at,

> this distance you could feel, the grass I'd felt
> and each of my own thrills of wonderment.]

With a different pair of languages and on less familiar poetic territory, I would doubtless have felt the same shock, the same sense of awakening on encountering Sika Fakambi's Zora Neale Hurston,[6] Jean-Baptiste Para's Boris Ryji, Valérie Rouzeau's Sylvia Plath[7]—and, above all, Rilke's translations of the many voices that came to inhabit him.[8] In his moving preface to the *Sonnets à Orphée*, Charles Dobzynski speaks of the redeeming fascination of poetry to his young self, a Polish Jewish boy who, having escaped the horrors of the war, saw Rilke's language as a secret opportunity to appropriate an aspect of Germanic culture left untouched by the Nazis. He writes:

'Learning the *Sonnets* by heart, day after day, I had for the first time a real sense of what a rigorously applied and subtly fulfilled poetic form can exert in the way of compulsion, to the point of acting on your memory with the force of an electromagnet. As I repeated the poems, caught up in their rhythms and patterns, I found myself entering into their game; I felt their transfusion and metamorphosis taking place inside me, as if in obedience to the phenomenon of transmutation that Rilke so often invokes. The fermentation of certain words during the process of creation produced an alcohol of the mind that kept me awake and alert, returning to me again and again like a leitmotif, and I ruminated on those words deep inside myself, or recited them out loud, at table or at the wheel of my car, so that my astonished son must have wondered what an earth had got into me as I declaimed:—'

> *Sie schlief die Welt. Singender Gott, wie hast*
> *du sie vollendet, daß sie nicht begehrte*
> *erst wach zu sein? Sieh, sie erstand und schlief.*

> Elle dormait le monde. Ô Dieu chanteur, est-ce que
> tu l'as parfaite afin qu'elle n'ait point d'abord
> désir de s'éveiller ? Vois, levée elle dort.

> [She slept the world. But how, o singing god,
> did you make her such that she knew no desire
> to be awake? See, she arose and slept.]

Dobzynski was fifteen when he made his first attempt at translating the *Sonnets*, but it remained unfinished, and it was only years later, after becoming editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Europe*, that he would return to the text for an issue dedicated to Rilke. Discarding all his old drafts, he started from scratch and set to work on the entire sonnet cycle, producing a translation that was published by two successive houses but soon went out of print. Another twenty-two years would pass before he decided to rework his translation, giving us his last, miraculous version of the *Sonnets à Orphée*. Further on in his preface—which I am almost tempted to quote in its entirety—he adds:

'Do we know why some music grips us and possesses us and won't let us go? What makes some words rather than others take over our beings and spill their seed inside us—the obscure seed of something that won't germinate until much later, something we are deaf and blind to at the time, but which begins to weave a tapestry in our unconscious, not yet fully discernible, but already bursting with the unknown that bodies it forth in the dark.'

When I think of *Berührungslust*, not as the opposite of *Berührungsangst*, but as going beyond it—and I might almost say, with a nod towards Rilke's tree springing up from the dark earth,[9]' transcending' it—when I think of *Berührungslust*, an image comes to my mind of Charles Dobzynski, possessed all his life by the desire to translate a handful of German poems. Filled with this desire, he went through the war and came out of it alive; blessed by this desire alone, he reached out to touch the language, the text, his readers—and, in touching them, he touched his own soul and united these forces in a benevolent and redemptive constellation.[10]

Thus the translator was metamorphosed into Orpheus touching his lyre, and the text that he gave us at the end of those long years of journeying sings like the simplest, purest music—a primal sound. This deep-seated desire to reach out and touch the text, overcoming, sublimating one's 'fear of contact', like a child approaching for the first time a musical instrument she would like to play—this desire to touch, which is also, of course, a fear of touching in the wrong way, of inadvertently damaging or destroying,[11] can, if worked hard enough and felt deeply enough, become an 'art of touching'. This gives us a third word, more literal and less accessible, perhaps, than *Berührungsangst* and *Berührungslust*, but still, I think, worth a try—*Berührungskunst*...[12]

> *Wo ist ihr Tod? O, wirst du dies Motiv*
> *erfinden noch, eh sich dein Lied verzehrte? –*
> *Wo sinkt sie hin aus mir? ... Ein Mädchen fast ...*

> Où est sa mort ? Ô ce motif, le sauras-tu
> Inventer mais avant que ton chant se soit tu ? –
> Elle me quitte... Où sombre-t-elle ? Une enfant presque...

> [Where is her death? Is it, o god, a theme
> you will devise before your song expires?—
> She slips from me… Where to? … A girl, almost…]

To translate—to reach out your hand in an act that combines the fear of touching in the wrong way with the desire to touch exquisitely.

Endnoten

1 When I am trying to settle on the first, provisional translation of a word or phrase, I often think of the opening line of Peter Bichsel's little book *And Really Frau Blum Would Very Much Like to Meet the Milkman* (London 1968, tr. M. Hamburger)—also the opening line of his entire oeuvre: 'For the sake of convenience one can imagine a house.' The first words are always chosen *for the sake of convenience*, but as we go on, we realize that they have affected the way we see the text and, in consequence, the translation that will eventually crystallize around their fragile core.

2 And perhaps also a little too sexual, burdened by association with the adjective *lüstern* with its overtones of greed, lust and debauchery. This urge to possess and control resonates strongly with the issues surrounding the 'fear of contact' in translation, a subject that Tiphaine Samoyault talks about magnificently in her latest book: ↗Tiphaine Samoyault, *Traduction et violence* (Seuil 2020).

3 English translation by Imogen Taylor.

4 Not counting Armel Guerne's beautiful and at times sublime translation which is strange to the point of abstruseness: ↗Rainer Maria Rilke, *Les Élégies de Duino* traduites par Lorand Gaspard, suivies des *Sonnets à Orphée* traduits par Armel Guerne, édition bilingue (Seuil 2006).

5 ↗Rainer Maria Rilke, *Die Sonette an Orpheus* / *Les Sonnets à Orphée*, choix, traduction de l'allemand et présentation par Charles Dobzynski, édition bilingue (La Différence 1997). The definitive edition of this translation was published by Éditions Orizons in 2011.

6 *Mais leurs yeux dardaient sur Dieu* ('But their eyes were piercing God') is the title chosen by Sika Fakambi to translate Hurston's title *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This extraordinary departure from the original—a clear signal from the outset of the translator's tone and recreative approach—should deter me from continuing my list. But it is important to me to pay homage to these fellow translators—and others, too many to name—who have given me the inspiration and confidence to start translating poetry.[footnote] Danièle Robert's Dante, Josée Kamoun's Jack Kerouac,[footnote]Even the most professional public speaker can be caught off guard by a 'shock' of this nature. I am reminded of a famous French journalist who, in his brief presentation of *Sur la route*, Josée Kamoun's translation of Kerouac's *On the Road*, begins to recite from the text, first from the original, which he knows by heart (he has it tattooed on his arm) and then from the translation, at which point, bowled over by Kamoun's brilliant deviations from the English, he is pulled up short and, perhaps for the first time in his career on radio and television, actually starts to *stutter*, almost forced to interrupt himself as he repeats these words: 'Because the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn…'—'Parce que les seuls qui m'intéressent sont les fous furieux, les furieux de la vie, les furieux du verbe qui veulent tout à la fois, ceux qui ne baillent jamais, qui sont incapables de dire des banalités et *qui flambent, qui flambent, qui flambent*…' (↗VIDEO)

7 Or, as French has it, 'Valérie Rouzeau traduisant Sylvia Plath', literally: 'Valérie Rouzeau *translating* Sylvia Plath'. How I love that gerundive with its overtones of work in progress, even once the translation has been sent on its way, into the world. A translator's work is never done; she is always 'in the process of translating'.

8 Rilke's complete translations are collected in a superb edition with facing originals, printed once and never reissued: Rainer Maria Rilke, *Sämtliche Werke in 7 Bänden*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt am Main 1997). Published many years after the first six volumes of Rilke's works, the book brings together all the texts that provided fertile creative ground for his poetry. I was lucky enough to lay hands on a handsome copy—the last, to my knowledge, in the network of German booksellers. Since I am to blame for its present unavailability, I feel that the least I can do is to say that I am happy to open my door to anyone interested in looking at it.

9 In the first of the *Sonnets to Orpheus*: ‘Da stieg ein Baum. O reine Übersteigung!’ (‘A tree ascended. O what pure transcendence!’).

10 There is another crucial point in this constellation, which I have deliberately avoided mentioning—my colleagues, and in particular Jayrôme C. Robinet, Stéphanie Lux and Julie Tirard, discuss it more intelligently than I can: how does the author react to this ‘touch’ that she has not always asked for? And what if the character of the text itself proves resistant to the alien hand reaching out to it? Strangely enough, it is when I think of authors who write in French that this ‘fear of contact’ becomes palpable to me. I often fantasize about translating or retranslating certain French texts whose expressive power moves me and makes me feel alive—though without any clear idea about what language I would translate them *into*. Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to my Native Land*) is one such text; Valérie Rozeau’s *Pas revoir* (*Cold Spring in Winter*) another. But even as I eye this poetry, I feel my gaze turning to a leer, with all that implies in the way of undesired touch, and I sense the injuries I would inflict, however sincere my intentions, if I tried to render the extraordinary power of Césaire’s voice shouting out his pain and rage at the Black condition or the grief of Rozeau mourning her father with tender lyricism, delicate as snow, and becoming again the little girl and adolescent she once was.

11 Here the paradox of the desire to touch takes on more precise contours because, of all genres, poetry is the hardest to touch without undoing it, damaging it, knocking it off course or even, to take an image from Rilke, *raping* it: ‘You would do better to train yourself to write down your feelings in prose. I cannot warn strongly enough against the manipulativeness of rhyme which rapes and alienates imperceptibly that which we think we confide in it, but which is, in fact, lost in the process of inexpert poetic transformation. It is by no means without risk to our integrity that, just when we want most to recognize ourselves, we squeeze ourselves into a form that distorts and indulges and slightly belittles us.’ (Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Anita Forrer, 16.1.1920, in: *Briefe*, ed. H. Nalewski, vol. 2, p. 49, Frankfurt am Main 1991, tr. Imogen Taylor.)

12 I am thinking here of the obsolete use of the French *toucher* to mean ‘to play an instrument’ (from the Latin *toccare*; cf. Spanish and Portuguese *tocar un instrumento*). The method, discipline and *tact* (another word related to touch) with which a translator devotes herself to a poetic text could provide the basis of a brief treatise along the lines of François Couperin’s *L’Art de toucher le clavecin* (‘The Art of Playing the Harpsichord’). It is no coincidence that I evoke this plucked string instrument, which, unlike the piano, has no pedals to modify the sound once the keys have been struck. The art of ‘touching’ the harpsichord resembles the art of touching a text; even if we plough on with the ‘translation’, there are moments all along the way when we have to be careful to strike the key with just the right force to make the word ring as true as possible in the provisional interpretation of a text that may or may not be one that we will decide to redo, retouch, replay. I am reminded of a question that often crops up in discussions with non-translators: ‘So basically, translating a text is a bit like interpreting a piece of music, is it?’ No, it isn’t *a bit* like interpreting a piece of music, it’s *exactly* like it.

#Lyrik

Alexandre Pateau has translated, together with Julien Lapeyre de Cabanes, a book of poems by Jan Wagner entitled Regentonnenvariationen (Les Variations de la citerne, Actes Sud 2019). In 2020 their translation won the Nelly Sachs Prize and the Max Jacob Prize for a foreign book.

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