

Transatlanticism and Translation

The plea for a global literary history – [as expressed by David D. Kim](#) on this blog – calls for a closer look at the translation business. In her contribution, Sandra Richter (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach) presents the example of German-American translations. In doing so, she sheds light on the imbalances of transatlantic cultural transfers. Her closing appeal has far less to do with activism than with reiterating the call for scholarly engagement with translation and translation studies.

By Sandra Richter

Transatlanticism has a 20th-century flavor. When, in her seminal essay »Death of a Discipline« in 2003, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak critically remarked that Comparative Literature originated from the intellectual interest of European emigrants in America and led to a privileged focus on these areas. She was one of the first to call for Indian, Asian, African, and Post-Soviet voices to be heard not only across the Atlantic, but also around the globe. This was both an aesthetic and an ethical appeal, as David D. Kim in his initial statement for this blog rightly stressed, and its realization had already begun in the 1960s: post-colonial and, later, decolonial studies as well as the global literature debate have shown how enlightening, necessary, and fruitful such histories are and how they could change the Western canon. What has not changed but rather been exacerbated in the meantime is the dominance of English in the book market and the ways in which the production and perception of literature is shaped by this one language. This diagnosis is even more problematic because translations matter considerably less in the American book market than, for instance, in its French or German equivalents. [According to the German Publishers and Booksellers Association](#), 9,802 books were published in translation for the first time in Germany in 2019, of which 61% were originally Anglophone publications, whereas in the USA only 545 first-time English translations were published in 2020, as listed by [Publishers Weekly's Translation Database](#). In 2017, approx. 11% of German publications were translations, in France translations made up approx. 15% of annual publications. The US book market occupied a distant last place with only about 2%. Two of the reasons for this could be, first, that translations have not yet received the recognition they deserve in the literary field and, second, that remuneration for translations is not adequate, especially in the USA.

Looking back, things were once different, at least as far as literature in the German language is concerned. American and German literature have a long shared history that dates back to the late 17th century, when the English and German languages existed in parallel (Cazden 1984, Richter 2019: 69–76). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, publishing houses like Tauchnitz and Macaulay established their international series that provided a canon of German literature in the English language, comprising heterogeneous works from Goethe's *Faust* through Berthold Auerbach's tales to Paul Heyses *L'Arrabiata*, Eugenie Marlitt's *The Princess of the Moor*, and Ricarda Huch's *The Deruga Trial*.

In addition to the commitment of exiled publishers to translation in the 20th century, the publishing house Alfred A. Knopf, which was founded in 1915, profited from the extensive travels and acquisitions of Blanche and Alfred Knopf beyond American borders; the two editors acquired a reputation for introducing non-American authors to the American audience. Among these authors were Thomas Mann, Egon Erwin Kisch, and – later in the 20th century – also Lothar-Günther Buchheim (*The Boat*, 1975), Heinrich Böll (*The Safety Net*, 1982), Patrick Süskind (*The Perfume*, 1986), Bernhard Schlink (*The Reader*, 1997), Hans-Ulrich Treichel (*Lost*, 1999), Daniel Kehlmann (*Measuring the World*, 2006), Thomas Bernhard (*My Prizes*, 2010) and Ferdinand von Schirach (*Crime*, 2011, *Guilt*, 2012), as well as Yasmin Reza (*Desolation*, 2003). The latter authors were brought to Knopf (and later Random House) by an extraordinary translator and agent: Carole Janet Brown Janeway (1944-2015), who specialized in contemporary German literature (Felken 2015).

Committed individuals like Carol Janet Brown Janeway are vital to conveying literature in another language to an audience. This is even true for translators who change a book as much as Thomas Mann's translator, Helen Tracy Lowe-Porter (1877-1963), did with *Buddenbrooks* and many more of Mann's novels. Lowe-Porter americanized his texts so much that Mann became increasingly skeptical of her work, although her translations were always very well or even enthusiastically received by the public (Horton 2013).

For decades, however, the translation business failed to raise much excitement, although enthusiastic publishers and translators like Naveen Kishore, the founder of Seagull Books, presented an amazing literary program to the English-speaking public. Kishore, who initially translated Indian drama into English and now maintains a network with the University of Chicago Press, has its own branches in London and New York and publishes English translations of Thomas Bernhard, Max Frisch, Franz Fühmann, and Dietmar Dath. For many years, Seagull Books have remained a near unique highlight; indeed, translations have long played only a minor role in the American book market, but they are now pushing their way to the forefront of literary activity.

Due to a recent poetic performance in American politics, the interest in translation is about to increase, even in America. The reading of her poem »The Hill We Climb« by Amanda Gorman at the Inauguration of President Joe Biden not only sparked interest in spoken word poetry but also in translation. The worldwide fascination with the text provoked a heated debate that even made it into the major newspapers: Who gets to translate such a political text, delivered by a young African-American woman on such a high profile occasion? The fact that activists accused the Dutch translator of having an inappropriate identity for her task, that publishers made special arrangements, for example Hoffmann und Campe publishers assigned the translation to a team of three translators of which at least one is ideologically disputed - all this has raised attention. As a consequence, the translation business is more in the spotlight than before, networks of translators are being looked at, and translations have become

politicized. Another discussion, however, is still to come: a debate about whether the quality of translations that can either equal the original, make it better or worse. Is the translator a second creator, a truthful servant to the master-poet, or something in between these extremes, someone who probably also has their own voice?

For university literature departments on all continents, including North America, this new focus on translations provides a large field of activity: translation courses are commonplace, but what once seemed like an academic exercise has become relevant in a new way. From a scholarly point of view, numerous systematic questions arise: what has priority and in which context, the translation of the particular aesthetic quality of a text or the representation of a certain group, i.e. the author and a translator who is equal to her in a certain respect? After graduation, students may even want to become translators and advocate for literature in other languages. Furthermore, translation programs such as the one administered by the Goethe-Institute or the European Union could enjoy high demand and publishing houses may find the publication of translations increasingly interesting.

Although this sounds like a utopia, the subject and practice of translation could bring new life to the way in which literature and literary studies are perceived. For it is ultimately literature, often only accessible in translation, that generates and legitimizes the enduring interest in the discipline – and ensures that the reading public in West and East, North and South can come together and discuss a work. The term activism, which David Kim uses to appeal for political engagement by scholars is, however, Janus-headed, as activism requires a robust political and not so much distanced and reflected academic standpoint. Working at perceiving sensitively, writing obstinately, poeticizing the world, telling stories about it, provoking and praising with the help of language, confronting ideologies with interpretations – this is perhaps what best and most sustainably stimulates communication and research across the oceans and landmasses.

References

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