Portrait of a Woman in the Restorer's Workshop

On the retranslation of Honoré de Balzac's *Cousin Bette*

By *Nicola Denis*

Translated from the German by *Steven Corcoran*

Adolph Menzel's 1846 painting *The Interruption* shows two women playing music who, torn rudely from their Biedermeier cosiness, look towards the door and the intrusion from the outside world. This scene, painted by this important realist observer, can be seen today in the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, one of the oldest museum buildings in Germany. It stands there as Menzel once painted it, enriched by a natural patina, carefully cleaned now and then, with minimal retouchings made across various layers of time. The effect on today's viewers seems hardly dimmed in its immediacy. Even the frame, an element for which the gallery owners or first buyers, not the artist himself, are usually responsible, in this case dates from the 19th century and discreetly supports the picture's message without explicitly updating it.



Adolph Menzel: Die Störung (1846)

Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe: https://www.kunsthalle-karlsruhe.de/kunstwerke/Adolph-Menzel/Die-St%C3%B6rung/618DD5774CDCDB159A7FD29F08F3BAEA/

Balzac's colourful social tableau *Cousine Bette*[1], one of his last works, appeared in the same year as Menzel's painting, first as a serialised novel in the daily newspaper *Le Constitutionnel* in 1846, then in book form in early 1847. The fact that it was printed chapter by chapter in a fast-moving medium, which was quite common at the time, ensured an immediate, dynamic reception. In October 1846, Balzac received an angry letter from a reader complaining that a deserving hero of the Napoleonic army in the novel was called Forzheim, which made the angry author of the letter—obviously a contemporary not entirely unfamiliar with German— think of Furzheim. Balzac takes the time to answer the gentleman several times with polite irony, and to explain that his intention was not a disrespectful naming, but rather a toponymic allusion.

When we hold a nobly presented edition of a classic in our hands today, an incomparably greater awe surrounds it: the cloth binding, indeed the very label as a classic, goes hand in hand with an exaltation that, in the case of Balzac's *Cousin Bette*, for example, hardly conveys anything of the original situation of reception. But there are ways to make the vividness of a reception perceptible even today. I, for example, was keen to make something of the reality of life at the time perceptible in the appendix: that is, not to write philologically dry annotations, but ones that tell small stories in the larger one, that trace Balzac's exuberant cosmos by means of now forgotten realities, with the help of objects such as the dagger of virtue, the blank log or pieces of furniture that Balzac personally appreciated and described in literary detail—annotations that create cross-references to the impressive array of characters in the *Comédie humaine*.

The specific history of Balzac translation today ensures that German readers inevitably have his *Cousin Bette* before their eyes with a linguistic patina that is now a century old. The standard German versions are still considered to be the Insel edition (1908-11), but above all the so-called Hamburg edition (Rowohlt, from 1923). The writer and philologist Arthur Schurig (1870-1929) translated *Tante Lisbeth* for Inselverlag (Aufbau published a slightly adapted version of this translation in 1959). And it was Paul Zech, an expressionist lyricist who, in addition to stories and essays, wrote free adaptations of Arthur Rimbaud, François Villon or Louise Labé, that provided Rowohlt with his version of *Tante Lisbeth* in 1923, which is still probably the one most widely read today and was later 'revised and completed' by the Diogenes publishing house. Over the years, these two translations have been superimposed on the original like third-hand overpaintings. As a translator, how do you communicate with these voices that sooner or later interfere in the dialogue with the original? How do you peel away the layers to let the original shine again in the presumed 'old freshness'? Indeed, does this artificial patina, as according to modern restoration criteria, also count as part of the original because it documents the object's history?

I would certainly say yes in a case like *Cousin Bette*. Each new translation has a different relationship to the aforementioned touch-ups from various times, to its predecessors, because naturally it depends on how authoritative these intermediate voices are, how dominant on the German book market. With my new version, have I merged into a polyphony or am I singing against a monopoly? When a translation is as long-lived as *Tante Lisbeth* (still available from Diogenes), it covers the original work as a second skin that is practically indistinguishable from the original varnish.

Let us take a brief look inside the restorer's workshop. If there are overpaintings that must be dealt with, then the artist has either intended them, and they are thus part of the creative process and literally called pentimenti, or they are large-scale

overpaintings by earlier, less remorseful restorers, which correspond to the taste of another time. It is often the case with such overpaintings that the composition of the painting and the choice of colour do not match, that the artwork loses intensity, and that the ageing process is even accelerated. To remove them, the top layer of paint must then be scraped back with a scalpel so that the underlying varnish, the original, transparent protective layer, is preserved: it maintains the painting and allows the original colours to shine.

Being the third restorer in the circle of translators, my first concern was to trace the lines of the original with a fresh, contemporary brushstroke and to bring out Balzac's pictorial ideas according to my own understanding. However, I needed and wanted to see where my predecessors, Paul Zech and Arthur Schurig, had laid down somewhat imaginative highlights, had possibly left blank spaces or had applied paint too impasto. Paul Zech, in particular, did everything to ensure good readability, shortening and summarising sentences, omitting the incomprehensible or the misunderstood, and eliminating almost all allusions to historical events and personalities. Almost every time I reached for Zech's or Schurig's *Tante Lisbeth* for help upon coming to a particularly hermetic passage in the original, the corresponding passage was missing. Nevertheless, or precisely because of this, they left me with the impression of having designed a surface to appeal instantly: smooth and coaxing, colourful, without cracks or dents—all in all very consumable. As soon as I began to scrape gently with the scalpel, a completely different colour palette would emerge, which right away appeared more differentiated and restrained, just as Vermeer's famous *Woman reading a letter* only regained the blue and green tones characteristic of the painter after her restoration. The hope of both restorer and translator is that the attempt to achieve the greatest possible accuracy might offer the best protection against premature ageing. I wanted to make Balzac's highly precise descriptions visible in extenso, to dissolve seemingly incomprehensible allusions, to dust off and polish realia, not to curtail the brilliant undertaking of cosmic proportions even in its resistance. Balzac's programme is that the general ought to be reflected in the particular, the great in the small, the laws of nature in those of society and the physiognomies of the owners in their furnishings. This undertaking unfolds consistently from his interleaving syntax, which is not just mere sentence structure but reflects an entire world view. I wanted to uncover these structural sketches, to caulk and retouch where Zech and Schurig had extensively painted over imperfections with their own additions. The newly created tonality is – naturally – of another sort.

Let's take a brief look at how the different arrangement of the syntax affects one sentence, in this case the very first:

> *Vers le milieu du mois de juillet de l'année 1838, une de ces voitures nouvellement mises en*
> *circulation sur les places de Paris et nommées des milords, cheminait, rue de l'Université, portant un gros homme de taille moyenne, en uniforme de capitaine de la garde nationale.*

In Paul Zech's translation this becomes:

> *Man schrieb das Jahr 1838, als die Milords, jene entzückenden leichten Wagen, zuerst auf den Straßen von Paris gesehen wurden. Mitte Juli dieses Jahres fuhr ein beleibter Herr von mittlerem Wuchs, eingezwängt in die*

> *Uniform eines Hauptmanns von der Nationalgarde, mit einem dieser Milords durch die Rue de l'Université.*

In my new translation, it reads:

> *Um die Mitte des Monats Juli 1838 fuhr eine jener unlängst auf den Pariser Straßen in Betrieb genommenen, Mylords genannten Kutschen durch die Rue de l'Université und beförderte einen dicken Mann mittlerer Größe in der Uniform eines Hauptmanns der Nationalgarde.*[2]

Zech makes it easier for his readers to get started, but immediately forces them into the carriage, which is the grammatical subject of the sentence in the original, but not the subject of the novel. The temporal reference is broken apart, the year being placed in the first sentence, the month in the second, and the stylistic effect is that of a precise but diffident travel guide prose. Does Balzac really intend only to take us to the Rue de l'Université with his sentence? Or does he want us to catch a glimpse of a new kind of vehicle, whose name ironically mirrors the lord-like, patronizing passenger smiling into the crowd, who is just as new and typical of the time? And which transports us from the outside (place, date, city, street) further and further inwards (person, physique, clothing, social position)?

Arthur Schurig's translation, which dates from 1909, precedes Paul Zech's by three years. He generally proceeds more faithfully than Zech, deletes less liberally and supplies his successor with passages that the latter now and then adopts word for word. Occasionally he coins a word that I also include in my palette, such as the figurative *Mondscheinblassen* ('moonlight pale')—small dabs from the dialogue with their predecessors that covertly hint at the faithful character of their translations. In one respect, however, they both lay it on so thickly that I would like to remove entire incrustations with a scalpel: their brush regularly slips in the shaping of the image of women.

Balzac's certainly ambivalent but nevertheless considered image of women, in which glamour and misery are mirrored, turns into a caricature for Arthur Schurig and Paul Zech, for which they use a single pot of paint with palpable pleasure. As soon as pejorative synonyms for a simple 'femme' have to be found, there seems to be no limit to the imagination of the two disparagers, which ranges from 'woman' to 'harlot' including 'schemer' and 'fiend'; and 'a woman of the lower classes' suddenly becomes a 'tramp'. In the following sentence, it is not clear from today's perspective why Paul Zech also uses the words *devil* and *net*, and yet chooses to gloss over the Balzacian irony according to which the baron is *convinced* that he is alone on the great open horizon of love, while we as readers have long known about his numerous rivals:

> *Le baron remonta chez madame Marneffe le visage rayonnant, et convaincu d'être le seul homme aimé de cette affreuse courtisane, aussi décevante, mais aussi belle, aussi gracieuse qu'une sirène.*

> *Strahlenden Gesichtes stieg der Baron wieder zu Madame Marneffe hinauf und frohlockte, der einzige Geliebte dieser abscheulichen Kurtisane zu sein,*

> *die ebenso betrügerisch war wie schön und anmutig und gleich einer Sirene noch den Teufel in ihr Netz lockte.*[3]
>
> (Beaming, the baron went up to Madame Marneffe again and rejoiced to be the only lover of this vile courtesan, who was as deceitful as she was beautiful and graceful and, like a siren, still lured the devil into her web.)

In the new translation, this passage simply reads:

> *Der Baron strahlte über das ganze Gesicht und ging wieder zu Madame Marneffe hinauf, überzeugt, als einziger Mann von jener abscheulichen Kurtisane geliebt zu werden, die so trügerisch, aber auch so schön und anmutig war wie eine Sirene.*[4]

Time and again, the two translators noticeably side with the bourgeois husband who clings to his privileges: Zech turns the simple *fonction* of serving tea into a bourgeois ‘housewife's duty’ [5], and where, in the original, the faithless husband is ‘spoiled with love’ by his wife, Schurig excuses his infidelity on account of his being ‘half smothered with love’[6]

Is it the devoted wife with the tea tray that goes too far with her suffocating affection and drives the poor husband out of the boring marriage bed? Countless more such passages could be cited, but for my part I don’t want to veer too far from the picture. My aim is simply to carefully restore, to uncover the original varnish if possible, but also to think about and give consideration to the artificial patina that has formed in the course of the history of this work’s translation. Those who stand before Menzel's genre scene have a naturally aged image before their eyes. Readers of Balzac's *Cousin Bette* can also expect this moral painting to return from the restorer’s workshop without premature ageing.

On 22.09.22, Nicola Denis spoke to Olga Radetzkaja about her new translation as part of the Night of Translation at the Maison de France in Berlin. More information here

Endnoten

1 Honoré de Balzac: *Cousine Bette. Die Rache einer Frau.* Translated from the French by Nicola Denis. Matthes & Seitz Berlin, 2022.



2 Translator's note. For English only readers I have included two English translations of relatively recent date for comparison.
The first is the translation of Slyvia Raphael for Oxford World Classics (1992). 'Towards the middle of July in the year 1838, a vehicle of the kind known as a milord which had recently appeared on the Paris streets, was going along the Rue de l'Université. In it was a portly man of middle height, wearing the uniform of a captain of the National Guard'. (p. 5)
The second is that of Marion Ayton Crawford for Penguin Classics (1983). 'Toward the middle of July, in the year 1938, one of those vehicles called milords, then appearing in the Paris squares for the first time, were driving along the rue de l'Université, bearing a stout man of medium height in the uniform of a captain of the National Guard'. (p. 11)

3 Honoré de Balzac: *Tante Lisbeth*. Translated from the French von Paul Zech, Zürich: Diogenes 2009, S. 237.

4 Translator's note. In the translation for Oxford World Classics by Slyvia Raphael, this passage reads:
'The Baron went back upstairs to Madame Marneffe's flat with a beaming face, convinced he was the only man this frightful courtesan loved, but she was as deceitful, though as beautiful and gracious, as a siren'. (p. 197)
And in the translation for Penguin Classics by Marion Ayton Crawford, which probably comes closest to the newly translated German, we find:
'The Baron climbed the stairs again to Madame Marneffe's apartment with a radiant face, convinced that he was the man, the only man, loved by that shameless courtesan, as treacherous, but also as beautiful and enchanting, as a siren'. (p. 194)

5 Ibid., p. 332.

6 Honoré de Balzac: *Tante Lisbeth*. Translated from the French by Arthur Schurig, Berlin and Weimar: Aufbau 1979, p. 242.

#Neuübersetzung, #Klassiker, #Frauenbild



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