A Corpse Washer Washes, Regardless of Who it is

By *Mahmoud Hosseini Zad*

Translated from the German by *Bradley Schmidt*

There is a saying in our country about people who mostly do routine jobs and complain about them from time to time: ‘a corpse washer washes, regardless of who it is!’

The 1980s. We were a team of three and a renowned Tehran publishing house had commissioned us to translate Brecht’s complete works into Persian. After more than two years of hard work and the publication of the first volumes, Brecht was blacklisted. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 had won – and that was the end of the project. The publishing house was also liquidated, for other reasons. To our delight, another respected publisher offered to collaborate with us, with one caveat, however: ‘We need long novels, especially by Thomas Mann!’

Years later, I decided to focus my translation work on contemporary German literature, and when the first translation was on the market in 2005, a journalist from Deutsche Welle asked me, ‘Why don’t you translate German classics?’ I am asked this question all the time.

The Islamic Ministry of Culture has a department called the ‘Book Authority’, which contains a censorship authority that also scrutinizes our translation activities. And as in every Iranian ministry, there is also a department for ‘information’ (read: intelligence). I have been summoned by this department twice. The first time I was treated with an ingratiating respect. The first question of the rather unpleasant conversation was, ‘You studied political science, why don't you translate humanities texts?’ I ignored the second summons from the Intelligence Bureau at the Ministry of Culture.

My son had passed the entrance exam for a master’s degree. The Iranian Ministry of Science, which organizes the exams, also has an ‘information department.’ My son was called in. ‘Your father is a translator of German-language literature. Who gives him the orders? From whom does he get the books he translates?’

In 2018, I applied for a residency grant in Germany, but the money was to come from Switzerland because it was for a Dürrenmatt project. Several years earlier, I had translated three of Dürrenmatt’s crime novels and wanted to continue this series. The reason for the rejection: ‘This year, only translators who translate recent Swiss literature will be supported!’

What is the saying? A corpse washer washes, regardless of whom.

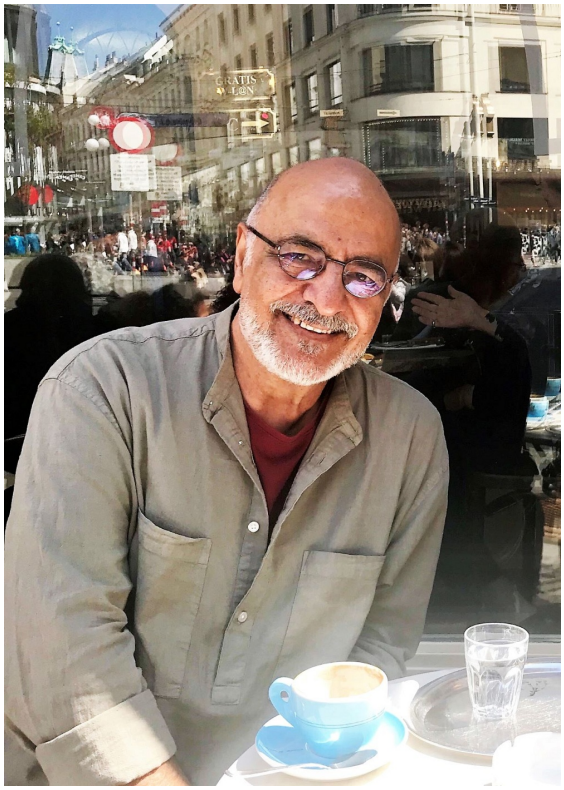
I have been a translator for many years, Iranian since birth, living in Iran, knowing the rules of the game and the so-called ‘red lines’. I have often enough tangled with publishers, with the administration and the censorship authority. Sensitivity reacts

reliably when I come across something in a text that refers to Islam, God, nationality, Marxism, tyranny, pacifism, women's bodies, spirits, sex, homosexuality, Jews, concentration camps, love, kissing, and the Western lifestyle. Sensitive Translating? It sounds harmless, but to me it is a dubious thing, because here in Iran, violations of the regime’s political and ideological sensitivities are rigorously sanctioned.

Many *Berührungsängste* – fear of touch, contact, engagement – go back to unpleasant experiences with the outside world. And then there are the inner demons with which you have to struggle. The only thing that helps is distance: from the mercantile interests of publishers; from the entertainment desires of readers; from the temptation to land on the bestseller list; from the vain motive to win prizes; from any kind of fashionable categorization. And liberation from the ‘creativity imperative’, as Andreas Reckwitz has labeled it: from the internal pressure and the expectation from outside to be constantly creative.

The pandemic has imposed masks on us and distance rules. Translating with distance can be a good exercise. Not with distance to colleagues, to the workshops, the cultural institutions where we meet, not with distance to all those we all miss terribly, but with distance to our *Berührungsängste*, external and internal.

In Tehran, in the time of Corona, Nov. 2020



© privat

Mahmoud Hosseini Zad, born in 1946, writes plays and prose. He is among the most important Iranian translators of German-language literature into Persian. In recent

years, he has translated almost exclusively contemporary literature (by authors including Judith Hermann, Ingo Schulze, Uwe Timm and many more). In 2013 he was awarded the Goethe Medal.

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/3846/a-corpse-washer-washes-regardless-of-who-it-is
Veröffentlichungsdatum: 18.12.2020
Stand: 29.03.2024
Alle Rechte vorbehalten.