

BOOK REVIEW

Feeling for the Sense

Katja Haustein

Kate Briggs, *This Little Art* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017).

Kate Briggs has described herself modestly as a translator, writer, and tutor, but to Barthes scholars she is probably best known for her highly acclaimed translations of Roland Barthes's *La Préparation du roman* (2011) and *Comment vivre ensemble* (2013), both published by Columbia University Press. Briggs, who teaches at the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam, spent five years translating the notes on the basis of which Barthes delivered his lectures and seminars at the Collège de France in 1976/77 and between 1978 and 1980. The intense experience of working so closely with the works of an author she loves offers one point of departure for her contemplations on the theory and practice of translation, and one she frequently returns to in the course of her writing.

For Barthesian readers, the most obvious value of Briggs' book may lie in the fact that she offers an insight into the process of translating Barthes, reflecting upon the pleasure of this task, but also the challenges, the (often unanswered) questions, limitations, the occasional 'mistakes'. In Briggs' words the 'labour of translation' appears as an intensely relational activity that questions seemingly stable conceptions of originality and authorship inasmuch as it is driven by the constant desire to 'feel out' the unknown space that opens up between translator and author, original and translation.

Briggs' method is avowedly schooled by her critical involvement with Barthes. Autobiographically motivated and composed in an often lyrical tone, her writing is driven by an unabashed subjectivity – a subjectivity, in fact, which the Barthes of the 1970s had turned into one of his main hermeneutical tools. But for Briggs, as for the late Barthes, subjectivity is not an end in itself. On the contrary, to develop one's own individual gaze means for Briggs to overcome the confines of the self and to recognize the space of the other. Within this context, the practice of translation turns into a form of critical engagement based on a high degree

of sensitivity towards singularity and difference. The ambition is, as Briggs emphasizes on several occasions, to resist the temptation of appropriation, to bear the otherness of the original text, to not treat all things the same way, and to parry any form of 'all-purpose explanation'. As a consequence, the practice of translation appears as an open-ended negotiation between translator and text that is based on a dialectical tension between identification and separation, nearness and distance. Briggs illustrates the complexity of this relationship most evocatively by using the image of the child walking alongside his mother and struggling to keep up with her pace. Not to impose one's own rhythm onto the other, not to 'overwrite' the other (text), but to develop instead the ability to endure the tension between assonance and dissonance that characterizes the relationship between original and translation, appears in Briggs' writing as the translator's most cherished good.

Briggs' critical practice could be accused of being imprecise. She has a way of addressing very big questions without attempting a solution, of associating different situations and texts without examining the material she is exhibiting, of repeating the same motif or thought over and over again in different variations, of leaving open ends and creating gaps. And despite the footnotes, it is not always clear who speaks. Some readers might find her writing unsystematic, amateurish, mystifying – a critique, by the way, that has often been applied to the late works of Barthes. Indeed, Briggs is very good at formulating questions, in creating highly suggestive correspondences, and in encouraging a dialogue between writers, readers, and texts. She is not so good at condensing her thoughts into clearly identifiable conclusions. But then I don't think she wants to be. In fact, it is precisely in this digressive nature of Briggs' writing that we can find its true quality. In a Barthesian sense 'writerly', Briggs' text inspires the reader to write things further. To mobilize the spiral of ideas. To *move things on*. In her book, Briggs evokes the practice of translation, and with it the practice of interpretation, as a kind of love relation driven by a desire that is potentially aimless in that it may never be fulfilled. (The three key examples Briggs discusses are of women translating works by gay men.) At the same time, Briggs' work is based on a sense of intimacy that turns the acknowledgement of difference, and of distance, into its actual strength. It is for this reason that Kate Briggs' essay on 'this little art' appears to me as a graceful, and highly inspirational, exercise in 'this precious indirection' called tact.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Before joining the University of Kent in 2012, Katja Haustein studied Comparative Literature, German Literature, and History in Berlin, London, Paris, and Cambridge. She was a British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge, and a Max Weber Fellow at the European University Institute in Florence. Her research interests are in modern French and German autobiographical writing in relation to visual culture; memory and identity; literature and emotions; and literature and ethics. She has written on conceptions of space in modern French literature, and on twentieth-century autobiography and visual culture, including [*Regarding Lost Time: Photography, Identity, and Affect in Proust, Benjamin, and Barthes*](#) (Oxford: *Legenda*, 2012). In her more recent work she looks at Roland Barthes's conceptions of empathy and pity (*L'Esprit créateur*, 55.4 [2015]), at the 'Breastfeeding Crisis' in Imperial Germany, and at the role of tact in the works of Plessner, Adorno, and Barthes (*MLR*, 114.1 [2019]). She is currently working on a literary history of tact in the twentieth century.

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