Translating and having translated – a political act

By *Julie Tirard*

Translated from the French by *Steven Corcoran*

If x is a book by a black transgender homosexual author and y is a white cisgender heterosexual translator, how long will it take before z, the feminazi fringe of the profession, burns f(x), the translation, at the stake? Bonus question: is it possible to dissociate y from f(x), and thus to criticize f(x) without y taking it personally? You have two hours.

Berührungsängste. The fear of translating a text and being reproached for having accepted to translate it.

The debate on the issue of legitimacy in translation when it comes to certain texts is so interesting that it would be well worth organizing a post-lockdown round table on this issue. While many people have considered it, no one has (yet) done so. It would be necessary to put away the knives and blunt the objects, to empty glasses of water in advance, to prepare defibrillators and oxygen bottles, to allocate a budget for a psychological counselling unit... I am caricaturing, of course. But we have all noticed the very strong reactions that people have had when the questions arises of whether anyone may legitimately translate anything.

This is a debate that I am passionate about, and I never tire of asking my colleagues about this topic whenever I get the chance. I would like to thank Aurélie Maurin and Jürgen Jakob Becker for inviting me to write an article discussing this issue at the close of this year.

Berührungsängste. The fear of touching it, then. That is, touching this text that could provide you with enough funds for three months. And that you may have proposed to a publisher yourself, convinced of the importance of this border-crossing attempt. The one that deals with a situation of oppression that concerns you more or less (let's be honest, rather less than more, but you know a lot of people concerned who will be ready to reread your work and/or answer your questions, so it'll be fine). This text, which, since the question of legitimacy has been publicly raised in literary circles – can anyone legitimately write simply anything, and, *a fortiori*, translate anything? – gives you cold sweats. You are already preparing responses to the attacks, reassuring yourself at night that you are legitimately able to translate this word, taking examples of excellent translations done by translators who were not concerned by the oppression suffered by the main characters and/or the author of the text, and that no one would dare to question. You already live in fear that one day, at a book fair, while coming out of the bathroom, someone will jump on you and shout HOW DARE YOU? Someone from the other *team*.



Anonymous member from Team 2

For the question of legitimacy in translation divides the translation world into two *teams*: one side thinks that not any translator can translate just anything, and the other thinks the opposite.

Those who know me won’t hesitate a second to place me in Team 2, the one that, at the Frankfurt Book Fair, watches for the arrival of white cisgender heterosexual translators who have translated books by racialised women and/or feminist essays to scare them. Well, maybe this is the moment to spring a surprise…

First of all, let's take a closer look at what's going on when a translator says, “I don't think you can just translate anything at all,” and another replies, "Of course, you can," with a flushed face. What do we hear in the slamming door?

This debate has an unfortunate tendency to immediately turn into a personal attack. It barely has time to exist. Why? Because to claim that a person may not legitimately translate a text, is ultimately, between the lines, to cast doubt on the quality of the translation that he or she could do, and therefore of his or her work, and therefore of his or her professionalism. The anger is understandable. It would indeed be presumptuous to say to someone: “I haven't read your translation. You may not even have started it. But I am already asserting that it will not be a good one.” Ouch. For this requires us to make a quick digression: what makes for a *good* translation?

An absence of false meanings, of looseness; a closeness to the rhythm, the poetry, the figures of speech, the register of language; the particular attention given to anchoring the text in a period, a region; accuracy regarding the choice of terms, especially when it is a scientific, philosophical or historical text... All this makes for a lot of boxes to tick! An arduous task, impossible if the truth be told. Any translator, no matter how good, will tell you: translating is choosing.

So how do we go about it? First of all, we can count on our colleagues, because, it must be said, we love to reflect on other people’s translation problems. Next, we can contact the author of the text, of course, if s/he is not dead and if s/he is nice. We can explain the situation to him/her, check with him/her whether s/he would privilege rhyme or meaning here or there, or even offer to him/her several similar solutions to choose among. If the text’s author is unavailable, we can turn to the publisher for whom we are translating it. After all, s/he has chosen to invest (usually at a loss) in the translation of this book and to entrust you with the translation. S/he will surely have an opinion on what s/he considers to be a good translation of the text and which boxes

you should tick first.

In short, we all agree that there is no such thing as a perfect translation, and that we have many tools at our disposal for doing the best possible job. So what is it with this group of hardliners, ready to jump down the throats of their colleagues over a translation deemed unwelcome?

Perhaps it is because the fourth player in this wonderful adventure of book translation is all too often forgotten: the reader (most readers are female, so I'll use the generic feminine here). We often think about her wallet, but we may all too often forget that she also has expectations. And I wonder if in Team 2, it is the readers who speak louder than the translators.

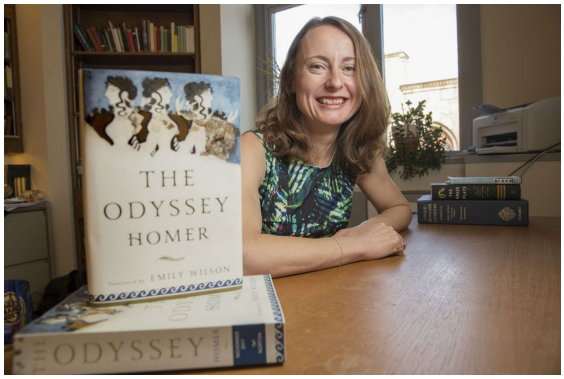
Let's imagine a French reader familiar with the German language discovering Hölderlin's poems. Moved, he dreams of sharing his emotion with his relatives, who have no notion of German. He does an excellent translation, making no misinterpretations and using the French of Hölderlin's time. But the translation is only concerned with rendering the meaning. The delicacy of the verses and their rhythm are not there. A disappointment. This reader would probably have preferred a translation that breaks slightly with the meaning in order to retranscribe the beauty induced by the form.

Now let's imagine a young activist who doesn't have the language skills to read her favourite American feminist author in English. She buys it in French translation and notices that it is signed by a white cisgender man. She doesn't doubt for a second the translator's knowledge of the English language, nor his probable interest in the subject. But she can't close her eyes to the fact that the words she is about to read will be words chosen by a man, a man who, even if he is married to a feminist activist, even if he lives only with feminist activists, even if he himself may be active in feminist organizations, will never know what it means and how it feels to be a woman living in a patriarchal society.

While readers are rarely aware that they are reading a translation (another problem, to which I return below), translators, on the other hand, don't buy a book without checking whether it is a translation. I think that the anger some people harbour towards their colleagues' decision to take on the translation of certain texts is above all the readers' expressions of frustration (readers who are militant, engaged, or simply aware of the workings of the oppressive system in which we live).

This translator-reader also knows that history abounds with translations that have (knowingly or not) truncated, adapted, and misused texts that have questioned this oppressive system. Let's take as an example the publication in the United States, in 1953, of Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, translated by an emeritus professor, Howard M. Parshley, who unfortunately took the liberty of making many cuts...

In 2020, it is unlikely that such liberties could be taken. But even if the translators and copyeditors (given the time and budget to do so) have the very best of intentions, there is one thing they cannot do anything about: the unconscious biases that govern our actions. These biases concern our gender, social class, culture, age group, and so on. Biases that it is useless to fight against and that we are all aware of, since there is another point on which we agree within the profession: a translation always consists in a subjective reading of a text. In essence, therefore, a translation cannot be objective.



Emily Wilson and her translation of Homers' *Odyssey* © Michael Bryant / STAFF

Emily Wilson, who published a new translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in 2018, said in an interview for the *Chicago Review of Books*: “I think we should aim not to be ‘unbiased,’ but to be responsible, and that involves being as conscious as possible about our biases and preferences (...). It’s been unsurprising that many people have asked me about how my gender identity (as a cis-gendered woman) affects my translation of the *Odyssey*. It's also unsurprising, but highly problematic, that hardly anyone (except me, so far!) seems to ask male classical translators how their gender affects their work. (...) [U]nexamined biases can lead to some seriously problematic and questionable choices (such as, in that instance, translating rape as if it were the same as consensual sex)."

It is commonly believed that something is always “lost” in translation. For my part, I firmly believe that, on the contrary, reflecting on one’s own biases makes it possible to “gain” a lot in translation.

Aude Sécheret, translator of *Jouir* (English original, *Closer*), an essay by the Canadian Sarah Barmak published by Zones, declared on her blog last year: “I propose that the translation of feminist works written by women be reserved for women translators.” Aude Sécheret clearly seems to be on Team 2. In this fascinating post, she takes the time to justify her choice of translation of the phrase “some can’t touch themselves,” which she rendered as “*certaines ne peuvent pas toucher leur sexe avec leurs propres mains*,” instead of “*certaines ne peuvent pas se toucher*” or indeed “*certaines ne peuvent pas se masturber,*” as was suggested to her by a friend and colleague, who happened to be an excellent male translator. Why this choice? Because she is convinced that Sarah Barmak meant “touching with their hands.” Because Aude Sécheret, like Sarah Barmak, knows that as little girls we were brought up with the idea that the vulva is dirty, and that throughout their lives many women will avoid touching their vulva by masturbating with an object or by keeping their panties on, for example (or by not masturbating at all), by washing with a glove rather than with the hand, by using sanitary napkins rather than menstrual cups, and so on. Aude Sécheret believes that “for issues like these, a female translator will perceive these kinds of nuances with more immediacy and accuracy than even a very good male translator would,” and I totally agree with her. However, I don't know if we can say that all female translators would have perceived this nuance, because among our female colleagues there are, on the one hand, transgender women, and, on the other hand, women who have probably never thought about the relationship they have with their vulva, but in any case I agree that entrusting a text like *Jouir* to a cisgender translator would not have been a very interesting choice – for him, perhaps it would’ve been, but not for the thousands of women readers who were impatiently waiting for the book. Translating it as “*certaines ne peuvent pas se masturber*” (some can't masturbate) would not have been wrong,

the translation would not have been *bad*, but thanks to this perspective that only a translator who has thought about these automatic reflexes can have, the readers come out winners, and the feminist cause, too.



https://www.editions-zones.fr/livres/jouir/:
https://www.editions-zones.fr/livres/jouir/

Just as political and/or militant books can generate strong emotions, commitments, and shift boundaries (for better or for worse, that's not the question), so, too, can their translations. And as master of the words that will be read, the translator bears a heavy responsibility in what s/he is about to transmit. It seems to me naive – even irresponsible – to believe that a translation, in these cases, is a simple passage from one language to another.

I hear and understand those who say that it would be ridiculous to decree that, from now on, only translators with a disability will have the right to translate authors with a disability, that only black translators will have the right to translate black authors, or that only transgender translators will have the right to translate transgender authors. First of all, because translation is a subjective reading, there can be several translations of the same work (this is standard in the theatre), and therefore, every person is – theoretically – free to (re)translate whomever s/he wants (we will mention, however, that there is an unspoken rule in literature that prevents you from translating a colleague's author without asking for his/her prior consent, and it should be remembered that English-speaking readers of *The Second Sex* had to wait almost thirty years between the time when the first voices were raised against the 1953 translation and the publication of a new translation in 2009). And secondly, because many oppressed minority authors are satisfied with translations of their works by translators who are not from their community.

I have identified two sorts of anger in this article: that of the translator having the quality of her work questioned, and that of the translator-reader on account of her expectations. A third theme is slowly emerging here. And it is perhaps this third sort of anger that will allow us to reconcile, at least I hope so.

For many, I think, the question of whether they are justified in translating a text not only raises doubts about their professionalism, it also calls into question their altruistic and humanist aspirations. To mention our unavoidable biases is ultimately to say: “even without meaning to, at some point you will most certainly betray the text and its author.” This is unbearable for the passionate translator who spends days looking for the right word that will combine precision, accuracy and tone, who spends hours learning about a subject in order to be as close as possible to the author’s intention. This is, again, quite understandable.

What we need to hear in this anger, it seems to me, is the idea that in order to lend support to various populations groups, it is not necessary to segregate the profession. To which Team 2 will reply that it is not very coherent to claim to aspire to a fairer and more egalitarian society, while nonetheless not being surprised for a second that, for example, at Translation Conferences, during seminars, in residencies or even at our *Stammtische*, non-white translators can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

With this, we at last come to the heart of the matter.

If I refuse to join either of these two teams, it is because for me the debate is elsewhere.

The real question I want to ask myself as a human being, and therefore as a writer and translator, since my job is to portray the world – mine and someone else's – with my words, is: how can I be a good ally?

> ‘In the activist world, an ally is someone who does not experience oppression but will join with victims of it to fight the system together. This is the classic definition of an ‘ally’ and thus covers all extant areas of struggle and activism. Whether the struggle is against racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia or other, an ally is someone who does not experience the discriminations in question but is aware of them and wishes to put things in place to fight them’. (A definition that I think is totally spot on and can be found on this site).



Kiffe ta race, excellent podcast for white allies
https://www.binge.audio/podcast/kiffetarace/:
https://www.binge.audio/podcast/kiffetarace/

As we learn from a number of articles and podcasts on the topic, to be a good ally necessarily requires that one begin by questioning one's own privilege and thus become aware of one's position in the oppressive system of which we are all a part (whether we support it or not). As translators, this will allow us to question a publisher's motivations for "producing" a given book, to anticipate the readers' potential expectations, or to better understand the stakes of a text.

Secondly, the ally must learn to be silent. As an ally, we have only a theoretical vision of what the daily oppression of those we support might be, has always been, like. It is therefore necessary to adopt the position of a learner, a position that will last all our lives. Because in the end, no matter how many books, podcasts, documentaries I consult, I will never know what it is to be non-white, for example.

But how can I do this when, like Agnès Jaoui, "I believe in the immense influence of images, and all the more so when we are not necessarily aware of it" and thus refuse, as an author, to continue to write love stories between white cisgender heterosexual people in order to give more room to the oppressed minorities that I wish to defend; how can I do this if I don't allow myself to speak up for the people I want to see take centre stage more often, i.e. if I refuse to give voice to characters from these minorities? How can I, as a translator, do this if I forbid myself to translate the same books that I would like my friends and family to read in order to make them want to fight against sexism, racism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism?

https://www.youtube.com/embed/uwcJxMfBQEI

For me, the answer lies in the collective. The alliance, precisely.

It seems to me that rather than see colleagues tear each other to pieces, it would be in our best interest to turn, together, toward the publishing houses, to question, together, our publishers about why they have entrusted such and such a project to such and such a translator, to question, together, the homogeneity that characterizes our profession.

The question of legitimacy is an exclusionary question. Someone who sits on on a chair is asked to make room for someone else. But why can't two of us sit on that chair? Each one a buttock. Why should we have to choose between translating alone or not translating at all? What if this was an opportunity to stop just asking our non-white, queer, disabled women friends to proofread us (for the sake of the text) knowing full

well that only our names will appear in the book, and instead to work at making them feel welcome in our profession?

“Legitimacy doesn’t pay the rent,” writes my colleague Stéphanie Lux in her text, and she is quite right: few of us can afford the luxury of refusing a translation and/or falling out with a publishing house, because this profession is extremely precarious – the year to come is always unclear, the income is very low and the threat that nothing will arrive is permanent.

Let’s continue to accept the translations that we are entrusted with, let’s continue to bring in-house projects that are important to us as allies, but let’s not do it without asking questions. Let’s alert publishers to the issues, let’s make the profession known to minorities who don’t feel legitimate enough to take it up, let’s talk with authors so that the passage of their into another language can be capitalized on, their text “augmented” rather than simply stuck to – let’s work together.

https://giphy.com/embed/3oge7Ve0gmIOhJkhOg

I have entitled this text “translating and having translate, a political act.”

Translating is a political act, because it seems to me that we can no longer hide behind the simplistic image of the shadowy translator. Like any artist (yes, the literary translator is an artist, we contribute to the artists' health insurance and retirement fund, we receive royalties, we are therefore artists), our work is the sharing of our vision of the world, whether we like it or not. We thus have a responsibility, which it would be good to become aware of, if not, one day perhaps, to be able to fully assume.

Having translated is a political act, because I think that by continuing to make translators invisible, by putting their names in small writing on the back cover or inside the book, by never mentioning them when excerpts from their translations are read or quoted on the radio or on TV, by refusing to allow more than one name to appear on the translation contract, or even inside the book as a thank you, we continue to make people believe that literary translation is a service. That it is objective. However, if the name of the translator were routinely put on the front cover, I can imagine that publishing houses would think more carefully when choosing a translator, that the translator would think more carefully before starting the project, and that there would be more consistency between the motivations for making a book and the choice of person tasked with finding the right words to bring it to life.

#Queer



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After directing the Art en Scène theater in Avignon, where she staged her first play, **Julie Tirard** moved to Berlin in 2013 to devote herself to writing. Initially a copywriter and freelance journalist (notably for the European magazine *Café Babel*), she co-founded the feminist online magazine *Girlshood* in 2016 before turning to the translation of novels, essays and plays by contemporary German-speaking authors. She is herself the author of several novels and plays.

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