



Being Genre-Fluid

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NOT ALL TRANSLATORS are versatile, nor do we generally do it both ways. I got my first gigs from a network of Berlin translators mostly specialising in business or academic texts, who forwarded any requests to translate arty, obscure and left-field writing straight to me. You may ask what image I was projecting. Certainly I was fearless in those days, offering to translate any text on any subject in any genre if the opportunity arose. How else would I expand my horizons? All skilled translators can shift register for each new job, adopting a new tone appropriate to the task in hand. But most seemed to know what they liked. One friend stuck to two fields, translating either legal documents or poetry, effortlessly in each case, although one made her more money. Another stuck strictly to fiction, certainly no poetry, a genre which fills many with fear. Others specialised in medical texts, history, architecture, drama, film.

Not me: like the teenage protagonist of a coming-of-age novel, I tried everything on offer to test my proclivities. Requests included translating a rap for dinosaurs from a children's puppet show, subtitles for a documentary about Berlin's drag queens, several of whom I drank with, rhyming verse to accompany physical theatre, free verse for a poetry blog, the libretto for a jazz opera, chatty articles for a website, programme notes for the Philharmonie, an essay on Conlon Nancarrow and 'smooth time', and copious experimental fiction; so while I did my share of Terms & Conditions, scientific papers, captions and manuals, my niche soon became...the niche.



At the point when I was asked to co-translate a doorstep on Joseph Beuys, and then a monograph on choreographer Pina Bausch and her innovative dance theatre, I realised I was dealing with the great and good of the German postwar avant garde. Yet still winging it; I cannot dance to save my life, and knew little about Bausch's work beforehand. Somehow I am now an expert on her oeuvre, which has enriched my own creative practice.

Recent books I've translated include an intensely emotional volume of diaries, a collection of by no means accessible poetry and a couple of fast-paced cosy crime novels. The pan-genre polyamory continues.

It's possible *translating* poetry may have been what got me *writing* it. Having fielded all those requests from verse-phobic translators, and enjoyed the challenge, I began translating poetry as an end in itself and sending it to journals. The poetry-specialist translators were a little suspicious. They all wrote poetry of their own, which they felt qualified them to translate it. I didn't seem to. But I had always read poetry, always written, though till then only prose, and hell, I saw myself as poetic.

This time I was like another teenager in a coming-of-age novel, standing across the street from a gay bar, wondering if they belong there, sipping vodka nicked off their parents for Dutch courage, before finally crossing the road and walking in.