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Let's Get These Works into Print! Translating German Women Writers as Engagement and Restorative Practice

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Let's Get These Works into Print!

Translating German Women Writers as Engagement and Restorative Practice

As a WiG member I am grateful to have Susan Bernofsky here this year as the special guest at our annual Women in German conference. Her presence acknowledges, and provides further validation for, my preferred form of scholarship, which is literary translation, and which is sanctioned as a valid form of research and academic activity at my institution and I hope at many others of yours as well. Many thanks to Astrid and Rachel also for organizing this session.

As members of WiG, we are all involved in an undertaking known as feminist scholarship. This responsibility is accompanied by the study and teaching of language in addition to the study and teaching of literature, and from its inception has entailed restorative practices in order to make unknown, little-known, or lesser-known works by women authors available to the reading public. While feminist literary scholarship, perhaps more so in the early days, has also explicated the images of female protagonists and characters in works written by male authors, many feminist literary critics have chosen to focus on the work of a small number of female authors who are, or who have become, exemplary due to their less-than-marginalized status. We can all likely name at least a couple of women writers from every century, from every era of German literary history, who emblemize their gender for their respective literary period, whether by force of circumstance, based on the quality of their writing, or both: their works have, over the years, entered the domain of the literary canon, which is inhabited predominantly by the works of male authors. Our attention to the writings of these and other women writers of the past or the present-day, however, remains a central tenet of our work

and as such may go unquestioned in what we do and have been doing for the last several decades. Because although there are *a few* representatives in this sacred grove who are female, women writers still constitute a slim minority on reading lists, in course syllabi and works in print, including those translated into English. The opinions about the reasons for this are as contentious as they are legion.

No one who comprehends this situation can fault us for our predilection. We are fighting the good fight, having made great strides and succeeded in restoring many texts that may have otherwise been lost to posterity. But the need for more of this kind of work, more effort to retrieve neglected stories, poems, plays, and novels, diaries, letters and memoirs, is ever-present, seemingly ever-urgent. So much so that I ask you to consider what it might mean if more of these texts by women were made available in English to a wider audience. Not to work at odds with, to counteract, or to undo our other major task, which is teaching the German language; no, but rather as a supplement, or ally, to this fundamental goal, our common cause. Because a broader reading public could grow to not only read and appreciate these texts themselves, but to pass them on to their students in the classroom, to other readers and researchers, and thus circulate them more widely than they have been throughout the context of this large English-speaking populace. We could thus further the impact of German literature in the United States, in Canada, and in Great Britain by teaching and researching the works of these women writers through English translation as well as in the original German.

Consider what this might bring about for us in our profession and our world. It emphasizes what Edith Grossman has written in her book *Why Translation Matters* (from 2011):

Quote: "Translation always helps us to know, to see from a different angle, to attribute new value to what once may have been unfamiliar. As nations and as individuals, we have a critical need for that kind of understanding and insight. The alternative is unthinkable." End quote.

* * *

Who are our role models? Which works have shaped the field of feminist literary translation? Who has paved the way? Restorative practice harks back to the influential work of colleagues, both anthologies of primary texts and collections of literary criticism and the analysis of literature. Here are a few which influenced my development as a scholar:

- Gisela Brinker-Gabler with her *Deutsche Dichterinnen vom 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Fischer 1978)—in German with a focus on poetry, this was a groundbreaking publication, so helpful in its scope.
- Sigrid Weigel, "Woman Begins Relating to Herself" and "Overcoming Absence: Contemporary German Women's Literature," *New German Critique* (1984)—a two-part article providing an overview whose focus is almost exclusively on prose fiction.
- Susan Cocalis with *The Defiant Muse: German Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Feminist Press, 1986)—which appeared in a series highlighting prime examples of poetic texts in a dual language format.
- *The Feminist Encyclopedia of German Literature* (Greenwood 1997), Friederike Eigler and Susanne Kord--an invaluable reference tool, innovative and practical.

A number of feminist essays and theoretical texts influenced my desire to translate women's works:

- A seminar from graduate school (in the mid-1980s) on feminist scholarship and women writers, where we read Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Silvia Bovenschen's *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit* (Suhrkamp, 1979). Other early feminist texts on women's writing, language, and literature—Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), Luce Irigaray's "This Sex Which is Not One" (1977), as well as Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938)—all provided a firm foundation for my future work. To these other theoretical texts I must add Tillie Olsen's unparalleled *Silences* (1978) which I have used in upper-level comp and lit classes taught in English. In the summer of 2012, I taught an upper-level undergraduate course entitled "Inscribing the Body: Sexual Identity in German Women's Fiction," where students read a number of these essays in preparation for their reading of four novels in English translation.

Whose work is being translated? With this I am referring to *Belletristik* or Literature with a capital "L" as opposed to popular literature. Here are some figures:

Two contemporary German-language authors, some of whose novels have been published in translation:

Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek (2004): 5/12

Nobel laureate Herta Müller (2009): 6/16-20

A few examples of women writers from previous centuries:

Karoline von Günderrode—known to English-speaking readers primarily if not solely through the translation of Christa Wolf's *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (*No Place on Earth*, 1983/1984). To my knowledge, her poetry has not appeared in book form in English translation.

Sophie von la Roche—*The History of Lady Sophia Sternheim*, published in 1771, appeared in translation with the SUNY series *Women Writers in Translation* in 1991 and the *Women's Classics* series of NYU Press in 1993 by two different translators.

Bettina von Arnim—*The Life of High Countess Gritta von Ratsinourhouse* (Bison, *European Women Writers* series, 1999).

The poems and stories of numerous other German-language women writers such as Annette von Droste-Hülshoff and Else Lasker-Schüler have been anthologized in translation, but separate volumes of their works are not readily available in English. Two twentieth-century poets, Nelly Sachs (also a Nobel laureate) and Rose Ausländer, each have several volumes in English translation. A book of Sarah Kirsch's poetry in translation appeared just this past spring 2014, a year after the poet's death.

Clearly there are many additional works deserving our attention and translation into English.

So: What can we do? Together we can strategize future efforts. Please consider these questions:

- Does your institution teach courses on literature in translation?
- Does your university offer courses that teach translation, literary or not, as a marketable skill?

* * *

The impetus to translate Ursula Krechel's long poem *Stimmen aus dem harten Kern* (2005) arose from my desire to do something purposeful and constructive about the political situation in the U.S. and the Middle East at that time, in the middle of the past decade. The crisis in world conflict seems just as stark, if not even starker, today than it did nine years ago. I quote from the beginning of my foreword to that volume, titled "Letting the Complicit Speak":

When Ursula Krechel's *Stimmen aus dem harten Kern* appeared in 2005, the United States' post-September 11 invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were still fresh in everyone's mind. As these conflicts endure into the present day, the timeliness of Krechel's long poem has not lessened. Indeed, its myriad voices—mainly soldiers, conquerors and occupiers—speak still with intensity and authenticity from many centuries and battlefields the world over.

My translation of Krechel's long poem appeared with Host Publications in 2010 as *Voices from the Bitter Core*, a dual language edition. This project almost didn't make it into print due to the financial crisis in 2008 and the recession of the years following. The publisher almost closed its doors. But I'd signed a contract, and after they'd taken cost-saving measures and, unfortunately, also had to make some reductions in staff, the book did eventually come to fruition after a delay of several years.

* * *

With regard to my approach to translating Krechel's work: The tightly constructed long poem demanded an approach where the English translation had to mirror the German text, line by line. This proved necessary not only for the structure of the poems themselves but also for the rhythm of the poetic line. Ursula impressed upon me the need for six regular beats per line for every poem, each one of 12 lines, her long poem consisting of 12 sections of 12 poems apiece. This task was extraordinarily demanding for me as translator, yet simultaneously consistent and uniform, unlike the prose texts I have been working on most recently.

Handout with examples of two poems, highlighting idioms in first couplet.

So when I began working on prose a few years ago, I was in for a tremendous shift in approach. I have found that, counter-intuitively, these short-form fiction narratives are often more fluid, more elusive, more difficult to pin down in their colloquial speech and dialogue, in addition to the challenges of rendering convoluted German syntax gracefully into English, among other concerns. My previous experience translating Krechel's poetry has come to my aid only occasionally now, as my formerly held belief that the translated text should be an exact mirror-image of the original no longer proves helpful in order to produce a solid translation.

Thus in my own work at present, I am at a crossroads. I feel as if I'm treading on thin ice, or perhaps more appropriately, walking a precarious tightrope from which I might plunge down to earth at any moment—either due to a deficit of naturalness in the English or by not adhering closely enough to the original German and thus sacrificing some of the authenticity of the source text. This is somewhat of a *Sprachkrise* for me at the moment. With the Krechel translation, I was able to consult with the author in addition to a professional translator in

Germany—an American who could help me iron out some of the intricacies of semantics and idiosyncrasies of linguistic reference. I am collaborating on my current project with a friend and colleague, which in turn is a very different circumstance.

* * *

I recently saw that Ursula Krechel's novel *Landgericht* (2012), for which she won the German Book Prize that same year, has just appeared in French translation. [How I envy the French for this!] Several years ago, Krechel's publisher Jochen Jung of Jung und Jung Verlag in Salzburg sent me Krechel's previous novel, *Shanghai fern von wo* (2008), winner of the Josepf Breitbach prize in 2009, in an attempt to find an American translator and publisher; this effort was ultimately abandoned, even though I had expressed an interest in translating the book, which like *Landgericht* is 500 pages in length, a formidable tome to be sure for any translator.

Thank you, and I welcome our discussion and hope this has provided an impetus for that.