

# Watch Out, I'm About to Sing

By Sandra Hetzl

Translated from the German by Charlotte Wührer

Dear colleagues, do you know how it feels to yearn for the latest book of a certain author finally to be finished, so you translate it? Because for you, translating this author doesn't just bring to mind such phrases as, "Finding a voice for," or even, "Lending a voice to," as it does with most authors? Because the act of translating these texts extends an invitation to introspection, inviting you to embark on a long sought-after simulation journey through the self, along which you encounter yourself in all manner of guises? For two years, I've felt this way about Rasha Abbas's work-in-progress novel. Could we call this *Berührungssehsucht*, a desire to encounter the text? For the act of translation is invariably an encounter, and encounters are always accompanied by a loss of control, especially for the author. I find it far easier, at any rate, to translate a text than to write one myself. Translation is more like karaoke. So watch out, I'm about to sing.

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Twins who are conjoined at the head are known as craniopagus twins. The famous twins K. and T., for example, share a thalamus. This is the part of the brain that makes decisions, which means that K. could order T. to move her legs. Experiences are also transmitted from one head to the other. When T. eats prawns, K. tastes prawns. If T. closes her eyes while K., lost in thought, glances at a tree, T. sees a tree.

But what does this have to do with translation? Let me tell you. Imagine you'd spent Sunday afternoons as a child in wood-panelled pubs with fly strips hanging over plates of roast pork with dumplings. The newspapers in your home were *Bild* and *Hörzu*, and perhaps the occasional copy of the *Sudetendeutschen Zeitung* came with the mail. You wouldn't have picked up a Bavarian accent from this first home, however - with a childish kind of arrivism, you'd have realised early on that the kids of parents who spoke standard German lived in nicer houses, travelled further and seemed generally more cosmopolitan. So you imitated them. But you'd also have learned words such as "Latschenkiefer" (mountain pine) and "Dohle" (jackdaw). You'd have participated in "Turnen am Reck" (gymnastics at the high bar), and learned that only the unemployed give limp handshakes. And that there's nothing worse than lying. You'd have learned to tell ribwort from a broadleaf plantain, and which "foreigners" were truly "foreign". Italians tended to be Italians, the Greek were Greek (recognisably so only in Italian and Greek locales respectively). Blond people with accents tended not to be foreign, either. "Foreigners" were visibly identifiable as such. Back then that meant, first and foremost, "Turks", or anyone who could be lumped into this category: people with Roma, Kurdish, Bosnian, Albanian and Arab backgrounds, to name a few. You'd also have learned that these people were dodgy by default, that they were at the very least "Grattler", antisocial. Having grown up among heating engineers, electricians and postal workers, there wouldn't have been anything unusual about this. It was more or less the consensus. Perhaps the only unusual thing was that you'd always known, back then, that you yourself were also one of these "foreigners".

What happens when either K. or T. wants to say something, but the other twin wants to stop her from saying it? Are they frequently rendered speechless? How must it feel to have a fight with someone whose brain is fused together with your own? Do the two different opinions have it out, or do they merge to make a third?

On a similar note, I invite you now to imagine that you had another set of parents in addition to your own, who were lower-middle-class, Republican-voting Germans. You'd know nothing about these other parents beside the fact that they existed and where they came from. You never had to think about them. (You already had parents, and thinking outside of that box would have been akin to walking on thin ice, to stepping across treacherous terrain.) These other parents left you nothing but their facial expressions, skin colour and the unknowns of their genes. They'd come to Germany in the 60s, one from West Asia, the other from North Africa. They'd disappeared into thin air after your birth, completely undocumented, your new birth certificate failing to mention them. (The only trace of them would be found in a genealogical certificate. Ever heard of such a thing?) These other parents would have buttressed the grandeur of Munich hotels with cleaning and kitchen jobs, keeping the machine running. Their relationship was doomed to fail, and this failure catapulted your mother, pregnant with you at the time, back into a state of precariousness. Your mother: an argonaut who, aged eighteen, had travelled alone from the Black Sea to Munich. Your mother who (married, divorced, in love, pregnant, betrayed, cast out) left you at the hospital in a Medea-like act of desperation, putting you up for adoption (or "releasing" you, as the German "freigegeben" would have it).

How did the adults in your life imagine it would play out? How was it supposed to work? Did they think that their condemnation and degradation of those they deemed foreign would stop short of you? That the rules would be suspended with the swoosh of a wand? In the end, Adorno's claim that there can be no right life in the wrong one was proven true: the murky idea that you wouldn't be one of those "Grattler", but a child with "such pretty brown skin", naturally didn't work out. As a kid you were deeply unsettled. You wondered why you, of all people, should be spared. The answer, that you were now "German", was dogma that didn't hold up. (The adults didn't see themselves as racist. According to them, only foreigners were antisocial, criminals, etc. But you were one of them, so it followed that you weren't like that.)

Sometimes, the matrix crumbled unexpectedly. In no time, you'd find yourself living the reality of these foreigners. In the supermarket, your light-skinned mother took her eyes off you for a moment as you carried a roll of wrapping paper that towered above you. Cue the cashier raging about "these Turkish kids" being at their shoplifting game again. Adoption isn't an invisibility cloak.

On the one hand, there was the imperative to forget what you'd lost. On the other (in the progressive and "diverse" circles you'd naturally later end up part of), you were ordered to own it, to insist on being something you probably weren't. Being asked, "Have you ever thought about looking into your roots?" was almost as threatening as the abruptness of: "Where do you really come from?" The rug snatched out from under your feet. The observation that your Mediterranean looks were really quite beautiful and exotic seemed merely a variation on the old insults.

(Do you also feel this *Berührungsangst*, this fear of engaging, when it comes to talking about racism? Are you asking yourself if you're even entitled to speak? Is your pain perhaps just a phantom pain? One that affects a limb carefully amputated from your

body? Might not this need to lay it all out now stem from your desire to belong somewhere, better late than never?)

But you were what the others saw in you. Like a wandering reflection of their ugly thoughts, you walked through the world without being able to encounter anything true. However often you repeated what you'd learned, that you were German, you were still dealt the hand that the world dealt faces like yours: "Scram. We're not buying. Seventy years ago, you lot ate the food we gave our dogs. N\*r, N\*r." (A chorus of fifteen children who'd formed a semi-circle around you in the schoolyard.)

Forgive me, I didn't mean to upset you. Really. It's just that I don't know how to talk about this, given the double matrix. I should really be writing about *Berührungsangst* and translation. Which brings me to the end of my experiment.

How about we start a new one? Imagine, please, how similar I am to you. Picture me trying to transfer the smile behind my FFP2 mask from my mouth to my eyes. Picture us looking into each other's eyes for a split second too long, both of us unsure if the other is smiling, unsure of whether or not the other person can see *our* own smile.

To see or not to see. The two are diametrically opposed. But then there's "Jein". The German words "Ja" and "Nein", yes and no, do more than simply touch and then (in an extreme case of *Berührungsangst*) push away from one another like the same poles of two magnets. Rather, their superimposition also creates a new word, a third place. In some situations, feeling so claustrophobic that you stand with your back to the wall, a new space suddenly opens up behind you into which you can escape.

You were still pretty much a child when you found yourself naturally drawn to left-wing and progressive groups. These offered a solution: all people are equal; stand up to racism. But it was a superficial solution that didn't help you one bit. Whenever the matrix fell apart, leaving you naked once again beneath the hellishly garish light of physical reality, you were stumped. You learned about privileges, and you knew that you had more as a German than most people had. Including, for example, those in Naples in southern Italy, where you studied art. Still, you were at a loss when, after you were beaten up by young men one night, your Neapolitan neighbour explained that although it hadn't been right of them, it wasn't obvious on first glance that you were German and not, heaven forbid, Moroccan.

Only much later, when you were around twenty-five years and two months old, were you saved by the following thought: What if all of it was completely wrong? What if those "foreigners", the ones you both were and weren't; the ones you definitely didn't want to be and who you'd nevertheless be forever; the ones you came from and knew nothing about - what if they did, said, wrote and produced a lot of things that you didn't have the slightest reason to feel ashamed of? Wouldn't that be the solution?

So you started learning Turkish and Arabic. First at the same time, which was pointless, and then just Arabic (a broader audience, you thought). You taught yourself while still studying for your art degree, with zero resources but manic dedication, as though in a trance.

You became a translator

The twin sister had taken charge.

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There's nothing worse than lying, but sometimes this is just the way it is: lies appear more real than the truth could ever be. I often find it difficult to answer questions both truthfully and in a way that satisfies the person asking to the extent that they'll believe me. Especially when it comes to the questions that should be the easiest to answer. What's your name? Do you have siblings? Where do you come from? When did you learn German? What Arab country are your parents from? When, for example, I'm asked if I have siblings, I should really answer, "Jein". But let's say that I, Sandra Hetzl, don't have siblings. I'd still believe that twin experiments are a fitting metaphor for many of the things I'm trying to say here. I often ask myself: who would I be if my life had taken another, more likely path? This other self would be the foreigner the others see in me. My twin sister. In a way, the mediation I do when I'm translating is a form of mediation between the two versions: her and me. Do you see?

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Hello again. My name is Sandra Hetzl, and I'm a 41-year-old literary translator. I translate from Arabic to German. I lived in Beirut for a few years. Every two months, I'd have to leave and then re-enter the country to renew my tourist visa. Flying to Lebanon, I'd feel a little queasy when listing my profession as "translator" on the pink form I'd be given to fill out in the plane or at the airport. What if the border guard at Beirut Rafic Hariri International Airport asked which languages I translate from and into?

When it happened, I'd luckily played the situation out in my head a thousand times before. I knew what to do. *Min ayya lugha?* From which language? I narrowed my eyes, feigning incomprehension, and cocked my head to the side. Looking friendly and somewhat confused, I crinkled up my nose coquettishly and trilled, *Excuse me?* He repeated the question in English, looking sceptical. *Italian*, I answered. *Italian to German*.

You must be wondering why on earth someone would shy away from owning the fruits of their labour, having painstakingly taught themselves such a difficult language and then turning this new skill into their profession. Especially in one of the countries in which this language is spoken.

Why? you ask. A fear of being put in a box, I'd say. A fear of disintegrating.

*„But what if a stranger speaks exactly, and expresses himself as clearly, as we do? Everything changes in that case. Gentleness and kindness end, and suspicion begins.“*

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I vowed never again to tell an Arab in a uniform that I can speak Arabic. This after countless disturbing scenes at airports (being taken into ominous side rooms and threatened with having my passport confiscated; missing flights), in Arab embassies "on German soil", and in public administration offices ("Tell me, no 'ifs' or 'buts': who are you really?" ordered Mr H., the security service official). By admitting I could speak Arabic, I'd complete the image of myself as an imposter. Looks Arab, speaks Arabic,

but claims to be called Sandra Hetzl and says she's German?

But even in Germany, how often have I been mistaken for an imposter by my "compatriots with Turkish or Arabic roots" when I speak German? (And that's not to mention the many times I've received impressed compliments for my excellent German from people who think themselves "true" Germans.) How often have I stormed angrily out of Berlin bakeries or slammed taxi doors behind me, strangers having implied I'm betraying my origins? That I, essentially one of them, brazenly claim when asked where I'm from to be "better than them", a "German"? In truth, I just don't always feel like telling complete strangers my sad, true story, which would only cast me as a pitiful bastard and my itinerant mother as some evil witch in their eyes.

I always thought that "Hochstaplerin", the German word for "imposter", came from the verb "stapeln", to stack, and that the only thing that matters is whether you stack from the bottom up or the top down.<sup>2</sup> Whether you lay one piece of hay after another into the manger so that the little baby Jesus might sleep soundly in some distant future, or if you take a shortcut.<sup>3</sup> I recently saw an interview with a young man from a poor background who, together with his friends, had stolen two hundredweight worth of gold in his youth. In the interview, he explained: "We got all the equipment together. The police uniforms. The blue flashing light. Everything a police officer needs to carry out a general search."

Investing relatively little, you can manufacture a disguise that lets you pass as a representative of power, giving you immediate access to whatever it is you want.

Disguised as tax investigators and police officers, they held up a vehicle transporting gold near Stuttgart. One single, magical sentence: "We're confiscating this gold."

But my investment wasn't a small one, and I don't have a disguise. The discrepancy between my name and face is the result of loss. The fact that, after a plot twist, I now speak a language that seems to justify my appearance: *this* is the outcome of my investment. Only it all seems completely implausible, to not fit together. Where it *does* look like it fits, the appearance is deceptive. I really am a tax investigator... or am I? Either way, I have to confiscate the gold and I've lost my car, which is why I'm driving a colourful VW Beetle through a world that hates colourful VW Beetles. Instead of a single, magical sentence, I'm speaking in footnotes.

Perhaps the more fractured your identity, and the more biographical narrative strands you have with sudden breaks, the more footnotes you need in order to talk about yourself. And the less likely it is that you feel included in the bigger narratives.

A fracture might be the result of emigration. It becomes thousand-fold bigger when adoption follows, resulting in a kaleidoscope of footnotes. Perhaps you're more likely, then, to look out for universal narratives, these being the only ones that might implicate you together with others. Besides your own completely improbable story, one that is, as you see, barely tellable. These universal narratives are the only ones that don't leave you clinging to some kind of periphery, a form of collateral damage. Am I a translator of colour? I suppose so, for PoC is the only state of being that I haven't been a latecomer to. It's what I've been since my birth. Bounty (brown on the outside, white on the inside), or a date wrapped in bacon (carnivore on the outside, halal on the inside): I've encountered hatred of this kind ever since I can think. But faced with group identities, I always feel I'm being pulverised, my individual identity such a puny one.

*Just before impact, fear of contact with the wall  
and the threat of running up against it  
en route to missing a deadline for a text.*

So am I particularly suited to talking about who is allowed to translate which authors, or is the contrary true? I believe that when telling stories (and maybe also when translating?), it makes a difference whether you feel like the mistress of your own house, in which case you might then make grand compassionate gestures such as welcoming "foreigners" to your home. Or whether you feel, at your core, that you're no more than a shadow slinking along the walls of said house. A translator's name and skin colour don't necessarily reveal which of these perspectives she has.

Speaking for myself, translation is an ideal occupation; it allows me to settle comfortably into my liminal existence. And to me, this liminal existence seems the ideal place from which to translate.

## Endnoten

- 1 Abdelfattah Kilito »*Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*«, (2008), Syracuse University Press, S. 91.
- 2 It's a cant word, however, and means something like "noble begging".
- 3 A Christian tradition according to which, in the run-up to Christmas, a piece of hay is laid on the manger for every good deed, preparing a comfy bed for the Baby Jesus.

### #Rassismus



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**Sandra Hetzl**, born in Munich in 1980, is a literary translator. She translates from Arabic into German, including texts by Rasha Abbas, Haytham El Wardany, Kadhém Khanjar, Mohammad Al Attar, Bushra al-Maktari, Aref Hamza, Raif Badawi, Aboud Saeed and Assaf Alassaf. She occasionally writes herself. Hetzl has a master's degree in Visual Culture Studies from Berlin University of the Arts, and founded 10/11 Collective, a literary agency for contemporary Arabic literature, as well as the mini literature festival **Downtown Spandau Medina**.

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