

On Fear and Courage in Translation

By *Tanja Handels*

Translated from the German by *Charlotte Wührer*

I did not consider, even passingly,
that I had a choice [...]. My enchantment
would take me where it would go.

William Finnegan, *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*

I'm a rather anxious person by nature. Hesitant, cautious, careful, easy to unnerve. Always a hair's breadth away from calling everything into question, and more likely to mull things over too much than to give them too little consideration. I've always been like that. But since I began translating, I harbour a second personality, one with very different traits. My translator-self gets straight down to it, makes bold choices. She tackles each new text with great respect and the utmost consideration, but also with considerable fearlessness. Not to mention a confidence that often borders on surreal, one that eludes me completely in my daily life. This self frequently wavers, of course, and by no means considers herself infallible – but she takes risks, and she's daring. My translator-self is clear-headed and deliberate, reflects on what she does and is able to justify every decision she makes. She also has a near-infallible instinct when it comes to selecting books to translate, something like an *Ur-trust* in herself and the text. I'd like to get to the bottom of this confidence and trust, which never cease to amaze me. I want to examine my lack of what in German we could call *Berührungsangst* – a fear of "touching" the text, of coming into contact with it. To investigate my more general fearlessness when I'm translating. Where does my *Berührungs-Mut*, my courage to get close to the text, come from? What drives it?

Translation, it seems to me, is essentially contact in its purest form. In order to write a new text in my language, using the linguistic tools available to me, and in order to make that text "shine", as Frank Heibert put it, I have to let it touch me.¹ More specifically, I must be touched by the essence of the text, and by what it contains: tone, style, stylistic devices, imagery, story, characters, voices. This is key if I'm to succeed in my work. To give the text a new linguistic form, I must enter into a quasi-libidinous relationship with it. I must want and be able to abandon myself to it, to be open to it. I must let it permeate and fulfil me. It's conceivable that the fearlessness, trust and courage my translator-self draws on in her work can partially be explained by this relationship. Fear would put paid to a commitment to the text. Or is it the other way round? Does my translator-self's instinct sense which texts she can trust fully and without bringing herself in danger, and is it on this intuition that her security is predicated? A fear of intensively engaging with a text signals to me that I should stay away from it, that I shouldn't translate it. How can I give it a convincing tone or voice in

German if I'm afraid of it? If I don't trust the text, or myself with it? There are quite a lot of these texts, and my translator-self recognises them just as instinctively and reliably as she does the by no means as numerous texts to which it can abandon itself entirely.

But what is the basis for this intuition? What's its criteria? It's not easy to say, because the translator instinct eludes reflection and is quick to put up metaphorical smokescreens. A text has to trigger something in me. It has to generate a spark, to light a fire. It goes without saying that it has to capture me stylistically, formally and literarily. If I take a closer look at the texts that have had this effect on me in the past, as well as the ones that currently have this effect, they're often books I should be afraid to touch, according to my cautious, anxious everyday-self. In many regards, they are remote from and foreign to me. What possessed me back then – a woman in her mid-forties who'd never stood on a surfboard in her life and who could count her big trips on the fingers of one hand – to translate the autobiography of an over sixty-year-old man, a passionate surfer and well-travelled American journalist?² What qualified me as a white translator to tackle the work of a Black British activist (and one of the most brilliant authors I'd ever had the pleasure to read)?³ The two books couldn't have been more different from one another, and both differed in their own very specific ways from me as a person. And yet my translator-self's instinct was unwaveringly confident in both cases, free of fear, ready and able. I had the courage I'd need to face the challenge from the outset.

Like I said, translation isn't possible without courage. Especially when there is distance between myself and the text. Translating, in this case, extends both my translator-self and my frequently disheartened everyday-self. I'm changed by the texts I translate when I allow myself to be touched by them. I carry them within me – their forms, their styles, their tones. And, above all, their characters with their range of voices, fates and experiences that I've perhaps never had, but become privy to through my intensive work on and with the text. These are characters that make their mark, that leave a lasting impression on me. My awareness of a world beyond my own far transcends its boundaries. This is an enriching and exhilarating experience, but also a double-edged one. It goes without saying that with some texts, I carry voices within me afterwards that I rather wouldn't, voices that express things requiring translation that I'd never say or even think in daily life.

So answering the question, "Who is speaking?" also requires courage. In this case, it often has to extend beyond the actual textual work. The decisions I frequently have to make when translating (translation is also an act of decision-making) are not always – how could they be? – the decisions others would have made. Both my translator-self and my everyday-self have to live with that; we have to be ready to explain ourselves, to debate and to refute unwarranted criticism. We must be prepared to recognise and accept warranted criticism, and to bear it in mind when moving forward, all the while not losing our *Berührungs-Mut*. This is often an arduous process, but also an important and ultimately fruitful one. Perhaps this is why instinct repeatedly strikes in response to those texts which, in all their Otherness in relation to myself, hold the promise of comprehensive self-development. This instinct seems to react to what Olga Radetzkaja calls the "eros of the non-identical", the "transformative power" of translation work that enables each of us to be all of us⁴

Occasionally there is something more, however: a moment of recognition in the Otherness. A voice picked out from the clamour of voices. An undertone, a nuance in

which the translator-self believes she recognises herself. And so it was when it came to my most-translated author of the last decade: Zadie Smith. To this day, I can only marvel at the fact that, although I had some translation experience (albeit in very different genres) I essentially had no *Berührungsangst* back then when it came to Zadie Smith. I had stage fright and a due respect for the challenge ahead. I was afraid of making mistakes (and as these can't be avoided, I promptly made them). Of not doing the esteemed text and author justice. But again, I also had sure-footedness and insight: *You, your voice, your tone, your text – I know you. You're close to me despite your remoteness, already a part of my translator-self, a part of my inner dictionary. The only thing I have to do is activate you.* (This innocuous "only" ultimately encompasses the entire undertaking, the whole world of literary translation.) Later, through my work, further reading and personal contact with the author, and despite fundamental differences, several clear similarities in our lives and biographies emerged. These complemented my insight, giving it more substance and weight, but they were never decisive factors. Rather, the decisive factor was a deep-seated recognition and understanding that existed solely on the textual level, that I still feel in response to every new book Zadie Smith writes.

Perhaps this is the commonality between all those books to which my translator instinct reacts. The thing that makes me feel secure enough to muster my *Berührungsmut*, my courage. From quasi-libidinous to quasi-mystical: texts carry their translation within them, and so the only thing my translator-self must do is to unearth and retrieve them. (Another case of this innocuous "only" that contains whole worlds.) This idea comes close to Walter Benjamin's theory: "To some degree, all great texts contain their virtual translation between the lines."⁵

Every translator capable of unearthing this "virtual translation" (how odd it is in today's digital age to come across this term in a text from 1923!), and is told as much by their personal translator instinct. Something I strongly believe every literary translator possesses, whether they translate professionally or as a hobby. It gives us the security and the courage to actually do our work, to tackle our chosen texts. To let ourselves be touched by our translation projects.

Naturally, debates like the current one, which question whether everyone is really entitled to translate everything, cause the translator's sure-footedness and trust to waver. Instinct alone is no longer the translator's primary text-selection criterium. Nor does it serve to justify, after the work is complete, the choice of one word over another. It's important to be more reflective when it comes to our work, to sensitise ourselves even more. To supplement our *Berührungsmut* with some much called-for *Berührungängste*.

That said, we should never lose our courage. I believe it's the essential ingredient of a truly successful translation. It makes the characters and voices of a novel come alive, and lends that aforementioned spark to the German rendering of a text. Every now and then, I come across a translation that can't be lifted from the page. One that radiates too little life, is altogether not radiant enough. When this happens, I think that the translator must have lacked the courage to commit to the text. Perhaps we can extrapolate from the small scale – a single translation – to a larger one: the entirety of language. Without courage, a joy of discovery and a desire to explore and try out new paths – initially risking getting lost and running up against obstacles and resistance – a language can't be changed in a permanent, sustainable way, and existing shortcomings can't really be eliminated. Despite how justifiable and even productive

fears of encountering a text may be, I'd like, with the voice of the fearfully inclined, to make the following plea: we must hold onto our *Berührungs-Mut*! It is, and remains, indispensable for translation, which is essentially contact in its purest form.

Endnoten

- 1 In Frank Heibert's essay 'Die literarische Stimme und der Satzbau' [The literary voice and sentence structure], he writes: "Translation is writing like the author, but with the tools of one's own language. Does this re-writing of the literary text and its tone in the German manage to work, to shine?" Link to Tell Review
- 2 William Finnegan, *Barbarian Days: A Surfing Life*. London, Penguin Books, 2016
- 3 Bernardine Evaristo, *Girl, Woman, Other*. London, Penguin Books, 2020.
- 4 See Olga Radetzkajas essay on *Berührungängste* "Being Everyone"
- 5 Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator' in: Venuti, Lawrence., Ed., *Translation Studies Reader*. London, Routledge, 2021. 15-24.



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Tanja Handels lives and works in Munich, where she mainly translates contemporary literature from the UK, the USA and other English-speaking cultures. This includes novels by Zadie Smith, Bernadine Evaristo, Kopano Matlwa, William Finnegan, Charlotte McConaghy and Nicole Flattery. She also teaches budding literary translators at various universities, and is chairperson of the Munich Translator's Forum. In 2019, she was awarded the Heinrich Maria Ledig-Rowohlt Prize.

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Veröffentlichungsdatum: 15.06.2021

Stand: 19.04.2024

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