

The Original Watches You

By Simone Homem de Mello

Translated from the German by Sinéad Crowe

For a long time, a peculiar type of fear deterred me from translation: unlike authors, we translators always have the original text in front of us, watching us, or at least that's how it feels to me. There's something daunting about having to follow an existing piece of writing. I didn't overcome this fear until the final years of my studies, when I translated from English into Portuguese lectures on Shakespeare (including Shakespeare quotes I had to provide new translations for) by the Canadian critic Northrop Frye as well as a book about historiography in antiquity (i.e. during the eras of the Hittites, the Sumerians, etc.). Years later, an encounter with Peter Handke's *Der Bildverlust* (2002, later published in English under the title *Crossing the Sierra de Gredos*) turned out to be a formative experience that would lead me back to translation. Still living in Germany at the time, I felt a strong need to share Handke's novel with people back home in Brazil. It was as simple as that: look at this, read it! I was no longer daunted by the original watching me, but why? Had my *Berührungsangst* – my fear of 'touching' a work – turned into an almost obsessive need for closeness, for intimacy? Since then, I have translated Arno Holz, Paul Celan, Thomas Kling, Augusto de Campos – poets whose works are dear to me. This selective approach is very different from that of professional translators who are prepared to take on all, or at least a broad range of, authors. I admire their openness.

I now run a centre for translation studies in a literature museum in São Paulo, from where I have been observing various discourses emerge within literary translation. The international debate about what texts a translator should and should not take on – a debate influenced by postcolonial and gender studies – has been going on in Brazil too. Many of my younger colleagues in particular now consider translators (or editors, or editors-in-chief, or publishers) responsible for correcting or even counteracting any ideologically suspect statements, language or attitudes that appear in the original text. I myself have never had to deal with a conflict of this nature, possibly because I've always chosen the texts I translate. But I do wonder whether eliminating unwanted attitudes or worldviews might lead to the erasure of history, and whether this is a satisfactory solution. If I had to translate a work I had reservations about, I'd prefer to express these reservations in the foreword or postscript rather than in the text itself.

It is now nearly twenty years since my first literary translation. Over the course of the pandemic, I have been translating Handke's *Mein Jahr in der Niemandsbucht* (*My Year in the No-Man's-Bay*, 1994). The narrator of this novel spends a year mostly alone at home while his friends and relatives travel across various continents. At first it seemed like a happy coincidence; after all, I have been bunkered down with my cat in my São Paulo apartment since mid-March 2020, my friends scattered all over the world. But social distancing has inspired such intense online sociability that my year in Handke's 'No-Man's-Bay' was anything but lonely. It would take a permanent power cut to fling me back into the narrator's situation ...

Since Handke won the Nobel Prize in 2019, everyone has been asking whether I have any reservations or indeed *Berührungsängste* about translating his work. It's

interesting how a media storm can drastically change people's perception – very often people who've never read Handke and never will, a theme Handke himself has repeatedly addressed in his books. His work centres largely on criticism of language, and to convey in translation the multifaceted, rhythmic nuances of his reflections, you have to allow yourself to be touched by it, to work with the linguistic material as if you were a sculptor. And so *Berührungssängste* – fears of touching this material – won't get you very far



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