

Gatekeeping and the Cross-Cultural Travel of Life Stories

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Traveling Texts: A Description

The starting point of this paper is provided by a metaphorical narrative. Texts travel between nations and cultures, either in their original language as exported books or in different languages as books in translation. This paper will deal with the second form of travel, which involves translation as a precondition for reaching a wider public beyond linguistic (and political, social, or cultural) boundaries. Auto/biographies in particular, which allow direct access to the life experience of members of other cultures, can work as contact texts that facilitate understanding between otherwise separate cultural groups. Such separate groups may speak different languages, but need not. For example, from 1978 to 1987, under the series title *Verständigungstexte* (*Texts off/for Understanding*), the German publisher Suhrkamp issued auto/biographical texts from groups which, although they shared a native language, did not communicate much among themselves and with mainstream society. The series included autobiographical statements from, for example, drug addicts (Müller-Schwefe and Schott 1981), prison inmates (Kreiler 1979), or teachers and pupils in Germany (Zimmermann and Eigel 1980). Such projects acknowledge that auto/biographical texts do have a special potential for the creation of

understanding between social and cultural groups. Nevertheless, if texts from foreign language cultures have not been translated, they are hardly ever received outside academia, at least in Germany.

On their way from one language community and/or country to the next, these texts pass thresholds of selection guarded by various people and institutions. They have to cross various kinds of borders, from ideological to territorial, until finally their language and meanings are transformed (and guarded) by their translators and by reviews in the new cultural context. Various professional groups and institutions select texts to pass into a foreign language culture and safeguard its borders against undesired texts. Literary scouts observe a foreign book market, write reports on texts, assess and recommend texts and help some of them find their way across borders. In publishing houses, editors carefully study book reports and reviews, assessing each traveling text before it is accepted for translation and publication and thereby allowed to pass into another culture and language.

The Concept of Gatekeeping

The term “gatekeeping” has been used by sociologists to refer to people who control access to housing (Fulcher and Scott 2003, 506) but has also been used in media studies. There, it means that to reach its intended target, “every message has to pass through many ‘gates’; some will be wide open, some ajar, some tightly closed” (Watson and Hill 2000, 123). In the world of publishing, “intermediary personnel” (Brooker 2003, 108) such as editors and literary scouts occupy a strategic decision-making position between the points of book production and reception. These scouts mediate between the primary publisher of a book in its original language and the publisher of the translation, making decisions about publication projects that advance and filter the stream of books from one country and language into another.

The gatekeepers’ class background, upbringing, education, values, and attitudes to the world as well as the values, norms, professional codes, and traditional wisdom of their institutions, including publishing houses, determine the criteria for the selection of material (Watson and Hill 2000, 124). The pressure of the market, that is, the necessity to select books that will sell well, also influences decisions. This factor is also intertwined with values, norms, and expectations of prospective buyers. Many gatekeepers in publishing houses share much of the culture and many of the values of the buyers; however, because of the diversity of the gatekeepers, not all of them. They may occasionally select and support books that they find particularly

valuable but not equally marketable. In that case, editors and publishers may employ internal subsidies, buying rights for some guaranteed best-sellers in order to implement special projects that they do not expect to be profitable.

To a large extent, gatekeepers control the flow from one culture to another of life stories, images, and experiences as well as norms and values that structure them.¹ In this process, they decide which auto/biographical texts will come to represent life in another country or culture than that of the home market for their readers, and whether existing lines of discourse about that other culture will be maintained or new ones created. But how free are these gatekeepers in their decisions? Why are some texts selected for translation while others are not? What considerations and criteria feed into their decisions? Which factors that influence gatekeeping can we find traces of? All in all, how do civilizations choose what they assimilate of others?²

Although regular border guards between nations may have guidelines as to whom to let pass and whom to send back, their decisions will often be driven by experience and a complex set of factors not easily explained to an outsider. Gatekeepers between book markets find themselves in a similar situation. For example, when I explained to editor M-S³ before our interview that I was investigating decision-making processes in the publishing industry, he agreed that to the reader, the publishing industry must appear as a black box and that its decision making is not transparent at all to the outside world. He also called publishing a gamble and an irrational business where traditions and structures that have evolved over many years play a major role. Decisions are not made on the basis of rules laid down in writing but result from complex interactions, routines, and experience, all of which make its decision-making hard to explain to outsiders. Despite these difficulties, some people involved in these processes tried to explain these rules to me, and it is to them that I owe my insights.

Besides drawing on the sociological model of gatekeeping, this paper builds on the assumption that discourse constructs knowledge and that controlling discursive flows means controlling flows of knowledge. Life stories from foreign cultures enter the receiving culture's knowledge of those other cultures and become incorporated into the receiving culture's archives and identity constructions. We might say that knowledge about "indigenous" models of life is complemented by "foreign" models of life through both contrast and resemblance. Therefore, control over translations of life stories is also a form of control over the flow of knowledge and world views between cultures. These "foreign" life stories must be related to "indigenous" readers' stock of conventional knowledge in the process of

reception/reading. Such stories will be adopted most readily if they confirm existing value systems either directly or indirectly.

The general thesis for this essay is that decisions about the translation of auto/biographical texts are part of wider cultural processes and discourses. These decisions are informed not only by considerations of literary standards and prospective readerships or buyers but also—through the gatekeepers—substantially by the cultural and political traditions and discourses of the country for which the auto/biographies are to be translated.

The Gatekeepers: Publishers, Editors, and Literary Scouts

For this project, an analysis of three German publishers' lists of books in print was combined with interviews with three professionals—one literary scout and two editors—working for these publishers. The lists of books in print were searched for auto/biographical texts in translation from any language into German. Categories of auto/biographical texts included autobiographies, memoirs, letters, memories, (auto/biographical) interviews, diaries, and journals. In the process of research, insights from the analysis of the book lists informed my questions in the interviews and, in turn, the interviews provided some background for understanding the publication policies behind the booklist. In the interviews, I formulated open questions and discussed specific titles. All three publishers, S. Fischer Verlag, Insel Verlag, and Suhrkamp Verlag⁴ are among the most reputable in Germany, devoted to the works of eminent German and international writers, especially modern classical writers, as is expressed in the publishers' mission statements on their websites ("Insel," "Suhrkamp," "S. Fischer"). Although they published some autobiographical texts, they do not specialize in auto/biography.⁵ They are not mass-market publishers but, rather, cater to the tastes of the educated middle classes. All three interviewees emphasized that their publishers are very literary in orientation and therefore any book, including auto/biographical texts, must be well written.

The first interviewee (Z-B), whom I interviewed in March 2008, lives in England working as a literary scout for the German publisher S. Fischer Verlag and four other publishers.⁶ She receives books from British agents and publishers and reports about the UK market for her employers. Her reports either inform the publishers about books or recommend them for translation and publication abroad. The publisher makes the final selections. The two other interviewees (M-S and S-D) live and work in Frankfurt/Main, Germany as editors for the German publishers Suhrkamp Verlag (M-S) and

Insel Verlag (S-D). I interviewed both in May 2008. Two of the interviewees are female, one is male.

Factors that Influence Decisions about Translation

1. The book lists of all three publishers reveal that decisions about translations are influenced by major themes of the national collective memory and by considerations of which life stories written in a language other than German are relevant to German memory and identity. Such relevant aspects of collective memory include the Third Reich, the extermination of the European Jews, the First and Second World Wars, and related issues. Therefore, the memories of survivors and eyewitnesses of the Holocaust are a recurring theme. For example, autobiographer Edith Velmans-van Hessen in her *Ich wollte immer glücklich sein: Das Schicksal eines jüdischen Mädchens im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (2001) remembers how she survived the Holocaust as a teenager hiding in Holland, and Richard Sonnenfeldt writes in *Mehr als ein Leben: Vom jüdischen Flüchtlingsjungen zum Chefdolmetscher der Anklage bei den Nürnberger Prozessen* (2003) how, as a Jewish refugee, he became chief interpreter at the Nuremberg trials.

Nevertheless, S-D and M-S emphasized that they always look for new perspectives on well-established topics such as the Second World War. S-D chose Edvard Hoem's story of his mother and father as an example. The auto/biography (2007) was translated from Norwegian and has a strong connection with Germany because the author's mother had been made pregnant by a German soldier in 1944. The experiences of women and children left behind by the German occupying army in countries such as Norway have a transnational appeal, and their translations have become new documents in the German archive of wartime memories. Illustrating the embeddedness of such life stories in wider social discourses, Hoem's book was mentioned in a popular German literary TV program, which contributed to its reception and success in Germany, and in his two auto/biographical books, Hans Massaquoi describes the African, or non-white, experience in supposedly homogeneously white Germany (2002, 2005). His life story provides a unique perspective on the Third Reich, but it also contributes to current debates about multiculturalism and racism in Germany and German identity. Furthermore, Massaquoi's two books, although translated from English, tell the story of lives lived partly in Germany, thus offering extra points of reference and relevance for German readers and for the integration of these narratives into the archives of German history.

2. Book lists and the two editors confirm that publishers tend to publish auto/biographical texts by well-known authors whose works have already been translated into German. Thus Insel published the letters by Katherine Mansfield (1992), Suhrkamp those by Marcel Proust (2002) and Gertrude Stein (1985), and S. Fischer the auto/biographies by Agatha Christie (2004) and Arthur Miller (1989). These autobiographical texts belong to the internationally established canon of modern classics that has been incorporated into German high culture, and all three publishers represent cosmopolitan, humanistic (bourgeois) German high culture and the idea of world literature to their readers.

3. Many of the titles are auto/biographies by internationally well-known public figures, from Nelson Mandela (1997) through Charles Chaplin (1998) to Pelé (2006) and Sting (2003). Some names may be familiar only to a certain generation or interest group, while others will have a wide currency. This variety appeals to diverse readerships, from those with an interest in international politics to fans of sports, film stars and popular music. The authors' names represent certain models of life such as "perseverance and integrity rewarded," "from rags to riches," or "from the bottom to the top through sports." These names help sell the books, but as models of life stories, they also confirm well-established western traditions such as the cult of the creative genius and the celebration of great personalities, formerly "great men." The translation of such life stories strengthens these western traditions by illustrating the international validity of such models.

The life stories of many political personalities embody the struggles experienced in working for political causes, for example, Pablo Casals' work for freedom and democracy,⁷ Nelson Mandela's long struggle for equality, peace, human rights, and especially since the Second World War, Anchee Min and Loung Ung against communism and totalitarianism.⁸ Thus many life stories endorse and disseminate western values, however indirectly. Along similar lines, current arguments over non-democratic systems and the "war on terror" have influenced, for example, the selection for translation of Reza Hajatpour's auto/biography of an ex-mullah from Iran (2005). The values implied in these select life stories stabilize western democratic systems such as Germany's.

4. The literary scout claims that another factor for selection may be an author's association with a famous name, as in the case of Malachy McCourt, who in his auto/biography (2001) exploited the success of his brother Frank

McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1997), the film version of which had also been a critical and box-office success. In other words, if publishers have names or books on their list that sell well, they put more of those names or books on their list. Furthermore, Z-B suspects that the truth aspect of auto/biographical writing makes such life stories more attractive than fictitious ones and that the warmth and humor of Malachy McCourt's writing, as well as the traditional German interest in Ireland, also contributed to its success.

5. With regard to unfamiliar names or ordinary people's autobiographies, two main criteria for selection seem to be at work. The first is a richness in emotions and insights that will captivate German readers (Z-B). Z-B mentions J. R. Moehringer's *The Tender Bar* (2007) as an example. Moehringer's story of a boy being largely raised by the regulars and staff of a bar was a success in the United States, hardly noticed in Britain, and selected for translation and very successful in Germany. Nevertheless, Moehringer's story of growing up and coming of age is not only a rich and captivating narrative in general and very well written; it also taps into current debates on gender roles. Although Moehringer celebrates the nurturing qualities of the men in the bar and the great impact they had on his socialization as a man, he ends up acknowledging how much more he owes to his mother, thus taking a very diplomatic stance with regard to single motherhood, fatherhood, and socialization. This even-handedness may have contributed to the popularity among German readers although most reviews have focused on the role of the young boy's experiences in the bar ("Kundenrezensionen," "Produktinformationen," "Reviews").

On the other hand, Z-B reports that some auto/biographies with similar qualities are not translated. Horatio Clare's *Running for the Hills* (2006), about growing up on a sheep farm in Wales, serves Z-B as an example of a book that is beautifully written but not dramatic enough and "with too much sheep farming in it" to be translated for German readers. John Cornwell's *Seminary Boy* (2006) about a childhood in a Catholic boarding school was hugely successful in Britain but not selected for translation by S. Fischer, probably because the Catholic theme does not occupy as strong a place in German culture as it does in Britain.

S-D explains that a second criterion is a person's connection with famous contemporaries or historic events, as in the case of the childhood memories of Gwen Raverat, Charles Darwin's grandchild. She lived from 1885 to 1957, and in her autobiography (1991) describes her childhood in Cambridge in the late Victorian era, drawing a shrewd and lively image of

that time. Nevertheless, S-D reports that despite excellent reviews in Germany, the book did not sell well. It can be assumed that neither the time and place nor the link to Darwin provided enough relevance or connectedness to the German reader, which is confirmed in one reader's response (Renate).

6. Books incorporating discourses of globalization appeal to German readers' interest in other continents and countries. The current interest in life in China, and especially Tibet, is satisfied by auto/biographies by Chinese persons who tend to write from their exile in the western world, like Anchee Min, who was born in Shanghai but went to the United States at 27. This phenomenon can be interpreted in two ways. First, that the memoirs of an émigré are already intrinsically cultural translations and therefore accessible to western readers. This interpretation works well not only for authors like Min and Alexandra David-Néel, a French writer who also lived in Tibet as a Buddhist nun, but also for Sonnenfeldt and Massaquoi, émigrés from Germany mentioned above. With regard to China, the second reason for the high number of "trans-cultural" auto/biographies may be that westerners' access to the enormous number of books published in China is limited, and many books probably go unnoticed by the West.

7. This question of accessibility implies another aspect of gatekeepers' selection criteria. "Foreign" (and especially Asian) lives serve as a means to constitute our own, western lives as different. At the same time, these foreign lives must offer points of commonality and be told in a comprehensible way. This doubleness may account to some extent for the large proportion of transcultural auto/biographies among recent translations into German, from those by David-Néel (2004), Massaquoi (2002), and Casals (2005) to Tensin Choedrak's narrative of his life as the physician of the Dalai Lama (1999) and to only indirectly transnational stories such as Hoem's of children of the occupying army. In such transcultural stories, either German or other western emigrants report their lives abroad from a German and European-shaped perspective, or emigrants from more distant cultures to Europe or the United States explain their different backgrounds within their new, western conceptual framework. It appears that transnational lives can be assimilated into another nation's culture and archive more easily than fully "foreign" ones.

8. The editors also confirm that current issues create an interest in related auto/biographies, as in the case of China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama. Choedrak's auto/biography was translated from French in 1999, appeared under the German title *Der Palast des Regenbogens* (*The Palace of the Rainbow*), and was very successful. Nevertheless, its 2003 edition published by Insel appeared under a changed title, *Im Dienst des Dalai Lama* (*In the Service of the Dalai Lama*), to make the author's link with the Dalai Lama recognizable at first sight and ensure that prospective buyers interested in the Dalai Lama, currently a controversial figure in the German news, find the book.

9. For the selection of texts from more distant cultures and languages, editors seek the advice of external experts for their decisions, as in projects such as the *Japanese Library* of Insel Verlag. In this way, publishers' decisions are anchored in existing academic, media, and transnational discourses and traditions.

The Role of Dominant Value Systems

My interviews with those guarding the gates of translation have highlighted the complexity of factors that influence the selection of auto/biographies for publication in Germany. The gatekeepers need to meet their publishers' profile and thus their readers' expectations to ensure commercial and critical success. They are also part of wider, even international professional and discursive networks that channel books and ideas. Besides the professional discourses, gatekeepers operate within ideological frameworks that guide decisions. What Janice Radway (2002) stated with regard to the selection of books by the Book-of-the-Month Club can be applied to the selection of books for translation: The books are selected to sell "a social framework and cognitive map for understanding and organizing the world" (367) and "confirm [the readership's] identity as educated and au courant" (368). Patterns and models of lives certainly belong to these social and cognitive frameworks that shape the identity of groups. Such patterns on sub-national, national, and transnational levels overlap and inform each other, but they also offer means of differentiation from constructed others.

Philippe Lejeune's question of whether there is an "International I" is addressed but not answered by these observations (2008). Nevertheless, this particular question and my observation of the suitability of transnational lives for further travel in translation is related to the current theoretical debate about transculturality, which doubts "essential" cultural difference in

favor of flexible relations between self and other (Clifford 1998, 14). Transnational life stories destabilize the previously assumed fixed opposition between different cultures, but concepts of self and other are still constructed in these narratives and by their readers, though they may often cross traditional boundaries, including national ones.

Crudely put, the ideological aspects immanent in decisions about translating auto/biographical texts are akin to the dominant bourgeois worldview⁹ that relies on a well-established canon of knowledge about the past as well as the present of one's own and other cultures—a knowledge shared by the educated, which stabilizes culture and society, including those of Germany. Therefore, gatekeepers, themselves part of these systems of knowledge, contribute to the coherence of their readership¹⁰ and affirm existing systems of knowledge. On the other hand, the translation of life stories not only affirms but also challenges and widens existing knowledge. Such systems of knowledge about the past include, for example, fascism, the Holocaust, and the Second World War, for which new perspectives from the outside are welcomed in Germany. When translated, books that provide external perspectives on such topics expand the archives of German history, but they must offer some connection with German history and culture to be accepted or “assimilated” (Lejeune 2008) into German culture.

Furthermore, many auto/biographies from other cultures directly or indirectly affirm western values such as democracy, freedom, and tolerance. They do so by presenting exemplary lives such as that of Nelson Mandela, but also by celebrating the general human values of a caring community and familial love, as in the case of Moehringer. The cultural details of such life stories may be exotic or unusual, but the values that shape the protagonists' lives, such as endurance or unselfishness, are not. Thus the translation of foreign and transnational life stories not only naturalizes those models of life into German culture, but it also naturalizes the German, or Western, models in that the reader recognizes them even in foreign autobiographies, thus experiencing their transnational—and seemingly universal—validity.

The interviews suggest that the affirmation of dominant values and systems of knowledge plays a key role in the selection of auto/biographies for translation, contributing to the maintenance of existing power structures. Nevertheless, it is also possible to read such decisions hermeneutically and as a result of the gatekeepers' desire to create broader understanding in their readers of other cultures and the experiences of non-Germans. Life stories and life models offer ways to understand different cultures, but at the same time some shared knowledge, values, and

representational conventions are preconditions for understanding because, although the boundaries between the self and other are unstable, to understand the other, we need to recognize ourselves in the other (Hans Georg Gadamer, qtd. in Vasilache 2003, 61). This hermeneutic approach, even if to some degree unconscious, may also be an aspect of the intentions and professional codes of the gatekeepers and thus may indirectly function as a stabilizing principle.

As for the future of gatekeeping, the digital revolution and the Internet may overthrow the regime of institutional gatekeepers. Auto/biographical texts of all types can now circulate relatively freely in electronic media, circumventing the checkpoints of the traditional gatekeepers. Nevertheless, the issue of translation remains unresolved for these texts, too, inhibiting their free travel between cultures of different languages. Will the proliferating forms of electronic communication give rise to new gatekeepers selecting, translating, and passing on some of these texts?

Notes

1. Maria Lowe (1998) uses the example of women's bodybuilding to describe how a small group of gatekeepers have the power to determine reality and set boundaries, define what is acceptable and set and maintain norms of behavior and appearance (174). She also exposes the need to increase profits as a driving force behind changing normative images.

2. The particular formulation of these last two questions was inspired by Philippe Lejeune's keynote address at the Sixth Biennial Conference of the International Auto/Biography Association in Honolulu, 2008.

3. In this paper, the names of the interviewees are shortened to two letters.

4. The web sites of these publishers reveal that there are slight differences. Suhrkamp Verlag prides itself in publishing authors, not books, and especially modern classics, but it also edits several different lines with different profiles. Similarly, Insel Verlag features classical and modern literature of high standards. S. Fischer Verlag incorporates a variety of publishers some of which offer quality entertainment and information or specialized lines, but S. Fischer Verlag itself is devoted to quality nonfiction, modern classics, and contemporary German and international literature.

5. The publisher S. Fischer has 63 auto/biographical texts on its list, 27 of which are translations. Suhrkamp features more than 300 biographical and auto/biographical texts, 38 of which are auto/biographical texts in translation. Insel offers 836 books in translation, 29 of which are auto/biographical. These figures have been determined by the kind of access given to the lists of books in print on

the publishers' websites and merely provide an idea of the number of texts from which my few examples have been taken.

6. The other publishers are De Geus (the Netherlands), Gummerus (Finland), Alfabet (Sweden), and Borgen (Denmark).

7. Pablo Casals was a Spanish Republican, musician, and composer who lived in American exile.

8. Anchee Min grew up in Maoist China, was sent to a work camp and later trained as an actress. She has lived in the United States since 1984. Loung Ung was born in 1970 in Cambodia, escaped the Khmer Rouge, and has lived in the United States since 1980. She has received the Nobel Peace Prize for campaigning against land mines.

9. For a more complex discussion of cultural production, class, and power, see Pierre Bourdieu (2002).

10. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (2005) argue with reference to Benedict Anderson that printed books and periodicals have contributed to national cohesion and the formation of national identity (93–94).

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