Vertiginous Touch

By *Marina Skalova*

Translated from the French by *Imogen Taylor*

It starts with physical desire: throbbing fingers, tingling hands, arms, shoulders, legs… The urge to translate, if only a few pages—to listen to the text, make it sing, give it life in French… Without that, there is nothing. Without desire, there is no will to translate. Why this impatience, this sense of urgency? Where exactly, between my subjectivity, the other's text and its entry into my body, does it take shape? In which part of my body—heart, chest, brain, gut, hair…? What is the topography of my translatorly desire?

Yesterday, while translating, it occurred to me that in Russian you fall
'up to your ears in love' and in German,
even, up to 'both ears',
while in French it's 'to the tips of your nails'.

More important still, why this physical thirst for contact, this longing to lap the text with my (mother) tongue, squeeze it in my hands, run my fingers over it, knead it like flesh? To get inside it, rummage around in it, rearrange the words, tamper with its breathing—its punctuation… If the text is a body, is translation like penetrating someone else's body to move organs around? How can I ensure that the operation is performed with enough sensitivity—that it is an act of love that damages nothing, leaves everything intact?

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Galina Rymbu, the poet I am currently translating, documents the social realities of her country, Russia, and writes about the status of the women who live there. She is the same age as me and, like me, she studied philosophy, is active in the feminist movement and publishes in poetry magazines. Unlike me, however, Rymbu grew up in a working-class suburb of Omsk, in Siberia; she and her family were hard hit by the deprivation of the nineties after the fall of the Soviet regime. In her poetry, she has found a language to write about this reality—a reality that I don't and, indeed, *can't* know, because my parents fled the country to make sure that I wouldn't. Rymbu is a woman of my generation, who shares my interest in gender issues and writes in the language of my childhood about life in a country that I know without knowing it (or don't know, though at the same time I do). The familiar and the strange. That which is close to me and almost unreachably far.

As a translator and writer, I have the impression that this *proximity coloured by distance* or *close strangeness* has an impact on the texts I choose to translate. I see Galina Rymbu's poetry as a communicating vessel interacting with my work. She explores the same questions that I explore, but she speaks from another place. I have noticed that this is often the case with the authors I translate. That, for me, is another aspect of the desire to translate—the appeal of the other's text, the need to be bowled over by it. Sometimes this relationship between me and the other even stimulates and

spurs my own writing. As I write, I try to answer the questions I ask myself by entering into dialogue with others.

I observe this, for example, in my translation of Senthuran Varatharajah's *Vor der Zunahme der Zeichen* ('Before the Signs Mount Up'), a novel in letters which is also a meditation on exile. Born in Tamil, Varatharajah immigrated to Germany with his parents when he was a child. In his book, he draws on a store of memories and autobiographical experiences that resonate with my own. When I began to translate it, I was finishing work on a book entitled *Silences d'exils* ('Silences of Exile') which uses different literary forms to map out questions similar to those asked by Varatharajah—about the loss of one's mother tongue, the link between exile and muteness, the silence of exiles whose language is 'sewn up' inside them and who are unable to talk about their experiences between worlds because they are linguistically overwhelmed.

There were times when I wondered if Varatharajah's book wasn't too close. Too close to me, to my writing. And yet it was written by a man whose language and culture were far removed from my own. Was the closeness I felt the result of a kind of projection? Projecting myself onto another author can help me to translate. But I have to work out the right place for myself, make sure I keep my distance.[1]

If I want to convey somebody else's voice, I must be as clear as possible about myself, my unconscious reflexes, my linguistic choices. Having recognised that I am attracted to writing that is at once close to and removed from my own, I must be sufficiently transparent about the choices I make as a translator to ensure that my subjectivity does not interfere with the texts I translate. I ask myself questions such as: how can I remain balanced? How can I avoid encroaching, appropriating, *colonising*—and yet at the same time affirm that the act of translation is an act of writing and re-creation that appeals to the translating subjectivity?

That is what makes all the difficulty, but also the beauty, of translation—respecting the other as other, possessing a deep enough understanding of his or her poetic language to be able to slip into it like a second skin, weaving it even as you pull it on. But you can't borrow other people's clothes without leaving something of yourself behind—skin cells, hair, sweat stains...

That, too, is part of translation: body rubbed against body, sweat mingling with sweat.
Inside another author's language, you see all, reveal all.
You're familiar with the way they leave their underwear lying around, with the smell of their clothes, tossed carelessly onto a chair.
You hear them waffle and repeat themselves.
You clean up their rooms for them.

Who is speaking when I translate? Inhabited by the other, I have sometimes felt haunted, if not *colonised* by the authors I translate—invaded by their language, to the depths of my being, even to the point where I could no longer write, so complete was the hold of their language over me.

This brings me to a crucial question: who has the power in the relationship between author and translator? I would be inclined to say that it is the translator, the one who has control of the target language. Let's not be naïve: what some call *love*, others call *rape*. As soon as there is desire, there is a very real risk of domination. That maybe

explains the high feelings in the current debate about Amanda Gorman. There is a fine line between *desire* and *rape*, and language is sometimes more intimate than the body. What's the good of asking the author's consent when he or she is like a child in the face of the unknown language, incapable of knowing what he or she is consenting to? When I translate, I am on my own, aesthetic intuition and moral conscience my only compasses.

As a translated author I have at times felt hurt, wounded, mistreated by the suggestions made by my translators. Translation gets under our skin. And yet, I defend the right of translators to *appropriate* the texts they translate, to make them theirs. This means working on yourself, accepting the other's share in a text that bears your name. Another thing that isn't always easy.

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Not long ago, I found myself confronted with a borderline case. A publisher I work with sent me a Russian manuscript and asked me to read it as quickly as possible. I didn't know then that I was one of the first to be entrusted with a secret. A woman, the ex-partner of a public figure, had written about her break-up, but above all about the domestic hell her partner had put her through: rape, beatings, extreme psychological control. How do you keep your distance from an account of that kind—and what is the right distance in the face of such naked violence? My instinct was to defend the text. I wanted it to be published; it seemed to me that, in this raw tale of psychological violence, there was something that deserved to be made known to the public.

The author's manuscript was a first draft that needed working on. It contained some very strong chapters and others that were less successful. I was given the job of not only translating the book, but also overseeing the work in progress, a task subsumed under the rather vague term of 'rewriting'. The overall structure was in need of revision; passages were cut or added at my request or that of the editor. As the book's translator, I played the delicate role of go-between. At times I had to ask the author to dig deeper, to rework her account of a traumatic experience to make it more intelligible to readers. I was acutely aware of the violence of my requests.

In order to find the right words, I had to get as close as I could to the author's experiences. At times, this meant being extremely intrusive and asking questions that I would never have dreamed I would one day ask a traumatised person. Here is an example taken from our correspondence, in which I interrogate her about a rape scene:

—I can't visualise the scene here. His knees are pressed against your hands or your arms?
—My arms.
—And his penis is in your mouth? It's ambiguous.
—Yes. I can't write about sex.
—I think it needs spelling out. I'm going to write, 'his penis in my mouth'. OK?
—OK.

The boundary between writing and translation is blurred at the best of times, but the existence of a definitive source text guarantees a degree of stability. When the original text itself is still only sketchy, the boundary is far harder to determine. Working with the author on her harrowing manuscript while at the same time giving her a French voice was a truly vertiginous experience.

The author sent me additions on Facebook—fragments of text to insert into the manuscript, sometimes only a sentence or two. I was the only one in possession of the complete puzzle which came into focus before me as the fragments trickled in. All through this work, as I helped the author to pull her book into shape, I was afraid of abusing my power; this was a book by the victim of a controlling relationship, and I was terrified of being overly controlling and interventionist myself.

Shortly before publication, I decided to use a pseudonym. The people who feature in the book are made of flesh and blood, not paper, and it was a way of restoring *distance*, *setting a limit*, protecting myself. But it wasn't an easy decision. To what extent should my commitment as a translator be permitted to *take over* my private life? Another question I can't answer.

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Translate but also touch move grope stroke crush shift knead dig meddle break mend carve patch sew embroider polish appropriate return give take lose find invent imagine deterritorialise situate repatriate utopify magnify sublimate transform. All these can be part of the process of translation.

Like every act of love, translation can be double-edged. Like every surgical operation, it involves both an element of care and an element of butchery.

In translation, as in life, the notion of *responsibility* is perhaps the only thing distinguishing surgeon from butcher—and lover from predator.

Endnoten

1 Écrire l'exil (Writing exile): Reading with Marina Skalova and Senthuran Varatharajah, 21 May 2021.



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Marina Skalova is a writer and a translator from German and Russian into French. She translates poetic prose (Dorothee Elmiger, Senthuran Varatharajah), drama (including Thomas Köck, Katja Brunner, Ernst Barlach) and poetry (Galina Rymbu, Maria Stepanova, Oksana Vassayinka, Martin Bieri, Dragica Rajcic, Rolf Hermann and others). Her own writing blends genres and languages. Recent publications include the bilingual collection *Souffle court* (Cheyne 2016), *Exploration du flux* (Seuil 2018), the play *La chute des comètes et des cosmonautes* (L'Arche 2019) and *Silences d'exils* (en bas 2020), a collaboration with photographer Nadège Abadie.

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Veröffentlichungsdatum: 22.04.2021
Stand: 19.03.2024
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