Personal message

Von *Stéphanie Lux*

Translated from the French by *Steven Corcoran*

There is so much to say about the qualms one may have related to translating, so much to show behind the scenes of this profession that is never shown, and so much fear just to mention this. For most of the behind-the-scenes stories involve other people, and we are afraid of wronging ourselves or others. I don't claim to be examining the question from all sides here. I don't want to take a theoretical point of view. I would like to convey a personal message, to let you see, through some questions related to my practice as a translator, just how much this theme echoes in me.

To my mind, the word *Berührungsängste* evokes, literally, the fear, the anguish that one can feel when translating. I'm not talking here about the fear of not turning in your text on time, but about what it feels like to translate a literary text depicting, for example, a stalker in a psychiatric institution (as in *Die Stunde zwischen Frau und Gitarre*, by Clemens Setz), when doing so for me brought back very unpleasant memories, or one portraying a father who has anxiety attacks, which, so realistically described and unpacked, induced them in me as I was translating them (as in a short story from *Der Trost runder Dinge*, also by Clemens Setz).

It's extremely nerve wracking. For, when translating, I get immersed in the author's mind, reasoning and emotions; I open myself to everything that, in the course of simply reading, might slide over me without really leaving any traces (or at least traces that are much less profound than those of the translation). I suddenly find myself, necessarily so, putting words to the anxieties, psychoses and distresses that I translate. It is commonly accepted that you do not emerge unscathed from reading certain books, but what to say about translating them? Traces remain of the discomfort I felt when transposing some disturbing and unhealthy emotions or atmospheres into my mother tongue. Images that imprinted themselves on my brain, modifying my perception of certain situations, of certain objects in the world around me.

However, my spending several months in the minds of the characters from the short stories of *Der Trost runder Dinge*, and, before that, a year in the head of Natalie, the heroine of *Die Stunde zwischen Frau und Gitarre*, turned out to be less trying than I feared. First, because these texts also contain a lot of funny or delightfully strange images. And then, as I sometimes say when customers in the bookshop where I occasionally work are put off by the "difficult" subject of a text, *a good book is a good book*. I'd rather read (and translate) a masterpiece that rocks me than a brain-dead "easy" novel. People often pour forth with words of compassion when they see the thousand pages of *Die Stunde zwischen Frau und Gitarre*. But it's a very good book, and I spent an electrifying year in its company. Translating it cost me much less than translating another novel, one that looked far easier at first sight, but which I had accepted because I needed a contract.

This is the second aspect of the *Berührungsängste* that I would like to talk about here: a form of rejection of, of aversion to, a text. Yet such rejection and how we deal with it,

or at least how I have gone about dealing with it to date, can only be fully understood if we shed some light on the context.

We know it, but let’s repeat it: the profession of literary translator is precarious. And 2020 was a particularly difficult year for the cultural world. We translators were lucky enough to be relatively spared at the beginning of this crisis (when you translate, no shows or big tours are cancelled, in principle you can continue to work quietly at home). But the publishing sector is not exactly flourishing at the moment. I translate into French, and in France bookshops had to close during the first lockdown and during part of the second one, many publications were postponed, some titles came out in really unfavourable contexts.

But I recently turned down a translation (*in an identical situation*, as Natalie would say) – after giving it much thought, because, like many colleagues, I can't afford to go on for too long without a contract. I didn't identify with the subject matter, or the humour, of the novel, and it seemed to me that to do it well would have required a huge amount of adaptation work, which I didn’t feel ready to do on this text. It wasn’t easy (I even said yes at first), but I ended up saying no.

If I turned down this translation, it’s because I accepted one in the same state of mind several years ago, and I suffered while translating it, since I didn't recognise myself in it. Its story didn't touch me, nor did the narrative point of view. I was offered it, I needed a contract, I said yes. I did my job as seriously as possible (my translation was even nominated for an award), but I had a bad time of it. As the mentor of the French translation workshop of the last three editions of the Goldschmidt programme (2018-2020), this is an experience I have tried to pass on to the participants: it is often a very bad idea to accept a translation merely to have a contract, and thus, let's say it even more directly, for earning your living, thus for money. It's simply better to take a day job.

For literary translation is not, and cannot be, about earning a crust. Sometimes you can make a living from it, but it requires a personal investment that goes beyond the exercise of a professional activity. And it raises questions and fears that not all professions have. Thus, among the *Berührungsängste*, or fears linked to translation, there is that of legitimacy.

Whether I had the legitimacy do to this job was not clear; however, I have finally stopped asking myself the question. I come from a modest background in which this isn’t an obvious activity to take up: while I am a Germanist, I am not a *normalienne* or *agrégée* in German, nor did I do a Master's degree in literary translation. But I've been making a living from translation for the past fifteen years or so. I feel legitimate in this profession. I am a translator.

On the other hand, I am increasingly questioning whether I feel legitimate in translating this or that particular text.

One may indeed fear not feeling legitimate in translating a work (or, seen from the outside: not being judged qualified to do it.) Let's state this upfront: translation is not neutral. Give the same book to two different translators and you will get two different translations. If this were not the case, what would be the point of regularly retranslating great works? Behind each translation, there is a person who has chosen the words of this translation with a certain experience, an experience that is specific to

him or her (and that is also situated in his or her time). Choosing a translator is, in some cases, if not in all, a political choice.

On social networks, I have shared an article by Aude Sécheret, the translator of Sarah Barmak's *Jouir*, in which she explains certain translation choices that in her eyes only a female translator (and not her male translator friend, who proofread it) would make, because they imply intimate knowledge of the female body, but also and above all of the prohibitions and shames that an entire upbringing imposes on female bodies, and that her colleague and friend could not have experienced. I agree with the translator on this point. It would seem difficult to entrust the translation of a book like this to a cisgender man.

For my part, I recently translated *SPRITZEN*, Stephanie Haerdle's essay on female ejaculation. At the book launch party, held at the home of Laura Meritt (a lesbian, feminist activist and sex shop owner in her Kreuzberg flat), Laura's first question was: "And you, Stephanie, when did you first ejaculate?" I should point out that Laura and Stephanie have known each other for a long time, and that Stephanie quotes Laura in her book. However, should I expect to be asked the same question when the translation comes out? Did I have to be a woman to translate this book, and a woman who ejaculates? Or at least someone who has experienced vulval ejaculation?

Another example directly related to the particularly sensitive subject of the body: last year, Jayrôme C. Robinet, an author and translator, friend and co-participant in the 2004 Goldschmidt programme, thought for various reasons that I was the right person to translate his transition story, *Mein Weg von einer weißen Frau zu einem jungen Mann mit Migrationshintergrund*, the rights to which had just been bought by a French publisher. I was as touched as I was terrified that he wouldn't like the result. Above all, as a cis woman, I didn't really feel legitimate in translating his story, since although I knew him before his transition, I hadn't experienced it myself. I told him my reservations and he responded with great generosity that if I was questioning whether I was the right person to translate his work, it was because I had the sensitivity to do so. Jayrôme finally decided to translate his text himself, and I can't wait to read what is bound to be much more than a translation.

I therefore increasingly ask myself whether I am the right person to translate this or that text.

But my legitimacy does not pay the rent.

This summer I enthusiastically agreed to translate an excerpt from *Brüder* by Jackie Thomae, the story of two brothers born to Senegalese fathers and German mothers in the GDR (one in Leipzig, the other in East Berlin). I don't know the daily life of a racialized person. I know Leipzig well, where part of the novel takes place. I live in Berlin. But I was 11 years old when the Wall fell. Set in the 1960s in East Germany, the father of the two characters comes to study medicine in Leipzig. I took a literature course in this city in 1999 as part of an Erasmus exchange year, and I stayed there for three years. So the context was completely different. However, the evocation of this city, in which I had also lived, gave me a certain feeling of closeness to the story. I liked translating this extract. It seemed to me that the author's style "suited me." I was surprised to discover that I had hopes of being entrusted with the entire translation, should a publishing house ever buy the French translation rights. But would I be justified in translating it?

I don't know. You learn so much by translating. Translating, for me, means carrying, transporting an intention from one language to another, from one culture to another. It means going towards the stranger, towards the strange, and coming back, different, towards the familiar. If you had to have lived through everything you translate, to know all the situations, to be a specialist in all the subjects in advance, what would you be able to translate? I don’t have any answers. My practice is not free of contradictions. But one thing is certain: I would like to translate only texts that I like. Because these are the ones I am most able to appropriate (in the good sense of the word). I would also like the publishing industry to listen more to the voice of translators, for there to be more dialogue. At all levels. I would like for people to be aware of all the issues involved in translation. I continue to believe that we must ask ourselves these questions, that we must question ourselves, every day.



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Stéphanie Lux (*1978) lives in Berlin. She is a translator of Clemens J. Setz, Michael Köhlmeier, Paula Fürstenberg, Julia von Lucadou, Andrea Maria Schenkel and Jens Harder, among others, and from 2018 to 2020 was the tutor of the German-French translation workshop of the Goldschmidt programme for young literary translators. She won the 2020 Nerval-Goethe Prize for her translation of *Katie* by Christine Wunnicke (ed. Jacqueline Chambon). Since 2013, she has occasionally joined the team of the Berlin independent bookshop Anakoluth.

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