

A new song, a better song - Translating Poetry

By *Judith Zander*

Translated from the German by *Charlotte Wührer*

The multiple meanings of the German verb *übersetzen*, to translate, are relatively common knowledge, have been picked dry and eviscerated. I'd like to posit, however, that there is one meaning that hasn't yet been given the consideration it deserves, and perhaps isn't so commonly used. That said, my awareness of this particular meaning can be traced back further than the rest, all the way to my childhood. In German, *übersetzen* can also refer to a technique known in English as "crossover". This kind of *übersetzen* is practiced in ice-skating, at least by skaters striving for accolades and acclaim in a winter sport played only once in a blue moon. I never got that far, instead admiring these dauntless super-athletes from the sidelines as they navigated curves by crossing their skates over one another, agile and elegant. Later, I'd turn to another kind of translation, and even that I did only sporadically. To my mind, however, these two kinds of *übersetzen* involve a similar process. In order to maintain the momentum of a poem when rendering it in another language, its movements and context must often be crossed over one another. At any rate, the goal is always to somehow make it out of the curve in the face of a powerfully felt centrifugal force, all the while avoiding too great a tilt.

Without wanting to overstretch the analogy, the ice on which the power relations of translation play out has become manifestly slipperier, not to mention thinner. Today, the smallest lapse in concentration could lead to a slip and a painful fall. One could even crash through the ice and sink, a freezing layer of discourse closing over the unlucky people to brave the ice. That's if one isn't disqualified before even starting, thanks to unsuitable equipment or other, purely appearance-based criteria. This might sound outlandish to readers of the past, and hopefully also to readers of the future, but this is the world we live in today. I'm not particularly set on embroiling myself in the tedious debate surrounding Amanda Gorman's poem and the question of who is and isn't entitled to translate. It's only because the question concerns me directly, as a translator of Maya Angelou's poetry, that I'll address the question, getting it out of the way here at the beginning.

When I was asked to translate even just a small portion of the great American writer Maya Angelou's work, I admit I felt *Berührungsangst*, a fear of "touching", of getting too close to, her poems. Why me, was the first thing I asked myself, a question that arose from the distance I felt between myself and Angelou. This had less to do with our different skin colours than with the gap between our respective ages and levels of fame. It's no secret that Angelou is a big name in the USA, not to mention an icon of the civil rights movement. (She, like Gorman, read at the inauguration of a president, which to me represented another unique, potentially alienating difference). I simply wasn't sure if I could (or wanted to) do justice to an undertaking that, in cases like this one, is entirely extra-literary. In translation, it's inconvenient if the source text and its author are on too high a pedestal. The translator must forever crane their neck

upwards, before looking down again to the text at hand. Nonetheless, the question of skin colour preoccupied me; a preoccupation, I promptly realised, that didn't come from within me, but seemed rather to somehow have climatically drifted in my direction. In some nebulous way, I'd absorbed an awareness of the sensitivities and concomitant hostilities that translation can evoke. I was struck by the appalled realisation that we've begun to live in fear, with inbuilt censors.

In fact, when I told a friend of my plan, he asked if a Black German translator might not be a better fit. This attitude, a year before the Gorman debate, struck me as well-intentioned but ultimately completely misguided. My outrage over his suggestion came from a place of fear: that of doing something wrong. And it was precisely this fear that felt so wrong. As did the eagerness that accompanied this fear, the near essence of which can be read in the German Gorman translation, and which began with the commissioning of not one but three translators... none of them with any affinity to poetry. The translation of Gorman's poem is driven solely by a keen effort not to overstep the mark of wokeness. What resulted wasn't so much a poem as something expressed, like the harp girl's song in Heine's *Germany. A Winter's Tale*, with *true feeling / And a false voice*. Moreover, these efforts seem less to me about avoiding "harm" – how condescending it is to reduce minority and disadvantaged individuals to incalculably vulnerable homogenous groups to be protected from everything – and more about avoiding harming oneself. About not becoming the target of vilification as a result of not using the currently deemed "correct" words, or of having crossed the party line. Whereby intention or lack of intention in word choice play no role. This fear is, staggeringly, more than justified in the face of both the arrogance and the intolerance for ambivalence that is meted out by totalitarian paragons of virtue. The fear of being attacked has taken the form of *Berührungsangst* – a fear of proximity, a pre-emptive submission.

But this attitude doesn't bring us closer to world peace, nor does it lead to good translations. The two, I'd argue, are directly linked: the whole idea of translation as such – and also as a form of what used to be called "intercultural understanding" – is reduced to absurdity if the prerequisite for it is that author and translator be as similar as possible. (This begs the question of what similarity actually means.) This prerequisite means there is either no need for a translation, or not the possibility. Who would read it? A hoard of similar people, if we go by the assumption that those who are different wouldn't understand? And what would be the point of readers being confronted with experiences they're already familiar with? This directly brings to the fore another zeitgeist phenomenon, namely the "bubble". Enough of suffering exposure, against our will, to things that don't directly affect our *selves*, our lives, our opinions! Better leave translation be entirely. Isn't the fact of a second language too Other to trust someone with the task, to expect the original to be understood?

Since I subscribe, however, to an old-fashioned and contrary view that verges on universalism, and being more of the *sense & sensibility* than the *sensitivity* camp, I undertook the translation of 33 of Maya Angelou's poems. It's highly unlikely, of course, that I understood and conveyed everything exactly as she intended it, but this is always the case with translation: so many readers, so many poems. And yet I didn't run into underlying comprehension problems stemming from our differing origins, life paths or skin colours. What's more, I don't believe there's a human experience in existence that either can't be shared at all, or can only be shared with representatives of one's own ethnic, social or otherwise "unique" group. This would amount to denying several facets of human experience, and the thing common to us all: a capacity for

imagination and empathy that extends well beyond our own of lives.

I'd like at this point to quote Maya Angelou herself. Specifically from the poem *Human Family*, which I didn't translate, because it struck me as a little heavy on the platitudes. We've seen, however, that even self-evident things must constantly be repeated: *I note the obvious differences/ between each sort and type,/ but we are more alike, my friends,/ than we are unlike*. Angelou repeats the last two lines twice more, thereby reassuring herself and voicing an assurance against another common aspect of humanity: stupidity.

I don't want to claim that biographical or other forms of similarity don't benefit the translation, but the crux of affinity is identification. (*Identity*, this popular term so often brandished in the debate at hand, is no more than the word implies, i.e. a conformance with oneself. It follows that a group can never have a single identity, because no one person ever becomes fully absorbed into a group.) Hence the bias: it's often difficult to translate the self, or an approximation of oneself. This is due to an unconscious fear of a falsification of the self as a result of its transference into a foreign Other – even if, in this case, it's into one's own language.

The original strikes us as the sacred, ultimate poem; every transformation is sacrilegious. As a writer, I know all too well that certain emotionally charged things require distance before they can be put on the page in any artistically valuable way. The same is true of the relationship between the author being translated and the translator. You need, on the one hand, a snag: a fishing rod reeling you in towards the foreign text, something that moves you. On the other, you need the text to snag, for it to resist at first, to elude you).

This is most frequently the case with poetry, the most idiosyncratic literary form, and for this reason, my favourite form to translate. A useful paradox emerges: it's precisely this greater distance that the translator needs in order to make a new poem of the source text – rather than prose – that leads to a greater affinity when I'm translating. I am a poet, too, and therefore in my element. I feel the particular responsibility of a poet towards the English poems entrusted to me, because my task is not "just" to render them accurately into German. *And as I reached the border line / I felt a mightier throb*: this line describes well the appeal and the challenges of translating poetry, which result from the entailing agitation of multiple boundaries.

For one, the translator is confronted with the fundamental issue of the untranslatability of poetry, which near enough equals proof of the form's success. I tend to agree, as poetry doesn't rely on standard, every-day use of language. Rather, the poem itself relies on the structural core of language. This can result in a level of intricacy and complexity that might seem to render a translation pointless. Unless, that is, the translator resorts to imitation, if this is possible, using the original poem as a mere blueprint. If in doubt, I always favour adaptation over word-for-word translation. The translator must be willing to get their hands dirty, however, since adaptation requires you to dig around in the earth with bare hands. Avoiding the brutal destruction of delicate roots when translating, with all the uprooting and transplantation that entails, requires dexterity. Simplification and losses are practically inevitable, not least because translation involves making grammatic and semantic decisions that the original poem was spared.

And then there's the matter of the boundary between the source poem and the

translator's version, which should not be breached. In other words, the fear of coming too close, the *Berührungssängste*, should be less prevalent than the fear of stirring things up, of seduction. When translating, we should do more than simply generate material to accompany a poem that looks confusingly similar to our own. Despite my conviction – stemming, of course, from a literary arrogance – that poets are best translated by other poets, the aforementioned risk means that too great a poetic proximity between the two should be avoided.

I know the tune, I know the words / I also know every author. I'd prefer not to know them. I'd prefer them to be dead already. My *Berührungsangst* is greatest where this aspect of translation is concerned, and not just because I'm relatively shy. There are at least two further reasons. For one, I find it takes a considerable effort to write to poets for clarification on the questions – both molehills and mountains – that arise in the process of translating their poems. Or even to talk to them at all. I'm always afraid they'll suspect me of having an insufficient grasp of their language, that they'll worry this will increase the near-unavoidable loss that naturally occurs in transmission. Unlike full-time translators, I merely dabble in translation, taking the occasional delight (in the sense of *delectare*) in the task. In the company of non-translators, I find myself in the unpleasant situation of having to debunk the myth that I – *but you're a translator!* – must have a near-native mastery of English, an assumption that elicits much admiration. Even if I'm convinced it's true, the explanation I give in my defence sounds like a somewhat lazy excuse to me: translations benefit more from the mastery of one's native tongue rather than of the source language, and less from having a comprehensive vocabulary in the source language than from having a feel for one's own language and being capable of poetic thought.

Direct contact frequently comes with another problem, namely the poet's lack of awareness when it comes to their own work. As such, I recognise this as an integral aspect of writing poetry: looking askance at what you're writing, and having faith that the poetically-trained brain will do its thing, usually produces better poems than the best, most thoughtful intentions. You often only see what you've created after the fact. Not everyone, however, accounts for the result afterwards. It's enough to sense that the poem works. As a result, the translator more often than not hears (besides a failure to acknowledge the existence of any textual problem) that the poet doesn't have the answers to their questions, either. And so, what should be a simple solution – directly following up with the poet – results, time and again, in getting inconveniently stuck. The question is drawn out, and the translator is none the wiser but increasingly frustrated. The whole to-do simultaneously reinforces any doubts the translator ever had about making autonomous translation decisions. Still, the translator shouldn't entirely abandon caution, and must resist the temptation to "improve" the source poem. This itself is a unique dilemma, given that incongruities of the translated text are often regarded as failures of translation. Much like the messenger, who is no more than the bearer of bad news, the translator involuntarily enters into a relationship of proximity to poet and poem, and becomes culpable by association.

Worst of all, however, is the unique affinity that results from the author of the source poem having a reasonably good command of the target language. For their own good, it's rarely a good idea for them to see their poem in translation. I'm speaking as a poet here, rather than as a translator. The shock of not recognising these changelings, these illegitimate children, can be simply overwhelming. Simply put: *And as I heard the German language, / I had the strangest feeling.* Perhaps the only thing that helps is to bear in mind that this transmogrification can nevertheless be considered a good deed,

one that benefits the rest of the world.

#Lyrik



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Judith Zander, born in 1980 in Anklam, is a writer and occasional translator (English to German). She published the first German translations of two poetry collections by Sylvia Plath: her debut *The Colossus* and the posthumous *Crossing the Water*. She has also translated poetry by Bob Hicok and Maya Angelou (Suhrkamp and Luxbooks), as well as Nan Sheperd's book about the Scottish Cairngorms, *The Living Mountain* (the 'Naturkunden' series, Matthes & Seitz). Her own novels and poetry collections are published by dtv, most recently *Johnny Ohneland*..

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