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Translating Karen Duve into English with a few peripheral observations on translation in general

This is an account of my work on the translation of Regenroman and Dies ist kein Liebeslied, with some general reflections on the process of translation, the way in which foreign books come to be translated and published in the English-speaking world, the research often necessary even in the translation of a work of fiction, and relations between authors, translators and publishers.

I did not, strictly speaking, deliver a paper at the Nottingham University seminar in May 2004 when Karen Duve was writer-in-residence for three weeks, but as the translator of her first novel, and just beginning work on the translation of her second, I was delighted to be invited and to take part in a parallel reading with her. The remarks below are based on my memories of the very interesting seminar and a few notes made at the time, with some reflections arising from the my work on Karen’s books.

I had first met Karen Duve in 2002 in Chicago, where she was one of three guest authors invited by the Goethe-Institut to give an evening of readings, and to take part in the day-long seminar at the annual gathering there on the occasion of the award of the Helen and Kurt Wolff Prize. My presence there at the same time was a most fortunate coincidence, since I had just completed the translation of Regenroman. The English title is Rain, with what I still feel is some weakening of effect, although nothing was ever going to strike quite the same alliterative and atmospheric note as the German original. For this novel is a book where the atmosphere, not just metaphorically but also literally, counts for much, with the chapter headings all drawn from weather forecasts. I had offered the publishers A Rainy Story, but I know I am not particularly good at thinking of titles. Indeed, I heave a sigh of relief when a book to be translated has a proper name as its title. That was the case, for instance, with the late W.G. Sebald’s Austerlitz, the translation of which had taken me to Chicago and my first meeting with Karen Duve in 2002. With a proper name as title, the translator and publisher of the translation have no problem.

Not a proper name but a song title does the same for Karen Duve’s Dies ist kein Liebeslied (This Is Not a Love Song), which I had begun to translate in May 2004, though I had not yet gone further than the rough draft stage, and was therefore unable to give precise answers to the several participants in the seminar who asked me what I was going to do with certain lines from popular songs of the 1970s onwards. All translators have their own favourite methods of approaching a work, and
mine is to go right through a book producing a complete first draft as quickly as possible, before revising and re-revising more slowly. This is partly because, quite often, some question or problem arising early in the book will be answered by something else that comes up later on. However, I know translators who fret at the idea that something is not yet as good as they can make it, and prefer to polish everything up as they go along. I even know one who would rather not have read a book at all before she translates it, so that she can enjoy to the full the experience defined by Willis Barnstone in his *The Poetics of Translation*: ‘Translation tends to be a certain kind of reading, an “intensive reading” of the original text.’¹⁴ Myself, I am not quite sure how she can be certain that she will *want* to translate a book if she hasn’t read it first; perhaps she at least takes a quick look. Not always, but very frequently – and I write not as an academic but as a general, all-purpose practising translator working in several fields, although with a distinct preference for fiction – the translator of a book will already have read it anyway in order to give a publisher a report on its merits and its suitability for that publisher’s list.

In a recent and excellent article in *The Author*, the journal of the Society of Authors, of which the Translators’ Association is a part, Eric Dickens deplores the comparative dearth of translations into English, and suggests that ‘many literary translators themselves could make sound judgements and suggest books with a professional eye.’⁵ In my own experience, this at least half-happens much of the time, for it is up to the reader to give a meticulously honest account of a book to a publisher, who more often than not is unable to read it in the original. (Coleridge says somewhere that we tend to overvalue a book read in a foreign language because we are secretly pleased with ourselves for being able to read it at all. Not so, however, if we are reading for publishers. It is incumbent upon a reader to be ultra-cautious in recommending a publishing firm to put its money where his or her mouth is.) If, however, I am asked out of the blue to translate a book that has not come my way already, I always have to read it before agreeing. And every translator knows what a test of a book the actual process of translation is; if you happen to have read and recommended a title, and it then comes back to you to be translated, you will certainly know by the end of your work whether your original assessment was correct.

As a matter of fact I had not read *Regenroman* for its English-language publisher Bloomsbury, which is one of the few publishing houses lucky enough to have an editor who can read German for herself. Rosemary Davidson happened to have been a guest member on the editorial committee of the twice-yearly journal *new books in german*, of which I have for some time been a member myself. The journal, as its name indicates, aims to interest English-language publishers in books just