Perspective turn

By *Jayrôme Robinet*

Translated from the French by *Steven Corcoran*

I invite you to relax into a nice, warm bath. All velvety with eucalyptus or lavender-scented oil. Sweet bubble bath. The plopping sounds of drops that pearl on your fingertips. I don't remember who said: translating means ensuring that the original text and the translated text are bathed in similar water. The same temperature, the same bubble bath or, in its absence, the same purity of transparency.

What *Berührungsängste* did I have when translating my own book, why do I think Stéphanie Lux was the right person to translate it and why did I finally decide to do it myself? This is what this text is about.

But first, let's take a comfortable position, well situated (though we are not all in the same bath, let's imagine we are fully stretched out, bathtub *oblige*).

The ethics and aesthetics of translation vary according to the schools, periods and ideologies of translation.[1] The issues at stake are fundamental if we consider, for example, the project of translating sacred texts. According to Henri Meschonnic, Europe is a continent whose culture is not only built on translations, but also built on the erasure of their erasures.[2]

The stakes of translation are closely linked to the production and circulation of knowledge. All epistemology is of course situated. It was Donna Haraway who theorized the notion of situated knowledge at the end of the 1980s, thus debunking all presumptions to scientific objectivity. Haraway, a historian of consciousness, refuted the concept of neutral, objective and universal knowledge and postulated that all knowledge was the product of subjects constructed by their time, their social position and their relationship to norms.[3]

Translation is, as we've said, an act that participates in knowledge production and circulation. Every translation is therefore also situated. For this reason, some publishing houses, such as w_orten & meer, strive to render such situatedness in their publications, not only with the text's writing but also its translators and readers. This work, moreover, shows an awareness of the performative nature of language. See Ina Pfitzner's article "Etwas ganz Neues – Übersetzungen als Versuch diskriminierungskritisch zu handeln" for *Bücher Magazin*, about her translation of Léonora Miano's *La Saison de l'ombre*.

In my opinion, situated knowledge and know-how do not depend solely on an identity position. All the more so as each human being is a bundle of concomitant identities.

When a French publisher bought the translation rights this year for a book I had written in German (a foreign language for me), it seemed clear at first that I would translate it myself into French (my primary language).



However, I felt some reluctance, which I would have called *Berührungsängste* had the term existed in French.

Other writers before me have decided not to translate their own work into their first language. For example, the British author Sharon Dodua Otoo entrusted the English translation of her Bachmann Prize 2016 winning text *Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin* to three translators for two different versions: the British version, *Herr Gröttrup Takes a Seat*, was translated by Katy Derbyshire, and the American, *Herr Gröttrup Sits Down*, was co-translated by Patrick Ploschnitzki and Judith Menzl.



The idea was appealing. Was I going to have my book translated into Quebec French, Belgian French and Swiss French? Like English, French is a pluricentric language, meaning that it has several standard varieties. But unlike English, it is an asymmetrical pluricentricity because the different varieties are not of equal importance. Since the

French standard is the predominant form, I liked the idea of upsetting this dominance by decentring the standard.

One of my *Berührungsängste* was indeed not the intuition that I did not have the necessary horizon of experience, but on the contrary, that I was too close to my text to maintain the healthy distance needed to produce a good translation.

To overturn a common belief, I would provocatively say that every writer is a failed translator.

As far as I'm concerned, writing this book in German cloaked me in an emotional distance, which allowed me to tackle intimate subjects that might have aroused feelings of shame or sadness in me were they thought and written directly in French. The French word, *maman*, for example, is apt to make me sob, while the German word, *Mutti*, is less emotive.

Also, I was afraid that, if I translated my own work, I would change everything, I would want to add or remove things. I wanted to avoid getting bored. I wanted to forge ahead. After having bathed in this story for almost three years, I was reluctant to spend extra months translating it. You know how skin wrinkles after soaking in water for a long time?

That's when I thought of my colleague and friend Stephanie Lux.

Steph and I met in the Goldschmidt programme in 2004. I have followed her work as a translator, and I know that she not only measures the temperature of the water but also the content of calcium, magnesium, potassium, fluoride and the nature of the trace elements. But there are other reasons why I thought of her.

To translate my book, what kind of situated knowledge would be welcome?

It would be wrong to think that only a transgender person would be right for this.

As I wrote above, each human being is a bundle of concomitant identities. No single identity category is more important than another; what makes up a being’s specificity and social positioning is the intertwining of the categories. In order to translate the story of a white bisexual transgender man who experiences passing as a Person of Colour in certain contexts in Germany, who has been living in Berlin for twenty years and who comes from a social background far from bourgeois cultural norms, but who has entered the academic world by pursuing a PhD – which category should be given prominence? From an intersectional point of view, the intertwining of different identity categories as well as personal experience makes each experience in the world, and thus each perspective, unique and specific.

Moreover, this is what makes it possible not to reify identities.

When I asked Stephanie if she would consider translating my book, she said she wondered about her legitimacy for the task.

Her question alone illustrated to me her professional sensitivity.

Secondly, I made my transition relatively late (at the age of 33), i.e. I experienced several decades of social gaze on a body that was then positioned as feminine, in other words, I experienced in my flesh a sexism that a person of feminine socialization like Stephanie could situate.

Third, Steph has, in my view, a queer-feminist theorisation that provides her with the necessary tools to re-situate my knowledge.

Fourth, her position as a French woman living in Berlin for over a decade also provides her with situated knowledge of some of the observations thematized in my book.

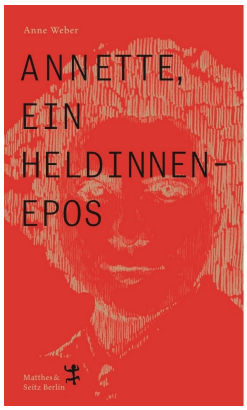
Finally, Stéphanie was one of my first readers, which means she knew about the writing process behind the book.

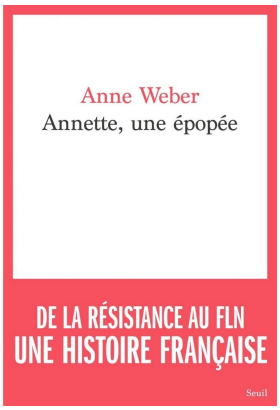
And anyway, I was there to support her during the translation process.

So why? Why did I finally decide to take it up?

From my translation studies at the excellent Ecole d'Interprètes Internationaux de Mons in Belgium, I acquired a professional quirk that consists in analysing translations aesthetically: I like to dive into both languages – original text and original translation in support – and swim down a few fathoms to feel around.

Thus I am fascinated by Anne Weber's translations of her own texts.[4] In so doing, she adds items of clothing and some bread here, she takes away kisses and tears there. In fact, I would say that the result is often two original texts.





When I made a draft translation of my text, I suddenly felt a great freedom. I felt like a fish in a huge bathtub. It was possible to refine my perspective, to introduce new subtleties, a different light, to develop the text.

Henri Meschonnic, again, says that we don't just translate languages, but texts.[5]

By translating this book myself, then, I could reframe it. In Germany, the publishing house thought it would be better if it came out as a document – in France it will come out as an autobiographical novel. I'm happy to be able to give it a new lease on life, to give it a fresh breath, a new life and a new frame. A new, original work.

Finally, let's try not to throw the baby out with the bathwater. After the linguistic turn of the 1960s and 1970s – according to which any analysis of the world must first pass through an analysis of the language that gives us access to it – and the iconic turn of the 1990s – which adds to this the analysis of images – it seems to me that our new millennium has begun with a perspective turn. Any analysis must first go through an analysis of the perspective from which it is done. As regards the choice which person is right to translate a text, another question that can be asked is as follows: which solidarity network to choose? For the choice of a translator is also a choice as to the circulation of resources.

Endnoten

1 Georgiana Lungu-Badea / Alina Pelea / Mirela Pop: (En)Jeux esthétiques de la traduction Éthique(s) et pratiques traductionnelles. Timişoara: Centre de recherches ISTTRAROM-Translationes 2010.
2 Henri Meschonnic: *Poétique du traduire*. Paris: Verdier 1999
3 Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective.” In: *Feminist Studies* 14/3, 1988. pp. 575-599.
4 Anne Weber, *Annette, une épopée*. Paris: Le seuil 2020.
Anne Weber, *Annette, ein Heldinnenepos*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz 2020
5 Meschonnic, Ibid.



© Ali Ghandtschi

Jayrôme C. Robinet, born in the north of France in 1977. Has published two collections of short stories in France. In 2015 he published his first book in German *Das Licht ist weder gerecht noch ungerecht*. The eponymous play premiered the same year at Maxim Gorki Theatre. In 2019 *Mein Weg von einer weißen Frau zu einem jungen Mann mit Migrationshintergrund* was published. He has translated plays (Christoph Marthaler, Fritz Kater, Sasha Marianna Salzmann, Händl Klaus), slam poetry (Bas Böttcher, Timo Brunke) and non-fiction (Kate Bornstein, Dossie Easton and Janet W. Hardy) into French. He is a research assistant at the University of the Arts in Berlin where he is doing his PhD on queer performance poetry.

Dies ist ein automatisch generiertes PDF der Webseite www.toledo-programm.de. TOLEDO ist ein Programm des Deutschen Übersetzerfonds.
https://www.toledo-programm.de/talks/2958/perspective-turn
Veröffentlichungsdatum: 18.12.2020
Stand: 29.03.2024
Alle Rechte vorbehalten.