

Translation and Attunement – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

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Translation and Attunement Finding Influences to Translate a Lost Classic Von: Sophie Duvernoy

What does it mean to translate a ‘lost classic’? After all, the term is an oxymoron. While all genre categories perform an act of interpretation, this one performs a double act: it takes a book that *should* have been recognized when it was published, and attempts, from a distance of several decades (or perhaps centuries) to reinsert it into an already established literary landscape, as if the book had received the reception it was due.

Gabriele Tergit’s *Effingers* was first published in German in 1951 after Tergit had been exiled from Germany in 1933 and moved to London. Sadly, the book attracted almost no attention when it was published. *Effingers* was Tergit’s ambitious attempt to chronicle German-Jewish life in Berlin from the founding of the Reich under Bismarck to the outbreak of World War II, and ultimately, the Shoah. It was written about a bourgeois world of assimilated German Jews that no longer existed; its reading audience had scattered to the Americas, Palestine, South Africa, and elsewhere. In Tergit’s native Germany, there was hardly anyone left to read it, and the book remained largely forgotten for decades after publication. After going through a series of stuttering rediscoveries – first in the late 70s, then the 90s – *Effingers* was republished by Schöffling Verlag in 2019. It landed on the *Spiegel* bestseller list and attracted the attention of literary critics in Germany and publishers abroad, launching the process of bringing the novel into translation. By the time I was asked to take on the English translation, *Effingers* had finally been accorded a permanent place in the German canon as a classic novel of German-Jewish life.

But Tergit’s novel never fit neatly into the landscape of postwar German literature. The language and project of *Effingers* represents a palimpsest of various moments in time: published in 1951, it was written between 1933 and 1947 about a time more than half a century earlier and a world that felt at a radical remove because of the astounding changes that industrial modernity had wrought. In the postwar period, Tergit’s insistence on documentary realism also felt increasingly out of step with literary developments in Germany. In 1965, when Tergit attempted to publish her second family novel, *So war’s eben*, she received a rejection from the editor Fritz J. Raddatz, saying “I don’t believe that one can still conceive of and write this kind of novel today”.¹

If *Effingers* can only be properly understood as a novel embedded in between worlds and – as I will argue – between national literatures, what should the novel sound like in English? The translator must always reinterpret the book she is translating, because she is creating a work that sounds as though it already has a context in the target language. This context is

created in part through the choice of a voice. Voice is at the heart of translation's attempt to replicate the effect of the source text, and the cause of the translation's necessary unfaithfulness to the original. It doesn't primarily affect the meaning but the experiential qualities of a text; it's not about what is said but how it is said. It affects the infinite array of small choices a translator must make after he has captured the meaning of a sentence; it determines cadence, the choice of one synonym over another, the construction of clauses or prepositional phrases, and the inclusion of colloquialisms. It signals the kind of book that we are reading, and sets up the reader's expectations accordingly.

In what follows, I would like to explore the work that went into finding an English voice for *Effingers*. As in all things, choosing a voice is an act of interpretation on the part of a translator, who not only must attempt to replicate how they 'hear' the author in the original, but also choose how far they wish to insert them into the context of the source language – in other words, how much they wish to domesticate the language or foreignize it, signal its belonging to a separate language and tradition, or bring it closer to new readers.² As Alice Kaplan writes, these choices are a result of extreme attentiveness. The translator must look at the construction of a text with a granular optics entirely different from the reader, or even a literary scholar: "Every act of translation is an act of attentiveness. As a translator, I notice aspects of style and language that would have escaped the part of me who is simply a reader, and even a literary critic", Kaplan notes.³ This act of extreme attentiveness is joined by a form of inner preparation that Peter Cole describes as "training and attunement".⁴ In his essay on the ethics of translation, Cole discusses the intangible internal work that translators must do to achieve success:

How clearly does a translator hear or see or grasp the goal ahead, the tone to be struck or the shape to be molded? And, since action generally arises from perception, what will he do about it—about that hearing and grasping, or not being able to hear and to grasp?⁵

Cole, who is well-known for his translations of medieval Hebrew poetry, goes so far as to call this an act of 'spiritual preparation'. Insofar as he points to a process of deep and subtle inner attunement, this can be construed as spiritual indeed. *Effingers*, that bourgeois, worldly novel, does not attend much to spirituality, but I did undergo a journey of intuitive instruction. What I shall now lay out is a process of attention, understanding, and internal preparation – a 'hearing and grasping' – that paved my way to creating an English voice for Tergit. This process was reflective, meandering, and highly internal, but I believe it is crucial for laying the foundation for a translation that will speak to others. Only when one can hear this internal voice clearly can one begin to move away from the act of mechanical translation and into a domain in which the translation begins to sing on its own.

Let us take a paragraph from the early chapters of *Effingers*, which can serve as a useful way to explore Tergit's style, focus, and intentions. Here is a brief excerpt from Chapter 21, the first high dramatic point of the novel, in which the wealthy Oppner family gives a housewarming party that will lead to the engagement of Annette Oppner and Karl Effinger. It is useful because it showcases two key features of Tergit's prose: conversation combined with thick social description of bourgeois social customs.

“Herr Theodor möchten sofort hinunterkommen, die ersten Gäste kommen schon.” Annette sagte zu ihrer Freundin Marie Kramer: “Ich bin schrecklich gespannt. Du mußt aufpassen, wenn Effinger vorgestellt wird. Wenn du mich kneifst, gefällt er dir, wenn nicht, dann ist dein Urteil vernichtend ausgefallen.”

Coupé auf Coupé fuhr vor dem Hause Bendlerstraße vor. Die Kerzen waren an den Kristallkronen entzündet. Die Frauen kamen in ihren großen Entrees, in königsblauen, in bischofslila, in rotsamtenen Capes, die mit Pelz besetzt waren. Die weiten Röcke bauschten sich hinten zum Cul, hatten Panniers und Tabliers wie die Toiletten des Rokoko, waren aus Brokat und Damast und Samt. Die feinen Lederhandschuhe reichten bis zur Achsel. Im Haar waren die Brillantsterne, die Blumen, die Straußfedern befestigt. Die Damen trugen Fächer in den Händen, Spitzenfächer, Elfenbeinfächer, Straußfedernfächer, Brillanten um die Arme und um den Hals. Die Herren kamen im Frack, eine Blume im Knopfloch, weiße Glacés an den Händen. Sie hatten lange, würdige Bärte, sie trugen Favoris, sie hatten kleine Schnurrbärte.

Emmanuel repräsentierte. Jovial und mit tiefer Stimme sagte er zu allen Frauen: “Na, wie geht’s denn, schöne Frau? Übertrifft mal wieder sich selbst. Sarah Bernhardt und Clara Ziegler in einer Person.” Er machte jeder auf besondere Weise den Hof.

Here is my initial draft of this scene:

“Herr Theodor is asked to come down immediately, the first guests are arriving.” Annette said to her friend Marie Kramer: “I’m so excited. You’ll have to pay attention when they introduce Effinger. Pinch me if you like him; if not, your judgment will be definitive.”

Coupé after coupé stopped in front of the house on Bendlerstraße. The candles in the crystal chandeliers burned bright. The women came in great toilettes, in royal blue and purple, in red velvet capes trimmed with fur. Broad skirts puffed out at the *cul*, with panniers and tabliers in rococo style, brocade and damask and velvet. The fine leather gloves stretched up to their armpits. Their hair was decorated with diamond stars, flowers, ostrich feathers. Diamonds hung on their wrists and necks. The men were in tails, flowers in their buttonholes, hands in white glacé gloves. They had long, respectable beards, sideburns, and little moustaches.

Emmanuel was in his element. With a deep, jovial voice, he said to all the women, “Well, how are you, my beautiful lady? You’ve outdone yourself again. Sarah Bernhardt and Clara Ziegler rolled into one.” He courted every woman in the house.

While I maintained the meaning of this passage in my translation, any native English speaker will notice many infelicities, some inaccuracies, and an overall stiffness in the prose (‘your judgment will be definitive’ is particularly grating). I followed the word order of the German in the long descriptions, which creates a rhythm and punctuation style unusual for English. The conversations don’t sound natural, and the descriptions aren’t yet vivid. The scene hasn’t

come to life; it hangs together as an assemblage of words that still gesture back towards the German. It would be tedious to read 800 pages that sounded like this because it doesn't have a coherent voice.

In order to find a voice that could guide the editing process, I needed to step back from the language itself and ask a larger question: what kind of book is *Effingers*? What sorts of topics and sensibilities is Tergit interested in exploring within its capacious structure? At first glance, it is a family novel that draws upon a nineteenth-century realist tradition represented by Balzac, Zola, Tolstoy, Fontane, and (in the twentieth century) John Galsworthy and Thomas Mann. Like these other works, the plot follows an arc of births, marriages, and deaths, professional successes and failures, as they intertwine with the course of current events. The narration is resolutely realist, with little interior psychologization of its characters. The secondary literature on Tergit frequently notes her debt to this genre, and to Mann and Fontane in particular.

However, despite the many obvious resonances, the comparison didn't feel quite right. These novels were written decades earlier than *Effingers*, and their style reflects this – both in the original, and in the choices made by translators into English. To cast *Effingers* back into a nineteenth-century idiom would have overdetermined it as a family novel which fit poorly with Tergit's breezy, journalistic prose, and given it a veneer of programmatic, ponderous self-seriousness (the beginning of Galsworthy's *A Man of Property* exhibits this kind of throat-clearing). Although the genre of the family novel seemed like the best model for understanding *Effingers*, it didn't provide me with any inspiration for establishing a voice.

The family novel has, particularly in the anglophone tradition, always existed alongside another genre: the novel of manners, which examines the mores of a particular social class and often trades in satire as dramatic currency. While the family novel has always attracted the attention of literary theorists – perhaps because of Georg Lukàcs's influential theory of the novel as an exploration of bourgeois life – the novel of manners is a parallel genre that continued to flourish in anglophone letters well into the mid-twentieth century. While the family novel remains a conservative genre, exploring the forces of modernity that tear a family apart, the novel of manners, especially in its satirical mode, pokes fun at the absurdities of modern life without any nostalgia for bygone days. It relies less on psychologization and more on external descriptions (clothing, furniture, status symbols, behavioral codes) to gesture at personal motivations. It aims to portray social life among a set of bourgeois or upper-class characters who are engaged in the cutthroat business of cultural and economic survival.

Effingers plays with both traditions. It isn't exactly a satire, given Tergit's attachment to her characters and to showing – sometimes quite wistfully – the fullness of the German-Jewish life of her youth. But Tergit's first novel, *Käsebier Takes Berlin* (1931) demonstrates that she can derive great narrative energy and dramatic impetus from satire. *Effingers* contains many satirical moments that point to the constrained social positions of the bourgeoisie, women in particular. When Sofie Effinger decides to get married, Tergit wryly concludes the chapter: "It

took her longer to choose each nightgown than to choose her husband”, which is not only a cutting remark, but points out how Sofie’s agency as a woman is fully exercised in her choice of a trousseau, where she can be far pickier than in choosing a partner.

To my knowledge, there are no other novels in the German tradition that engage with these two genres in quite the same way to offer a portrait of the bourgeoisie. But when considered through the lens of Tergit’s adoptive homeland, England, and of anglophone literature in general, a literary and cultural context emerges that perfectly aligns with the novel’s ambitions. Understanding *Effingers* as a novel more at home within Tergit’s host country and its literary traditions changes the kinds of resonances and voices available for a translator.

Another aspect of determining voice was to understand *Effingers* as a novel with a fundamentally female view of social life. In delivering a portrait of her own milieu, Tergit plumbed her own gendered, upper-class experience among the German-Jewish bourgeoisie. One sees this not only in the strong female characters in the novel, but in the attention it lavishes upon clothing, furnishings, china, and other domestic elements so crucial to upper-class social and cultural life.⁶ Women authors, for example, will frequently note the exact dress style, accessories, and tailoring decisions in describing characters.

While composing *Mrs. Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf considered the question of women and dress through a desire to explore a sense of “party consciousness” or “frock consciousness”, the idea that dress and outward ornamentation are important modes of bourgeois social performativity. In a diary entry from 1925, Woolf writes:

[M]y present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: and I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness etc. The fashion world at the Becks—Mrs. Garland was there superintending a display—is certainly one; where people secrete an envelope which connects them and protects them from others, like myself, who am outside the envelope, foreign bodies. These states are very difficult (obviously I grope for words) but I’m always coming back to it.⁷

Woolf points out that clothes and parties are an important point of negotiation for bourgeois identity. The short stories collected as *Mrs. Dalloway’s Party*, which feature vignettes about different characters attending the party, explore the tension between these people’s private sense of self and their (often deeply awkward) performance of a public social persona. The stories focus frequently on dress and costume: the short story entitled “The New Dress” plumbs the deep malaise that the middle-aged Mabel feels at the party in her new empire-style dress, which she had thought beautiful at the tailor’s, but now makes her feel like a dowdy girl playing dress-up.

Among British and American women authors of the early twentieth century I found writing styles that matched the easy, insouciant qualities of Tergit’s prose, and an interest in structurally examining the lives of upper-class women in particular. Three authors emerged as strong figures of comparison and inspiration: Edith Wharton, Dawn Powell, and Nancy Mitford.

The first, and perhaps most important, initial influence on my voice in *Effingers* was Edith Wharton. Take, for example, the beginning of her 1913 satirical novel of manners, *The Custom of the Country*:

“Undine Spragg—how can you?” her mother wailed, raising a prematurely-wrinkled hand heavy with rings to defend the note which a languid “bell-boy” had just brought in.

But her defence was as feeble as her protest, and she continued to smile on her visitor while Miss Spragg, with a turn of her quick young fingers, possessed herself of the missive and withdrew to the window to read it.

“I guess it’s meant for me,” she merely threw over her shoulder at her mother.

“Did you EVER, Mrs. Heeny?” Mrs. Spragg murmured with deprecating pride.

[...]

Mrs. Spragg and her visitor were enthroned in two heavy gilt armchairs in one of the private drawing-rooms of the Hotel Stentorian. The Spragg rooms were known as one of the Looey suites, and the drawing-room walls, above their wainscoting of highly-varnished mahogany, were hung with salmon-pink damask and adorned with oval portraits of Marie Antoinette and the Princess de Lamballe. In the centre of the florid carpet a gilt table with a top of Mexican onyx sustained a palm in a gilt basket tied with a pink bow.

Here is an assured, confident prose style that sets up the social dynamics and hunger for status that characterize Undine Spragg throughout the novel. We have sharp, believable dialogue; quick repartee; and a detailed description of the furnishings and apparatuses of upper-class comfort, an aesthetics central to the self-understanding and social performativity of the characters. Several word choices – “to ‘defend’ the note”, “a turn of her fingers”, “possessed herself of the missive” – imbue the language with historical flavor. These choices are key to feeling one’s way back into the English language at the turn of the century, when sentence construction was more elastic and creative, and less cut-and-dry than most prose today. It is also worth noting the way Wharton peppers her conversation with descriptions of reactions (“wailed”, “murmured with deprecating pride”), which move the conversation along while keeping track of its emotional register. (Tergit doesn’t do this often; she sticks to “he/she said”, and the dialogue itself.)

Wharton’s novels were hugely helpful to me because, like *Effingers*, they treat the period between 1880 and 1910 and contain lots of descriptions of the ins and outs of society events. The dialogue, however, was clearly from another time. For this, I felt it would be best to read works that were written in closer temporal proximity to *Effingers*, which is how I landed on Powell and Mitford. Powell is perhaps the most obvious anglophone analogue to Tergit; she was born only two years after Tergit, in 1896, and wrote satirical novels about social and literary life in New York that examine the transformation of modern mores, culture,

and women's roles. As a member of New York's literary scene, she lampooned this sphere in several of her novels, which are quite similar to Tergit's satire of Berlin newspapers in *Käsebieber*. Mitford is also a great chronicler of upper-class society in Britain, and her novels are extremely helpful in providing the attendant vocabulary for parties and high-society gatherings. Both Powell and Mitford pay close attention to furnishings, dress fashions, and other trappings of female bourgeois life, and have a wonderful ear for natural spoken dialogue.

Here are two excerpts from Powell and Mitford that reveal similar inclinations, despite their obviously distinct writing styles. The first is a scene from Powell's 1942 satire *A Time to Be Born* about the obnoxious social climber Amanda Keeler Evans; in the second, Mitford's *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), the narrator, Fanny, is reunited with her childhood friend Polly, who asks her if she enjoyed making her society debut.

Powell:

"I'm Mrs. Evans' assistant," the voice was a well-placed baritone. "Mrs. Evans is working in bed today. Come in."

The rear room was a large and sunny bedroom and surprisingly enough, done in the Hollywood modern style of white rugs, glass tables, and chromium touches quite out of period with the rest of the house. A great white satin-tufted bed fitted into a white-curtained alcove with a half-moon window above it. Here lay Amanda, propped up on cushions in some sort of high-necked Chinese bed coat. [...]

"My dear, why on earth didn't you phone first?" she exclaimed. "I'm up to my ears today, but if I'd known I could have canceled one interview. I had no idea! I thought it was that Carey woman from the Czech Relief."

Mitford:

"Girls had to come out, I knew. It is a stage in their existence just as the public school is for boys, which must be passed before life, real life, could begin. Dances are supposed to be delightful; they cost a lot of money and it is most good of the grown-ups to give them, most good, too, of Aunt Sadie to have taken me to so many. But at these dances, although I quite enjoyed going to them, I always had the uncomfortable feeling that I missed something, it was like going to a play in a foreign language. [...]

'What I do enjoy,' I said, truthfully, 'is the dressing up.'

'Oh, so do I! Do you think about dresses and hats all the time, even in church? I do too. Heavenly tweed, Fanny, I noticed it at once.'

'Only it's bagging,' I said.

In both of these passages, characters are introduced and connect by means of furnishings and dress, which are described and commented upon in detail (the girls in the Mitford go on to discuss party dresses). In these novels, the kinds of aesthetic choices serve to position the self-understanding of the characters; Amanda Keeler Evans' 'Hollywood modern' bedroom marks her out as a fashionable society woman, as does the 'high-necked Chinese

bed coat' (which is perhaps unfamiliar to her provincial visitor, who is less up-to-date on current fashions, suggested by the wondering 'some sort of'), undercutting the purported seriousness of her journalistic work. The earnest Fanny and Polly, in Mitford's novel, come from a more conservative world in which tweed is still the height of fashion – though they are also cognizant of the fabric's limitations (because tweed is made of wool, it will begin to distend in the rear after a while). They familiarly reference the classic rituals of upper-class girls' lives: dances and the much anticipated 'coming out', which marks a girl out as ready to marry.

Reading these authors together over several months gave me a sense of the sonic texture I wanted, the kinds of rhythms that were possible in dialogue, and the word choices that might resonate with the period. They each present different solutions to signaling dialogue; Powell describes the voice of Amanda's assistant without using a verb, while Mitford relies heavily on cadence, parentheses, and exclamations or words of emphasis ('what I *do* enjoy') to insert emotion into reported speech.

Let's return to the excerpt from *Effingers* we looked at above. With the authorial voices of Edith Wharton, Dawn Powell, and Nancy Mitford in mind, I shaped a voice for *Effingers*. At times I skewed more toward British usage, such as the word "indeed" over "too", at times toward the American when the British sounded too formal for Tergit's straightforward German. Foreign words, which I had initially thought were important to preserve for precision, were brought into English (there is no reason to retain 'coupé' when 'carriage' does just as well; the same goes for 'rear' over 'cul'). 'Herr Theodor is asked' has now become 'requested', a more formal verb that suits the tone of the servant better. Annette and Marie Kramer now have a bit more of the girlish intimacy with which Mitford's Fanny and Polly chatter away. The descriptions have been adjusted to match English word order and the verbs now do more work; 'diamonds dangled', rather than 'hung'; men 'sporting' rather than 'had' beards, etc. The trick was to accomplish these small changes without too many additions or explicit rewriting:

“Herr Theodor is requested to come down immediately. The first guests are arriving.” Annette said to her friend Marie Kramer: “I’m so excited. You’ll have to pay attention when they introduce Effinger. If you like him, pinch me; if not, I’ll know you’ve passed a devastating judgment.”

Carriage after carriage stopped before the house on Bendlerstrasse. The candles on the crystal chandeliers had been lit. The women arrived in their grand toilettes, wearing capes of royal blue, purple, and red velvet trimmed with fur. Wide skirts in brocade, damask, and velvet jutted out in the rear, with panniers and tabliers in rococo style. Fine leather gloves went up to their armpits. Their hair was decorated with diamond stars, flowers, and ostrich feathers. Diamonds dangled from their wrists and necks. The men were in tails, flowers in their buttonholes, hands in white glacé gloves. They sported long, respectable beards, sideburns, and little mustaches.

Emmanuel was in his element. He greeted each woman in a deep, jovial voice: “Well, how are you, beautiful lady? You’ve outdone yourself again. Sarah Bernhardt and Clara Ziegler rolled into one.” He courted every woman in the house.

The process I have described has an imitative aspect to it; it is slow, painstaking, and hard to reconstruct because of the way in which these choices sediment over time. My contribution to an anglophone Tergit comes not from the individual word choices I made, but from the preparatory context I built for my own understanding of Tergit and her novel. This is what Cole describes in as a

preparation of the self for the reception and registration of an actual other, and as such its ethic is technical, and its technique is ethical. [...T]his preparation-for-reception and the reception itself comprise, as I see it, the most important stage of the translation process, and the quality of that reception will to a large extent determine the quality and even the content of what one represents.⁸

Ultimately, this recognition of kinship – both in style and in concern – between Tergit and a set of female, anglophone, midcentury authors was crucial for my own preparations to render *Effingers* into English. These preparations also bring the work into a new framework that moves Tergit’s work out of the German context in which it initially found little resonance. These attunements, in which I increasingly imagined a lively conversation between Tergit and these other writers, thus laid the foundation for my understanding of voice – all for the purposes of giving this ‘lost classic’ a new audience in English.

References

1. “Ich glaube tatsächlich nicht, dass man heute noch ... einen Roman noch so konzipieren und schreiben kann, wie Sie das hier getan haben.” Quoted in Hans Wagener, *Gabriele Tergit: Gestohlene Jahre* (V&R Unipress, 2013), 226.

2. This is the time-honored question on which much translation theory turns. For a more theoretically sophisticated and erudite treatment of the questions I raise here from the perspective of ethics, see Peter Cole's excellent essay, "Making Sense in Translation: Toward an Ethics of the Art," in *In Translation: Translators on their Work and What it Means*, ed. Esther Allen and Susan Bernofsky (Columbia University Press, 2013), 3–16. For an overview of foreignizing versus domesticating tendencies and their roots in the translation theory of Schleiermacher and beyond, see also Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (Routledge, 1995).
3. Alice Kaplan, "Translation: The Biography of an Artform," in Allen/Bernofsky, *In Translation*, 67–81, here 79–80.
4. Cole, "Making Sense in Translation," 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 4.
6. In his review of the translation in the *New York Review of Books*, Adam Kirsch notes this, drawing a parallel to Walter Benjamin's *Berlin Childhood around 1900*. See Kirsch, "Things Fall Apart," *New York Review of Books*, February 12, 2026.
7. Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 3, 1925–1930, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie (Hogarth Press, 1980), 12.
8. Cole, "Making Sense in Translation," 9.

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