

# Fear of the Touch as a Moral Compass

By José Aníbal Campos

Translated from the German by Jonathan Becker

For me, the first thing that comes to mind on the topic of *Berührungssängste*—fears of touch, of contact—is a somewhat outdated term: *professional ethics*. Contained within it are considerations of morality, of respect, and of critical restraint—not the worst companions for a life straddling borders between languages and literatures. A few observations from my perch:

1) Translators should know their limitations. The wide-spread fear of *touching* the poetry genre, for example, is easy to comprehend. Translating poetry, and translating it well, requires intense reading experiences in the field of poetics. I myself have never accepted a commission to translate poetry, but only chosen to publish select poems, taken from anthologies, with which I felt a connection.

2) A few years ago, I was engaged to translate a volume of essays by Joseph Ratzinger. I am anything but a devout Catholic, yet I was intrigued by the challenge of translating a work by Benedict XVI. In said book, the Pope attempts to theologically parse the social issues of the present. A German acquaintance—a theologian with a good grasp of the Spanish language—shared with me his reading impression: my translation made Ratzinger the dogmatist read like a follower of liberation theology. There were no serious mistakes in the translation, but something was off about the tone, with devastating consequences for the end result. As a translator, one is never neutral. In fact, it is good idea to hold onto certain *fears of the touch*. And to stay away from texts one does not inherently empathise with.

3) In the frenzied struggle for bread and jobs, some inhibitions are swiftly abandoned—amidst the turmoil, one can end up wishing that perhaps some fears of the touch had not been overcome. I have received several offers from Spain to translate authors who I knew had been primarily translated by a specific colleague in the past. What motivates such a request? Is the publisher trying to undercut the colleague's rates? Are there conflicts between the publisher and the colleague rooted in unethical publishing practices? It doesn't cost much to inquire about these questions before deciding whether to take the job.

Another example: A few years ago, someone bragged very publicly about having translated 21 books in a single year. Such a feat can only be undertaken at the expense of quality and will lead to a loss of prestige for our profession. Translation takes time, it resists industrial assembly line methods of this kind.

4) Re-translations are shooting up like mushrooms. They can give new life to classic, sometimes forgotten works. But is the, let's say, 50th Spanish translation of Madame

Bovary strictly necessary? Of course, it strokes the ego to be able to say: "I'm a Flaubert translator!" But it is not too much to ask that such a project offers a new idea, an original interpretation of some kind.

5) And finally: "politically correct" language. To what extent is it justifiable to purge a historical novel of all—from a contemporary perspective—"politically incorrect" words? A few years ago, I was collaborating with a younger colleague on a translation of the correspondence between Stefan Zweig and Romain Rolland. These letters were exchanged between 1913 and 1918 in German and French. My colleague took the French part; I took the German part, it was a wonderful, rewarding cooperation. In one letter, Zweig uses the German word "Bonhomie", a loanword from the French. The word also exists in Spanish: "bonhomía". It is outdated but was a perfect fit for this particular context. My younger colleague would have instinctively corrected it and replaced with a more common "non-sexist" word. To what degree can this be justified? Can we simply copy edit the unsympathetic, even discriminatory aspects of the past away? Is there a false *fear of the touch*?



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