

Translating your thoughts

Mascha Dabić

Can you be both *free* and *faithful* at the same time? Well, as a translator this is exactly what you are supposed to be. You have to find a way to accomplish this mission impossible, time and again.

I have been translating and interpreting for ages, literally, but it was only last year that, to my surprise, I experienced another position in the translation process, namely that of being the author of a book which was translated into my own native language. Sounds complicated. And it is complicated. My native languages are Serbo-Croatian and Russian, but I have lived in Austria ever since I was eleven, so German has become my *Bildungssprache* ('language of education'), and it felt perfectly natural to write my first (and maybe last?) novel in German. (The title *Reibungsverluste* could be translated as 'Losses in friction'). My novel is about interpreting in psychotherapy, and it describes a working day in the life of a young Austrian woman named Nora. She interprets for Russian-speaking Chechen asylum seekers in Austria who are struggling to find words to describe their

experiences and memories as survivors of war(s) and torture, during sessions with an Austrian psychotherapist.

I am not Nora. *Reibungsverluste* is not an autobiography. Nora is a native Austrian, and I am not; for Nora, interpreting is not a profession, for me it is. And I, too, have been working as an interpreter in psychotherapy for many years and have continued to do so, even in Corona-mode, which means that ever since March 2020 many of the psychotherapy sessions where I was interpreting took place either online or via phone, but that's another story.

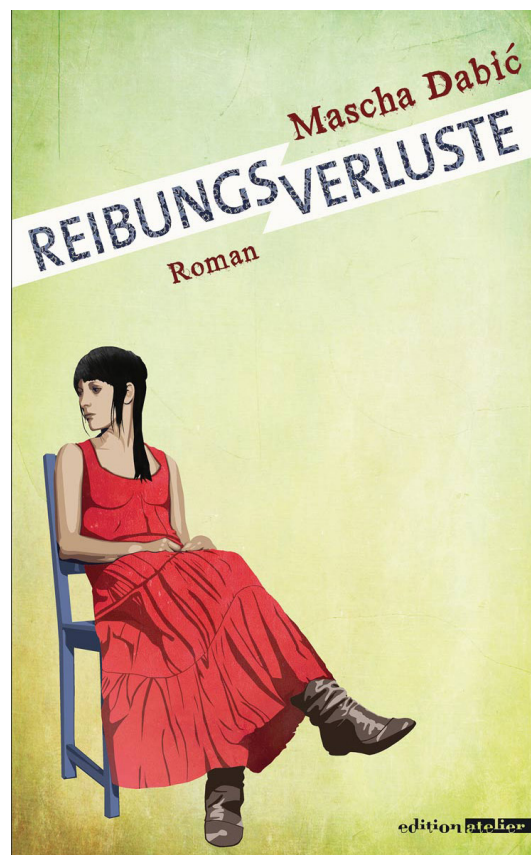
So even though I didn't write an autobiography, writing the novel gave me the opportunity to process many situations that I had experienced myself as an interpreter of psychotherapy encounters. Nora helped me to illustrate the restrictions of interpreting and to show how interpreters work under pressure – to understand, translate and convey the meaning as quickly as possible, expressed so concisely in *Zeitnot*.

“I was used to having ‘my authors’, but now I had ‘my translator’”

Negotiating the story

However, Nora also taught me that an author’s freedom is relative as well. I had thought that by being the author of my novel I would be ‘free’: free to choose my words, free to design characters, free to steer the story in any direction I liked. Yes, writing a text definitely brings more freedom to pick and choose your words and to think your own thoughts than when you are translating a text. And yet I discovered that even when writing you are not fully in control of what is happening in the text. The characters that you create turn out to have their own inner lives, they can do and think surprising things. At times, it felt as if I had to negotiate the story with the protagonists, as if it were up to them to see if they had the space and capability to do or say what I wanted them to. Maybe like a film director who has a film script and the actors but still needs to negotiate with the actors to see if they want to stick to the script or if they would prefer to improvise and do something else instead ... While I was working on my text, time and again there were sentences and words and scenes that seemed to pop out of nowhere, and at the same time there were other sentences or words that were in my head but that I couldn’t write down, no matter how hard I tried.

To come back to what I had mentioned in the beginning: last year my book was translated from German into Serbo-Croatian, by a young translator. All of a sudden I found myself at the receiving end of a translator’s questions, such as “What is the exact meaning of this word here...? Could it also mean something else?” I was used to having ‘my authors’, but now I had ‘my translator’, Đorđe Trišović. He did a great job, and I was impressed by the high level of accuracy in his work. It reminded me of my very first literary translations and how nervous I had been when I had to contact ‘my’ authors and ask them questions about their texts, because, to be honest, back then I tended to mystify authors and their work, and it took me a couple of years and translated novels until I realized that there is nothing wrong with ‘bothering’ authors with questions, that on the contrary, authors



Cover of Mascha Dabić’s debut novel



Since her M.A. in Translation sciences (English and Russian) **Mascha Dabić** has translated numerous novels from Bosnian/Serbian/Croatian into German. She has written journalistic articles on the topic of migration and works as a community and conference interpreter Russian-German. Mascha Dabić is a lecturer at the universities of Innsbruck and Vienna. For her first novel *Reibungsverluste* (2017) she received a literary prize of the city of Vienna in 2018.

Mascha Dabić
Photo: Jorghi Poll

actually enjoy seeing someone trying hard to understand every little nuance and hint of their text. The translator is arguably the most studious and careful reader of a text because there is nothing that he can skip (unlike the ‘normal’ reader; me, for instance, I tend to skip descriptions of nature, because I prefer experiencing nature in real life instead of reading about it).

Collective visibility

And then, there is the aspect of visibility. As translators we strive for invisibility in our work, in the sense that a translation is considered ‘good’ when the produced text seems ‘natural’, as if it had not been translated. And yet, on a collective level, as a group of professionals, we translators, of course, strive for visibility in society, and consequently for acknowledgement. I didn’t mind being visible together with ‘my’ authors, at book fairs for instance, when I would interpret their presentations; however, when I found myself ‘visible’ as an author, I found it quite embarrassing. Especially in the beginning, being

visible on stage as an author felt quite suffocating; while as a literary translator I am only concerned about the *quality* of my translation and whether ‘it works’, as an author I found myself worrying about whether readers would like my work... and what if they thought it was stupid? What if I myself thought it was stupid? Well, I guess these self-doubts are part of the concept of visibility too. You somehow have to deal with the ‘limelight’ that you have created by writing a book, and for me going back into the ‘shadows’ of being a translator felt like a relief. Doing your work in a rather ‘invisible’ manner gives you some sort of freedom and peace too – but I guess I needed to experience an author’s visibility to come to fully appreciate the translator’s relative invisibility.

What I have learned from the experience of being present as an author is that, when you come to think of it, to speak and to write actually means to try and translate your thoughts into language. As translators we know that translation can never be perfect. But it’s worth a try.