Me and the Other, the Other in Me

Isabelle Liber

First Picture

A primary school playground, children lined up outside their classroom. I must be eight or nine. Deep in conversation with the little boy in front of me, I tell him about my adoptive brother. This catches his interest. ‘And,’ he says, ‘what country is he from?’

‘No, no,’ I hear myself reply. ‘He’s normal. Like us, you know.’

Detail: The little boy I am talking to is an adopted child born in an Asian country. My response is not only racist, but completely absurd.

I clearly remember feeling two conflicting emotions just before the bell rang for class: shame at using the category of ‘normality’ to define a birth in France, and embarrassment at putting my classmate into that (blatantly incongruous) category, while at the same time implicitly excluding him from it.

I see myself jumping over a skipping rope held by two other children: with both feet on one side, I try to clear it, feet together, but I get caught in the rope and end up with one foot on one side of the border and one on the other.

Michaël Borremans, *Gone*
To see the picture, click here.

Second Picture

A café in the sun: I am having a break with N, a translator colleague I have recently got to know. I talk to her of a meeting place near where I live in Berlin that welcomes ‘lesbian, gay, bi and trans people’, and tell her that it has always bothered me that there is no mention of, say, ‘straight people’ on the sign in the window.

For a reason I have yet to fathom (is it the fine weather, N’s sensitivity, her calm, intelligent manner?), N is the first to open my eyes to an aspect of what, until now, I had always considered a form of inverse exclusion. She pushes a door open for me—the door to *her* space—and tells me of the fragility created by her sexual choices,

of her occasional need for a place of shelter along her route. She doesn't preach or make demands, but *shares* with me what she feels.

She is one of the two friends holding the skipping rope; she raises it nice and high so that I can pass underneath, to the other side of the border.

Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Two Girls in White and Blue Dresses*
To see the picture, click here.

Third Picture

Surname, first name, marital status, address. Filling in these boxes always makes me feel uneasy. The completed form says unequivocally who I am: a white married woman and mother who probably lives in a relatively middle-class, cultured world.

Unequivocally, really? Am I really no more than the sum of those labels? Can I say and think and feel only what is implicit in them?

I am alone with my skipping rope that turns and turns and turns, tracing a narrow, warped circle around me. I jump up and down within this strictly circumscribed circle and feel very bored.

Frida Kahlo, *Me and My Parrots*
To see the picture, click here.

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These lines that loop around me like a skipping rope, drawing a boundary between me and the Other, marking out spaces, incapable of describing what goes on in this zone that stretches from the Other to me and from me to the Other—these lines also trace

boundaries around books.

Each book I translate is that Other, familiar and unknown, like the little boy in my class, and to translate is to ensure the success of the dialogue between us: to be good at listening, although I am the one speaking—to have one foot either side of the skipping rope. This time, though, I mustn't trip up—mustn't let my words catch me off guard and cordon off me and my 'normality'.

In the last book I translated, for example—*Töchter* by Lucy Fricke[1]—I had to ask myself about the gender of 'we'. In German, as in English, the first-person plural pronoun is ungendered; when the narrator, Betty, says 'wir', it is left open whether she is referring to a mixed group or a group of women. In French, as soon as adjectives and participles come into play, you have to know whether or not 'nous' is feminine. In the discussions with Lucy and her other translators, it became clear that she was keen to keep parts of the book gender-neutral—that it was important to her that everyone, of whatever sex, could recognize themselves in that 'nous'. In order to avoid over-feminizing the novel, then, and making it say things it didn't, I had to find ways of working gender-neutral adjectives and participles into the text. I also used the impersonal pronoun 'on', which can be used to replace 'nous' in colloquial French, without necessarily posing the gender question—although, of course, the fact that the 'non-gendered' form is actually the masculine form raises a number of gender-related issues.

To translate is also to be N, that day in the sun, a go-between capable of shifting borders—words and sincerity almost her only weapons. I search that scene for the mystery ingredient that made the border vanish, and because the moment stands out in my memory as particularly luminous, I decide that it must have been clarity, clear-mindedness—seeing that Other, the book, as clearly as I see this place where 'I stand upon the earth'.[2]

Even here, in my own spot, I want to translate without getting trapped in the circumscribed area defined by the skipping rope; I want to get out of my circle, to run my fingers over that Other who is not me, but who is, nevertheless, somewhere inside me. To translate is to have the courage to approach difference, to dare to touch the Other—*Berührungsmut*.

Kiki Smith, *Lying With A Wolf*
To see the picture, click here.

Endnoten

1 You can find out more about this novel and its translations in the translation journal I kept with Sinéad Crowe and Maria Tellechea.

2 In his *Robert Walser Sculpture*, a temporary project that was on display in Biel in 2019, Thomas Hirschhorn quoted Robert Walser—'I stand upon the earth, that is my standpoint'—as part of a meditation on point of view.



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Isabelle Liber was born in Avignon and has lived and worked in Berlin since 2003. Her first translation from the German was published in 2002 by Actes Sud. As well as translating, she enjoys a number of other creative pursuits, including graphic book design, literary readings and teaching young translators. She is the translator of David Wagner, Karen Köhler, Alina Bronsky and others.

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