My Worst Translation

By *Lídia Nádori*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

Around ten years ago, I received the pleasant request to translate a German author's autobiographical novel into Hungarian. The fact that the author was my age seemed irrelevant at first, but already during the first reading of the book, I felt what I sometimes feel towards authors whose works I translate: a familiarity, even a spiritual kinship – as if we were twins. I was particularly impressed by the matter-of-fact, detached, and ironic narrative tone, which was soothing in view of the expanse of the emotions and tragedy of the events depicted, and which I also like to echo in my own writing. In short, I heard my own voice in the book. It gave my work some wings.

The editor and chief editor were pleased with the manuscript. They commissioned an external editor (himself an author of the first rank, by the way) to compare the translation with the original, because even in Hungarian publishing houses there are hardly any editors who know German. Remarks and corrections were made here and there, as is customary. The suggestions from the three of them were completely in line with the original text and my intention. So the text was in the best of hands.

Until the big boss, the director of the publishing house, entered the scene. He read through the translation manuscript (not the original) and claimed that the language of the novel was too cool, dry, emotionless, almost unpalatable, unsuitable for a Hungarian readership. He did not even ask me to edit my own translation. Instead, he commissioned a colleague to rewrite the text according to his instructions. Which she did without a qualm. The result was the same French apple tart, only with loads of whipped cream on top. And also delicious. I was asked to review the whipped cream version, but lacked both the desire and the time. I just couldn't bring myself to review the ruins of my work. For copyright reasons, of course, it was impossible to list my colleague's name as the translator, although I suggested this in an embarrassing telephone conversation with the editor-in-chief. I've rarely been seen screaming as I did then: I stood at the reception desk of the Goethe-Institut in Budapest and screamed into the phone because I was not allowed to lend my twin sister my voice. Yes, it was probably also a narcissistic wound, I admit. My translation had been discarded, dismissed as a bad translation – in the eyes of one person alone, to be sure, but even that is sometimes too much.

What did I do then? In the end, I did in fact allow the doctored version. The publisher's judgment deeply unsettled me in my role as a literary translator. What if he's right, I thought. What if I had overtaxed the Hungarian translation with my twin-sister concept and distanced irony, and ignored the subtle differences between the two cultures? In that case, did the result fall short, was it a bad – almost unpalatable, in the words of the publisher – translation? Did I literally get too close to the text or the author and neglect other necessary translation aspects in the process? Or was I simply a victim of the arbitrariness of the publisher, and was my only mistake to have accepted his demands instead of rebelling and insisting on my rights as the creator? In retrospect, I naturally know that the publisher put his (supposed) commercial interests above my professional translation ethics and abused his power. But the question of 'bad

translation' – with and without quotation marks – is one of the most interesting and delicate in our profession. The criteria are fuzzy, there is no shared measure with which freedom or arbitrariness in translation can be judged. We translators probably have the most to say about this, but we shy away from developing a culture of translation criticism. We all pursue an underpaid profession, so our sensitivities are all the greater. To what extent do we allow criticism at all, 'among ourselves' in a peer-to-peer setting, in our work with publishers, and in public? The *Berührungsängste* that come to light here would be worth a longer discussion....



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Lídia Nádori is a translator and author based in Budapest. She has translated authors such as Ingo Schulze, Terézia Mora, Judith Schalansky, Herta Müller, Martin Walser und Botho Strauß into Hungarian. She is chair of the Hungarian Literary Translators Association (MEGY).

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