

Adversaries?

By Claudia Hamm

Translated from the German by Jonathan Becker

"I'm listening. I get close, I am captured, I remove myself or I run away. I return, I capture, I translate. What comes from the others, what passes through my body and disappears, I don't know where to."
Nastassja Martin, *Croire aux fauves*¹

Strictly speaking, it was all there: a French book, a German translation, a shocking plot. Strictly speaking, the existing translation could have been reprinted and everything could have ended there. After all, Emmanuel Carrère's *L'Adversaire* had already seen enough fighting.² Murders committed by a real-life main character as the inciting incident, the author desperately struggling with the material for years, now translators turned into adversaries? I do not know what exactly moved the publisher Andreas Rötzer when he suggested a retranslation of the novel to me, what he imagined it would lead to. Sure, I had brought the author into the publishing house after none of his books had appeared in German for a solid decade, a time during which he had discovered the "I" as the perspective of his writing. I had translated five, six of these documentary novels, but nevertheless, *Amok*³ had been fairly well-reviewed when it came out, only sixteen years prior... Besides, at first I was anything but certain of whether I even wanted to take on such a challenge: every sentence of the two German versions would be up for comparison, the judgment of whether one was better than the other always looming in the background. Nor was I certain of whether I wanted to immerse myself in the novel's dark world at all, the harrowing sentences that I would have to turn over in my head for months... I asked for time to consider. I wanted to do a few sample pages, then compare and see whether the result was noticeably different.

It was different. And this *Difference* is what I want to talk about. In this text, and perhaps in general. What is it that makes every literary translation an intimate act of writing? That makes the effort of recreating the same book once more worth it? Or is it not even the same book?

The title of this series of TOLEDO TALKS is *Staying alive*. When is a book alive? When does it die? How can it be brought back to life? Who has a vested interest in this? The publisher, hoping to give birth to something new? The author, afraid of death? The audience, for whom the book has become a source of nourishment? I did not retranslate *L'Adversaire* to extend the life of the author or of his work, or to somehow extend my own. I did not translate it because I perceived the first translation as lifeless and felt the need to offer readers a correction to it. I retranslated it because I wanted to give a voice to my own relationship with this book. Because I felt that the book needed a different title. Because those first ten pages *sounded* different to me, and to me alone, to my inner ear. This may come across as egomaniacal or banal, perhaps it does not fit with the often-invoked image of the translator as the bridge-building mediator between original and new audience, and yet for me this subjective desire is

the most important and best reason to devote part of my lifetime to the translation of a book.⁴

A book calls out. Sure, it doesn't just call out, it sets out things, locations, people, it contains a self-statement, it orchestrates a relationship between text and reader, it sounds out linguistic beauty and power—but it also calls out. Within every text there is the dimension of an appeal, which as a translator I respond to very impulsively. Because a narrative voice sets up a subjectivity and intimacy that speaks to me—or does not. And it speaks to me even more so when this subjectivity is precarious, endangered, grasping, when the *Need* of the narrator can be felt clearly—because I believe that it is a *Need* that drives narrators from the first sentence to the last, an urge to speak in exactly this way and not any other, because speaking in any other way would not do the same thing.⁵ For me, Carrère's *L'Adversaire* was a narrative that attempted to feel around for a language of deep restlessness and as such profoundly resonated with me.

Luc a compris alors et ressenti un immense soulagement. Tout ce qui était arrivé depuis quatre heures du matin, le coup de fil de Cottin, l'incendie, les blessures de Florence, les sacs gris, Jean-Claude dans le caisson des grands brûlés, cette histoire de crimes enfin, tout cela s'était déroulé avec une vraisemblance parfaite, une impression de réalité qui ne donnait aucune prise au soupçon, mais maintenant, Dieu merci, le scénario déraillait, s'avouait pour ce qu'il était: un cauchemar. ... L'idée a traversé Luc, elle devait le hanter par la suite, que dans ce rêve Jean-Claude faisait office de double et qu'il s'y faisait jour des peurs qu'il éprouvait à son propre sujet: peur de perdre les siens mais aussi de se perdre lui-même, de découvrir que derrière la façade sociale il n'était rien.
(Emmanuel Carrère, *L'Adversaire*)

Perhaps the journey is the destination. Perhaps as a practitioner it makes sense to speak about one's own Doing rather than its results. About translating rather than the translation. I want to try, for a moment, to do so away from the dark undertow of the *Adversary*.

As a translator, at first I find myself in the position of a reader. A reader of a foreign text in a, to me, "foreign" language. As a reader, I could leave the text to its foreignness, I could just stare at it in its otherness. But as I begin to read, I am not just staring: When I read characters from an alphabet I am familiar with, I hear what I see. Phonetic languages are called that because their characters stand in direct relation to sounds (phonemes).⁶ Even if I did not understand French, even if I was just reading letters and invented their pronunciation, the sounds, structures, and punctuation would already suggest a voice that speaks and speaks to me. My personal relationship with a text starts here.

As a consequence of the academic trench warfare between production aesthetics and reception aesthetics, it has become difficult to define a text as written speech (at the same time it is exactly the combination of these perspectives that would be so useful in thinking about translation). It might have once been clear to Aristotle that the written word conveys "what is in the voice" (*ta en phone*) and that the voice conveys "what is in the soul" (*ta en psyche*), and in the 18th and 19th centuries Herder, Schlegel, Wieland, Novalis, Humboldt may have seen melody, tone, and rhythm as the universal language of humanity, and the suggestive power of a text might once have

derived from its rhetoric, and writing might once have been the same as notated speech—nowadays, however, it appears that those most invested in these questions are the psychologists, rather than scholars of literature.

Since 2016, the American psychologist Ruvanee B. Vilhauer has been conducting studies on “inner speech during silent reading.”⁷ In doing so, she is building on the research of the English writer and psychologist Charles Fernyhough (who also studies what kind of voices authors hear while writing).⁸ Their finding: 82.5% of readers hear a voice while reading. *Silent reading, then, stimulates inner speech, or something like it.* (10.6% on the other hand report that they, like deaf people, directly connect what they read with images, and 6.9% are unsure.) But who is speaking when we read? Vilhauer’s and Fernyhough’s studies confirm what the authors of the 18th century had already asserted: In many cases, the *sound shape* of what we read corresponds to our own thinking voice,⁹ in others—when we know the author for example—it corresponds to speakers we conceive, or, in a sense, hallucinate.¹⁰

Reading means, as Fernyhough suspects—and this is where I have to prick up my ears if I am to get at the *In-Between* of translating—, converting what is heard into an inner language that *fragments, condenses, summarizes, and enriches*: into an inner image, a *mental representation*. This includes more than just linguistic or just auditory processes. *The inner language connects words with visual conceptions, colors, smells, sensory and emotional elements.* Unconscious matter enters into this, spontaneous memories, dislikes, preferences, sentiments.

Aspiring to quantify these phenomena, the *science of the reading brain* offers a descriptive account: The American scholar Maryanne Wolf, for example, uses neuroscientific methods to observe which areas of the brain are activated while we read. Reading, as I read in Wolf’s book,¹¹ is a constant remembering of what was already said, a keeping-at-the-ready of partially processed matter and a near-instantaneous pre-empting and calibrating of potential meanings, the interplay of which allows me to imbue the reading material with meaning and to give it an affective charge. As we learn to read, our brain develops a switching circuit that conforms to the writing of our respective language community and within fractions of a second is able to connect wide-ranging areas of the brain, in which seeing, hearing, language, cognition, articulation and affects are “called upon”, but also those that are responsible for remembering, listening, decision-making and trusting (!). When I read, I converge on what I construct as the “text” with all my senses, individual intuition, emotion, association, and experience just as much as with my analytical knowledge of language and the world, with psyche and reason just as much as with the body. Reading is dialogue and monologue all at once, it is an engagement with an Other and with what this Other arouses within our own self: an alienation trial-run.

So, who am I hearing when I read the book of another? How much *I* is constructed from the *You* and how much *You* from the *I*? I have had several conversations about this with the cultural scholar Thomas Macho. Macho has extensive experience with psychoanalysis and for much of his research career has been interested in voices, doppelgangers, and all kinds of technologies of the self.¹² “A voice acts as a *transitional object*”, Macho says and that means: the heard voice is to the listener what a teddy bear is to a child. A voice creates a connection between inner and outer world and is filled with subjective emotions. In this respect, listening is an act of *transference* in the psychoanalytic sense: We fill the other’s voice—which has turned into ours as we read—with our own substance.

If this is the case, then—for the act of translation—the transference begins with reading the foreign-language text. If so, then what I am working with is a mental representation

of the voices activated within it, including what I myself have fed into it. If so, then this is where I should place the moment when I wake up in the morning and am looking for an expression in my language for something I am acutely aware needs to be rendered but cannot find it—and then suddenly jump up because I have in fact found it and am *certain* that this is the one. If so, then the *mental representation* of the original text and not the original text itself, its passing through the mind-body-spirit unit, is what shapes its new linguistic form. And in doing so, shapes the transitional object that I, in turn, make available to readers of the translation and for which I make my own poetic, ethical and political decisions. Because the narrative voice in the translation can lull or lecture, it can beguile or berate. A tranquil, thrashing, or a trickling voice impacts the reader subcutaneously. It acts directly upon emotional recollection, which is exactly what I want to get to as a literary translator. What we know as the prosody of language is part of my building material, part of how a literary text *makes its impact*: word accents or sentence emphasis achieved through a specifically chosen combination of syllables, but also familiar patterns of rhythm and sound sequences trigger voices, which the foreign language text in its sound shape does not determine (because it is working with different sound material), but whose Gestus and character is what my translation has to tune in to. This tuning is the responsibility of the translator. Because a literary voice is also a unique way of speaking, a style, an idiolect that employs very specific linguistic methods, a personal linguistic fingerprint. To put it in de Saussure's terms, it's the *parole* (speech, speech act) within the *langue* (language).¹³

Narrator and character voices are shaped by their inflection, by their worldview, their proximity to or distance from what is said, their relationship with their own act of speaking, their trust or mistrust in language, their irony or urgency, by register, rhetoric, rhythm, and silence, but also by age, biography, character, and physicality of the speaker, by the speaker's sociolect, dialect, state of consciousness, gender and social standing, by the historical When of the speech act, its milieu, location and situation, by the speech act's cause and intention, by the subtext of what is being said and the authenticity or inauthenticity of the speech. The decisions translators make about this determine the texture of a text and its diction, things like syntax, text flow, syllable and word counts, and its sound material, but also, on a fundamental level, the brevity or loquacity of narrator and characters—their "tone" is what makes the music and ultimately the "content".¹⁴ A voice does not contain all possible ways of saying and meaning. *A voice struggles with the difficulty of finding an ear in others and finds a particular resolution to this struggle.* It is a self-revelation and positioning, it is as personal as a vote that is cast in response to a call for action. It "makes sense" when it follows its own rules, which it has established in the text.¹⁵ And it resonates differently in different readers¹⁶ and leads to different writing decisions.

*Da wurde Luc alles klar und er fühlte sich ungeheuer erleichtert. Alles, was seit vier Uhr morgens passiert war, der Anruf von Cottin, das Feuer, Florences Verletzungen, die grauen Säcke, Jean-Claude in der Kammer für Brandopfer, die ganze Geschichte mit den Morden, all das hatte sich mit der größten Wahrscheinlichkeit abgespielt und so real gewirkt, dass es nicht den geringsten Anlass gegeben hatte, daran zu zweifeln, doch jetzt, Gott sei Dank, wurde das Szenarium so absurd, dass es sich als das zu erkennen gab, was es war: ein Albtraum. ... Die Vorstellung schoss ihm in den Kopf – sie sollte ihn auch weiter umtreiben –, Jean-Claude sei in diesem Traum nur sein Double und es offenbarten sich darin die Ängste, die er eigentlich selbst hegte: seine Familie zu verlieren, aber auch sich selbst, und festzustellen, dass er hinter seiner sozialen Fassade niemand war.*¹⁷

| (Der Widersacher, German by Claudia Hamm)

Da endlich begriff Luc, dass er träumte, und er empfand eine tiefe Erleichterung. Was sich seit dem frühen Morgen abgespielt hatte – Cottins Anruf, das brennende Haus, Florences Kopfwunde, die grauen Säcke, Jean-Claudes schwere Verbrennungen, und obendrein noch die Geschichte mit den Morden –, all das war ihm dermaßen realistisch erschienen, dass er keinerlei Verdacht geschöpft hatte, aber jetzt lösten die Bilder sich Gott sei Dank auf, erwiesen sich als Bestandteile eines schrecklichen Albtraums. ... Plötzlich kam Luc ein Gedanke, der ihn nicht mehr losließ: In diesem Traum fungierte Jean-Claude als sein Stellvertreter, spiegelten sich seine eigenen Ängste, die Seinen oder sich selbst zu verlieren, plötzlich entdecken zu müssen, dass hinter der bürgerlichen Fassade nur Leere war.
(Amok, German by Irmengard Gabler)

How do the two German versions differ from one another? The major difference, the one that potentially determines all the others: Irmengard Gabler reads the French *passé composé* as the narrative tense and places the narrator's perspective at some distance from the character, whereas I stay closer to Luc's position. Therefore, the syntactical construction of the second sentence in my translation points towards the nightmare and (hopefully) creates a tension, which is then broken, relieved in fact, after the colon (the underlying intention being that language *makes* what it speaks of by coordinating information, rhythm, and sound in correspondence with internal experience). In Irmengard Gabler's reconstruction on the other hand, the nightmare is related through the narrator's account. In the French, the tense does not clearly demarcate the differentiation between internal speech and external description, both readings are grammatically possible, nonetheless, the original follows the dramatic structure of free indirect speech. Beyond that, there are differences in rhythm (punctuation, syllable count, emphasis) and register (e.g. Gabler's use of the archaic 'obendrein' [withal]), in the narrator's stance toward the narrated (the judgmental adjective "schrecklich" [terrible] added by I.G.), in lexis (the formal-sounding "fungiert" [functioned] in I.G.'s translation, "Stellvertreter" [surrogate] as opposed to the established film term "double")—defining elements of individual style but also indicative of a very specific understanding of narrative language. Because all this does not yet capture the pull of the text conjured by the prosody, and the individually sensed and accordingly generated *Need* ... The perhaps most prominent difference, in fact, is the choice of title.¹⁸ In the bible, "L'Adversaire" is one of the names used for the devil (as the father of lies), alongside "tempter" or "lord of the flies". There is a fairly clear-cut equivalent here, "der Widersacher" [the adversary], which I personally thought fitting: In a conversation, Carrère had told me about the sinister reverberation of the true story of the mythomaniac Jean-Claude Romand that he had felt inside him.¹⁹ Furthermore, as I began to translate the book, a remark by Carrère himself (on his translation of the Gospel of Mark), offered me guidance which Irmengard Gabler could not have received, because it can only be found in Carrère's novel *The Kingdom*, which appeared fourteen years later:

"I finally opted for a style that was correct but awkward and somewhat disjointed: with the sentences placed one after another without transition. The opposite of the 'flowing style so admired by the bourgeois' that Baudelaire could churn out hand over fist and that I, too, spontaneously tend

to adopt: always connect one sentence with the next, always look for a smooth transition. [This translation helped me find the right tone for The Adversary.]”²⁰

What this means for both translations of *L’Adversaire* is: *We also translated the author’s name differently*, because we assigned that particular signature to different texts with different poetics²¹ - and therefore different ways of relating to itself and to the readers. Both German versions, however, are grammatically possible translations. Differences between translations owe to pre-existing personal knowledge, readings, conceptions of literature and language, but also to different “impressions” of the original. Irmengard Gabler and I both *heard* something different. Maybe we were listening differently, too. Does this make us adversaries? Does it even make sense to hold translations against, rather than next to one another? Who or what are we defending when we do so? Are we not both, in our own ways, shining a light on what the original leaves open—and what is in fact left open for many more translations after ours? (Because we are all coauthors of *one* big story?)

I’ll admit: I am trying to maneuver out of a tough spot. Of course, not *every* translation can claim to *live up* to the author. To be *tuned in* to the original. Of course, there are real mistakes (this would also apply to translations that believe themselves to offer an improvement, every linguistic conceptualization has its blind spots), of course there is sub-complex, meaning: unsensing, reading, which then results in sub-complex, meaning: unsensing, literary writing; and of course, there are more or less successful attempts to generate literary force or to avoid it, because what is not heard cannot be translated. And yet, I intuitively resist assessments that adjudicate which translations get to live on—or even exist in the first place—and which do not, especially if those assessments presuppose a singular ideal of translation.

The expectations translations are faced with often respond to the *imagery* of the word “translate”, which stems from the linguistic-historical and metaphorical associations of the Latin *trans*, as in *translatare* or *transdurre*: Transfer, transport, traversal is what triggers this word, the translocation from one place to another, a transmission, or a transit across borders. (The idea of a border fosters potential accusations of trafficking, smuggling, and illegal crossings.) But it is possible that the word *transdurre* itself already results from too narrow a translation decision. One of the oldest written references to translation is the Sumerian cuneiform character *eme-bal* (*eme* - language, mode of speech, tongue; *bal* - transcend, transform).²²

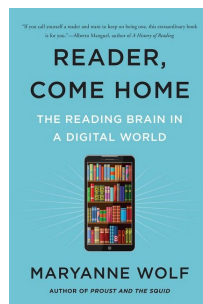


Eme-bal can be translated as “language transcender” (whatever may lie beyond language, perhaps it is the idea of a condensed inner (somatic) language?), but it is just as easy to interpret it as “language transformer”. And then there is another story to be told: that of the “meta” and of metamorphoses. A transformation is more than the mere undamaged transport of goods across an obstacle. It is a transmutation. The translation thus becomes a rewriting and writing forth. Transformed, the text at once faces backward and forward. It is in dialogue with the text that called out to it and the one it is listening to, and with those it is appealing to—just as individually as its originators.

Cover: ©Dirk Lebahn

Endnoten

- 1 Nastassja Martin: *Croire aux fauves*, Paris: Verticales, 2019. [quote trans. JB]
- 2 Emmanuel Carrère: *L'Adversaire*. Paris: Folio, 2000.
- 3 Emmanuel Carrère: *Amok*. German translation by Irmengard Gabler, Frankfurt: Fischer, 2001.
- 4 Emmanuel Carrère: *Der Widersacher*. German translation by Claudia Hamm. With a conversation between Emmanuel Carrère and Claudia Hamm. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz, 2018.
- 5 I am borrowing this term from the acting coach Susan Batson. "Unfulfilled *Need* is the universal truth at the heart of all characters ... The *Need* dictates a character's Public Persona, not the other way around ... when that unfulfilled *Need* can no longer be denied and jams up against the Public Persona, the third dimension of character is revealed—Tragic Flaw." Here, Susan Batson is pursuing a concept of truth that speaks to an *artistic truthfulness*. Susan Batson: *Truth. Personas, Needs, and Flaws in the Art of Building Actors and Creating Characters*. New York: Rugged Land, 2007.
- 6 In *The Reading Mind*, for example, Daniel T. Willingham describes the process of learning to read phonetic languages, such as the European ones, as "*sounding out*", a decoding of sound from letters and combinations of letters. Daniel T. Willingham: *The Reading Mind*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2017
- 7 https://www.academia.edu/33422656/Characteristics_of_Inner_Reading_Voices
- 8 See <https://writersinnvoices.com/>, part of the *Hearing the Voice* project, a collaboration between the Edinburgh Book Festival and Durham University, and Charles Fernyhough: *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.
- 9 According to Fernyhough's research, for the vast majority thinking is internalized speaking. Again, however, there is a segment of the population who think in images rather than language. See: <https://www.technologynetworks.com/neuroscience/articles/inner-speech-internal-monologues-and-hearing-voices-exploring-the-conversations-between-our-ears-335264>.
- 10 Although there does appear to be a difference between direct and indirect speech. See Fernyhough: "The findings provide a neural basis for the observation that direct speech is experienced more vividly than reported speech, because it activates areas of the brain that represent the qualities of voices." (p. 82) — Experienced speech in the third person also triggers more voice processing. "But there's no doubt that mixing characters' inner speech with a regular authorial voice is one of the ways in which novelists make their prose come alive." (p. 85)
- 11 Maryanne Wolf: *Reader, Come Home: The Reading Brain in a Digital World*. New York: Harper, 2018



- 12 See for example Friedrich Kittler/Thomas Macho/Sigrid Weigel (eds.): *Zwischen Rauschen und Offenbarung. Zur Kultur- und Mediengeschichte der Stimme*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002.
- 13 Language is always something that is shared and, at the same time, handled individually. A German translation operates within the *langue* German. However, it is supposed to live up to an individual French *parole*. It can only do this by creating a German *parole*, which is then no longer that of the original author.
- 14 I am using quotation marks here because there is no content independent of form. (In this sense, every dictionary is an illusion.)
- 15 If I were, for example, to choose a word for my German version that is too long or that creates an inappropriate emphasis in a hurried text, I would be violating these very rules. If I adopt the wrong register, the complex image of a character or a narrator becomes blurred. If the reading flow is slowed down by excessively nested subordinate clauses, it embodies a different mindset and poetics. If there are superfluous words or syllables, if there are subordinate clauses that could be resolved in a more grammatically efficient manner, if there is convolution, then the *Need* changes. Every decision we make cowrites the text's inner world. After all, a voice represents a *specific* way of thinking and feeling.
- 16 Compare this with the *Labor Sonor* concert project, presented in Berlin in August 2021, in which the same piece of music was performed in different rooms and, accordingly, sounded differently.

- 17 “Then Luc understood and felt hugely relieved. Everything that had happened since four that morning—Cottin’s phone call, the fire, Florence’s wound, the gray bags, Jean-Claude lying severely burned in the hyperbaric chamber, and now this business about crimes—all of it had happened with perfect verisimilitude, an impression of reality that left no room for suspicion, but now, thank God, the scenario was going awry, revealing itself as what it was: a bad dream. ... The idea occurred to Luc (it would haunt him later on) that in this dream, Jean-Claude served as a double, bringing out into the open Luc’s own fears—of losing his loved ones but also of losing himself, of discovering that behind his social facade he was nothing.” From: Emmanuel Carrère. *The Adversary*. Translated from the French by Linda Coverdale. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000.
- 18 Even though that choice is generally subject to the publisher’s decision and therefore of little use to a comparison of translations. I was unable to speak with Irmengard Gabler about the genesis of the title. In the course of my retranslation I attempted to locate and contact her, unfortunately without success.
- 19 See my conversation with Emmanuel Carrère in the appendix of *Der Widersacher*: “*In all the years I worked on this book I did not just face a technical issue, I was also ashamed of my fascination with this story, especially in front of my children. As if it would reveal something terrible about me. As if in some way I myself was Jean-Claude Romand. When the book was published and became a success I wasn’t just happy, more than that I was relieved. It showed me that I was not the only one who was interested in this story, that there were good reasons to be, that others found themselves within it, too, that it was possibly even of interest to everybody.*”
- 20 Emmanuel Carrère: *The Kingdom*. Translated from the French by John Lambert. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2017. [text in brackets trans. JB, not included in John Lambert’s translation]
- 21 This is one of the reasons why I advocate for the systematic naming of translators on book covers. There is only one original, which therefore has an accordingly singular signature. Translations on the other hand are collaborative works, they can originate from a variety of collectives, which create a respectively different text and as such should be identified to the readership.
- 22 I discovered this in David Bellos’ enlightening *Is That a Fish in Your Ear? Translation and the Meaning of Everything*. New York: Faber and Faber, London: Penguin Books, 2011



©Michael Donath

Claudia Hamm found her way to literary translation through theatre direction, performance, writing texts for the stage and essays, as well as years-long stays in Mexico, Chile, France, Italy and the German-speaking world. She has received several grants for her translations, which include the work of Emmanuel Carrère, Édouard Levé, Joseph Andras and Nathalie Quintane. In 2016 she was nominated for the Translators' Prize at the Leipziger Buchmesse and won the Translators' Prize of

the Association of Arts and Culture of the German Economy. Here and there she leads literary translation workshops (in the Literary Institute in Hildesheim or in the George-Arthur-Goldschmidt Programme), and she is the co-founder of the *translationale berlin* festival.

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/3450/adversaries>

Veröffentlichungsdatum: 25.11.2021

Stand: 19.04.2024

Alle Rechte vorbehalten.