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Yael Inokai's *A Simple Intervention*: Reflections on a Translation

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By Be Schierenberg

Every translation is an occasion for reading and [Yael Inokai's *Ein Simpler Eingriff*](#) is a pleasure to read closely. Stylishly reduced to brief phrases, events unfold by the measure of breath or a wandering gaze, stretch out in a soft tension between one encounter and another. Inokai's third book continues the success of her previous novels [Storchenbiss](#) und [Mahlstrom](#); added to the Longlist for the German Book Prize in 2022, it won an Anna Seghers Prize and the Clemens Brentano Prize in 2023. A brief reflection by the narrator Meret some ghostly October presents the novel as a recollection of a time in her mid 20s working as a nurse in a hospital. Meret is an assistant to a doctor who performs corrective brain surgery designed predominantly for women deemed disordered, angry, queer, poor. A figure of disciplined empathy, Meret's role is to soothe patients undergoing the procedure with simple games and conversation. Despite patients regularly not returning from the procedure, Meret is first convinced of its promise. Over the course of the novel, she changes her mind because of her friendship with patient Marianne, who barely survives and is disabled by this procedure, encounters with frequently incarcerated Vera, whose treatment keeps her in positions of servitude, and Meret's love story with her new roommate Sarah, who lost her ex to a fatal psychiatric intervention.

Resonant with queer plays of perspective that structure modernist works such as Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, the novel is divided into three sections: named after "Marianne," "Sarah", and "Meret" herself. The story predominantly takes place in the hospital and nurses' dormitory - the "Schwesternheim" - in a generic German speaking city at a not further specified time. Meret's recollections mirror and reconfigure the scripts animating the clinic as *dispositif*. Against various expectations of docility, Marianne, Sarah and Meret gain range beyond the institutional contexts of clinic and family and eventually flee the wards and wardens of their life. My remarks on translation are grounded in the novel's second section, "Sarah," which begins in a room with a view - street, city, sky, a specular facade.

Our room was four by four meters in size. It faced the street. In the distance, one could see the city with its single high rise; the smooth facade reflected the sky. (63)

This surface serves many purposes: as point of reflection for the protagonist, as screen, as spotlight onto the scene—under its cool illumination, *Ein Simpler Eingriff* slowly unfolds an exploration of proximity between Meret and Sarah.

While Inokai's sparse settings seem to reference the leaden mid-century decades, they do not actually represent a historical moment, but make use of literary history to stage the novel's queer speculation. The novel deals with a psychiatric brain surgery that was common in the 1930's-70's, but there is no other reference to historical or geopolitical context. There are uniforms and dresses, bikes and trains, a bar and one high-rise, books and an alarm clock, and a telephone in the hallway—(post)-modernist

props that bracket neoliberalism's consumer cultures and mark the novel's a-contemporaneity. The narrator does not spell out: love, lobotomy, abortion, lesbians. Readers are to infer instead and become implicated. *Ein Simpler Eingriff's* ground, if you will, is less a historical archive than an intertextual field. Inokai has added a list of inspirations to the end of the book; some titles situate her novel in the history of strange love, among such authors as Toni Morrison, Patricia Highsmith, E.M. Forster, Alice Walker, or Violette Leduc; her mention of Jennifer Worth's *The Midwife Trilogy* on the other hand sketches in the post-war working-class background and nurse's perspective. Then, there are references absent from that list: the world of *Ein Simpler Eingriff* is shaped by addiction, where opiates "provide entire cities with work and entire cemeteries with death (119)." This view into the story world, too, appears as an effect of literary lineage: the death of Swiss lesbian writer Annemarie Schwarzenbach is hauntingly present as Sarah explains the passing of her former lover: invasive cures aimed at her 'disease' - morphine addiction, a diagnosis of schizophrenia after a concussion incurred during a biking accident, queerness—"until there was nothing left of her (119)." Resonances with Schwarzenbach fold themes of queer love, opiates, and proto-fascist atmospheres into Inokai's story world in a few simple, understated strokes. Also missing from her list but mentioned in an interview with Daniel Graf in [Republik](#), is *Le Jardin d'acclimatation*, Yves Navarre's story of a young gay man's imprisonment and lobotomy. Having received the Prix Goncourt in 1980, this book was translated into German in 1988 by Christel Kauder as *Vorbeugender Eingriff*. By echoing the work of Navarre, who purposefully overdosed on barbiturates in 1994, Inokai recalls a literary lineage lost in the wake of the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis and signals an alignment with a forgotten history of queer accounts of institutionalization and violent correction. Ultimately and for the present purpose, I parse these resonances to emphasize that *Ein Simpler Eingriff* is born of translation and takes effect through the work of transposition.

The section "Sarah" interests me as a translator because it showcases the novel's preponderance of scene over exposition. Narrative prose, in its capacity to speed up time and collect plot, is used effectively to demonstrate the passing of time, and to establish enough background for the present scene. Most of the novel takes place in rooms, such as the one we enter with Meret:

I packed my things, I was swift. Once on the second floor I put my suitcase on the table, took a few steps across the room and waited. Neither of the two beds seemed occupied. One stood by the window, one closer to the door. The empty closet was divided down the middle. (63)

The establishment of clear spatial frames, the description of a few recurring objects that function as props, the relationship of dialogue and action, and the story's limited cast display the compositional logic of a chamber play. In their new space of four by four, two beds, a closet divided by two, Meret's sphere soon becomes the window and its view; Sarah connotes the door and a stack of books. Within that space, we witness attraction drawing them into each other's orbit. Over weeks of divergent daily rhythms, Meret and Sarah contemplate each other and appear refracted in the other's gaze.

Lines of invisible separation appear in the description of Meret's rooms in the dorm and repeatedly across the novel:

For the last seven years I had been living on the first floor, in a room without a view, right next to the stairs. My roommate had kept to herself most of the time. There was an invisible line between her bed and mine that she had never crossed. (63)

This spatial division is both an abstract and objectively manifest line keeping the women in the nurses home straight and each in their part of the closet. Soon, Sarah's presence in the room, the creases in her sheets, her curly hair, the folded pages in her books announce that she is neither. There is discipline in the way that, over two chapters and several weeks, Meret waits, before making a few symbolic steps from her own across the line over to Sarah's bed. The text works brilliantly with pleasure in restraint: offering only brief moments of contact between the two characters creates a sustained arc of longing that culminates in one moment of touch. This moment of touch reaches Meret through time, bends back on the first line of the prologue as well as the novel's very last.

When I finally got up, I went to her bed and pulled the blanket back over her shoulder. I let my hand rest there, just for one moment. It meant nothing, then. But the moment stayed with me. It is still around. I am sitting on a bench, and it is here. I make coffee, and it is here. I look at a window fogging up in October. And it is here. (67)

There is as prevalence of descriptions of space and duration, then, a scenic composition of this text, that comes to the fore through the work of translation. Take, for instance, this moment in the beginning of Chapter 2:

I waited for her. Sometimes I lay in bed in our room and waited for her.

I would try and collect my days off until they made up a small bundle that allowed me to visit home. This did not always work out; there was also a scatter of single, free days, not enough for the trip. Since I had begun sharing a room with Sarah, I stayed in bed longer than usual on these stray days. I wanted to encounter her, exchange a glance, a word. (65)

This curious image of Meret waiting, saving up her days off in little bundles to make the trip to her family home, draws attention to the logic of restriction and excess governing this character. Waiting for an encounter with Sarah becomes the new ground for a game of endurance Meret usually plays out at her job. When the two finally meet, the exchanges are highly anticipated yet clipped:

Only briefly, she was the one I remembered. Then, in the arc of one exhausted breath, something fell away from her. She bent her upper body lightly forward, folded her arms behind her back. She lowered her gaze to the floor, lifted it up at the closet, let it fall onto the table, toward the window, motionlessly. Her gaze trailed on across the room, eventually reaching me.

"You're here," she said and looked straight at me in surprise. (66)

Dialogue thickens into presence and then slips away, merely affirming the essentials: You're here/yes/now I'm here. I highlight the description of gesture in space, the prevalence of deictic language, or pointer words, the specific use of this, you, here, as a marker of an intersubjective bodily feeling that both draws attention to and seems to overflow the almost carceral dimensions of their shared room. Through translation, I have come to see *Ein Simpler Eingriff* as a workplace-boarding-house novel with a certain preference for closed-system poetics, which situates it in a field of stories about queer women that dramatize desire and enclosure. Its relatively classic negotiation of disorder and order, individual and societal sickness, passion and privacy, recalls, for instance, the aesthetic systems of classics like Leontine Sagan's *Mädchen in Uniform* or Celine Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* or the recent TV adaptation of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. Given that this is not a historical novel with the excuse

of realism, the oppressive environment of the shared closet fashions a phantasy scene in and against which seduction can play out.

Lastly and briefly, a note on possible translation of the novel's title. [New Books in German](#) suggests *A Simple Procedure*. The word 'procedure' for *Eingriff* marks the localization and neutralization of deviance as in keeping with protocol; it speaks less of an event than a law. "Intervention," another possibility, highlights the way the operations of the hospital promise a correction, working hope against the obstinacy of rage, addiction, and desire. I wonder whether *A Simple Intervention*, for instance, could allow *Eingriff* to mean more than one thing, so that its reference to surgery oscillates with other scenes of curative intervention, such as the way Sarah breaches Meret's steady routines, Meret's interference with a scheduled operation, Meret, Sarah and Marianne's escape, but also Sarah and Meret's intimacy at the centerfold of the novel; while the titular gesture of the 'Eingriff' denotes instrumental incisions 'liberating' women from their pathologies, Meret and Sarah proliferate the image of the 'Eingriff' along the lines of another kind of touch, opening a gap for pleasure. Since this book is concerned with bodily autonomy and formally speaking, with *minor interventions* in matters of genre, maybe, one could postulate somewhat provocatively here, that it thinks about histories of gendered surgery in a stranger sense than how we tend to think about gender-affirming surgery today. In conversation with authors like Andrea Long Chu, who [reclaimed](#) Valerie Solanas's SCUM manifesto for trans study, incision could then appear as a shared motif, able to mediate differentials of trans and queer experience in feminist writing against the operations of TERFY and binary reading. And then again, maybe this is overstated, especially in respect to a book so versed in the aesthetics of understatement.

Work Cited

Inokai, Yael. *Ein Simpler Eingriff*. Berlin: Hanser, 2022.