

ISSN: 2514-0612

Journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>

---

A Review of *History of Violence*

Author(s): Alice Horne

Email: [ahorne05@mail.bbk.ac.uk](mailto:ahorne05@mail.bbk.ac.uk)

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 3 No. 1 (March 2019), pp. 92-96.

URL: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/153>

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24134/be.v3i1.153>

---

© Alice Horne

License (open-access): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. No warranty, express or implied, is given. Nor is any representation made that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for any actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

*Brief Encounters* is an open access journal that supports the dissemination of knowledge to a global readership. All articles are free to read and accessible to all with no registration required. For more information please visit our journal homepage: <http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE>.

In association with

## A Review of *History of Violence*

---

Alice Horne

Édouard Louis, *History of Violence*, trans. by Lorin Stein (London: Harvill Secker, 2018), 199pp., £14.99, ISBN: 9781911215752.

One can't help but lose something in translation, whether this is adroitly crafted alliteration, or a pun that just doesn't translate. But the beauty of language (or the skill of the translator) is such that it often conspires to give us something in return. In Lorin Stein's English translation of Édouard Louis' *Histoire de la Violence* — in which 'histoire' means both 'story' and 'history' and could even connote 'lie' and 'biography' — to simply *History of Violence*, Anglophone readers may lose the immediate connotations of 'story'. In return, however, readers gain the subtle but suggestive '(his)story'. For a novel with multiple layers of narration — an intimate, emotional, and at times obsessive telling and retelling of the narrator's traumatic rape and strangulation — this translative decision sets the tone for an important theme in Louis' oeuvre: who does a story belong to? Stein's translation is yet another retelling of the narrator's story, so it is particularly imperative to consider his translation in light of the original French text.

This question of whom a story 'belongs to' is particularly significant in the context of Louis' work, not least because his novels are heavily autobiographical. One might imagine that, if any story belongs to anyone, an autobiographical story belongs to its author. However, in this instance, the opposite seems to be true. Following the publication of Louis' provocative first novel, *En finir avec Eddy Belleguele*, in 2014, journalists reportedly swamped Louis' home village in northern France in an attempt to ascertain exactly how much of the book was 'fact', and to re-present the story for their own ends.<sup>1</sup> *History of Violence* has been equally exploited by the press, and presented as a 'courtroom drama'.<sup>2</sup> However, in a 2017 interview with Sian Cain, Louis explained that he feels it is precisely this intersection of truth and fiction that society needs in order to face up to real-life issues such as social violence. As Louis explained, 'I don't want people

---

<sup>1</sup> Édouard Louis, *The End of Eddy*, trans. by Michael Lucey (London: Harvill Secker, 2017); Sian Cain and Édouard Louis, 'Fact or Fiction: Autobiographical Novels with Édouard Louis', *Guardian Books Podcast*, 28 February 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2017/feb/28/fact-or-fiction-autobiographical-novels-edouard-louis-books-podcast>> [accessed 3 June 2018].

<sup>2</sup> Angélique Chrisafis, 'Édouard Louis: "I want to be a writer of violence. The more you talk about it, the more you can undo it"', *Guardian*, 9 June 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/09/edouard-louis-i-want-to-be-a-writer-of-violence-the-more-you-talk-about-it-the-more-you-can-undo-it/>> [accessed 10 June 2018] (para 8 of 18).

to be able to turn their head away in the same way that you pass a homeless person on the street'.<sup>3</sup> This intersection is clearly not something that readers are comfortable with, but this uncomfortableness seems to be the author's intention.

This interrogation of truth and of who a narrative 'belongs' to pervades the entirety of *History of Violence*. Indeed, Stein makes this explicit within his somewhat clumsy translation of the opening paragraph:

I am hidden on the other side of the door, I listen, and she says that several hours after what the copy of the report I keep twice-folded in my drawer calls *the attempted homicide*, and which I call the same thing for lack of a better word [...] which means I always have the anxious nagging feeling that my story, whether told by me or whomever else, begins with a falsehood, I left my apartment and went downstairs.<sup>4</sup>

Though the text is narrated in the first person by a character who identifies himself as Édouard, the majority of the action within the story — Édouard's meeting and one-night stand with a stranger, Reda, who then strangles and rapes him, and the resultant police interviews — is described by his sister Clara to her (mostly mute) husband and is overheard by Édouard. However, through Édouard's commentaries, it becomes clear that Clara is 're-presenting' his story in her own way. As Édouard denotes, 'that part's made up, she never said that. I'm sure she thought it when we were talking, but she never said that' (p. 47). The interviewing police officers' version of Édouard's story (what they call '*the attempted homicide*'), is similarly forced into a racist, anti-Arab narrative, as one officer incorrectly infers Reda's race based on Édouard's description: 'he kept repeating it, "the Arab male, the Arab male", every other sentence' (p. 14). The police officer even finds the conclusion of the story 'disappointing' when it is not as dramatic as he wants, or expects, it to be (p. 133).

In the original French, however, the fact that Édouard's story is told by someone else is not made clear until several pages later: 'c'est ma sœur qui décrit la scène a son mari' (p. 12).<sup>5</sup> What Stein's reader therefore loses as a result of this delay is Louis' effect of catching the reader off-guard: what initially feels like an incredibly intimate description of the immediate aftermath of Édouard's trauma is suddenly

<sup>3</sup> Chrisafis, (para 15 of 18).

<sup>4</sup> Édouard Louis, *History of Violence*, trans. by Lorin Stein (London: Harvill Secker, 2018), p. 1. All further references to this text will be supplied in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup> This literally translates as 'It's my sister who is describing the scene to her husband' (translation author's own).

revealed to be the subject of someone else's gossip. Similarly, ideas of 'falsehood' and of Édouard's story being appropriated by 'whomever else' are not explicitly mentioned in the original text. On one hand, these additions within the translation signify powerful narrative themes that imbue the opening pages with increased meaning. On the other, they feel unnecessary: Louis' text succeeds in conveying the same ideas without resorting to this level of explicitness. At best, therefore, it seems that Stein is conveying his intelligence to the reader; at worst, he is patronising them.

This is not the first time that Stein has seemingly put his own 'twist' on a translation. In his 2015 translation of Michel Houellebecq's hugely controversial *Submission*, Stein was criticised for having smoothed out Houellebecq's characteristic 'anti-style' too extensively.<sup>6</sup> This begs the question: can, or should, a translator 'improve' on an original text? And how much do lapses in judgement matter? As Kate Briggs points out in her 2017 monograph *This Little Art*, for scholars, questioning translators' decisions can be helpful in terms of 'continuing [the work of translation] together', but it is perhaps more useful to 'look to the whole [...] to consider the way the thing is working and reading altogether'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, if translation can be read as a crossing — the action of 'passing across' from the original language to the new one — surely we must accept, and even welcome, a certain degree of change or 'interpretation' within textual translations.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of the 'whole', then, Stein undoubtedly succeeds. For the most part (opening aside), Stein's prose is uncomplicated and fluent — no small feat for a literary translation — and captures the simplicity, honesty, and humility that makes Louis' work so raw and fresh. The moment of the rape itself, for example, which is not described until over halfway through the novel, is at once harrowing and moving in both editions, and is written in terse, frank sentences: 'I struggled harder to give him pleasure, more pleasure, and so to end it sooner' (p. 131). If Louis' project is to lay bare not only the violence of the act, but of the multiplicity of narratives that become layered upon the story's telling and retelling, Stein

<sup>6</sup> Cody Delistraty, 'Can Lorin Stein Translate Michel Houellebecq Into a Great Writer?', *Slate*, 16 October 2015 <[http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\\_valley/2015/10/16/michel\\_houellebecq\\_a\\_writer\\_who\\_benefits\\_from\\_translation.html?via=gdpr-consent](http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2015/10/16/michel_houellebecq_a_writer_who_benefits_from_translation.html?via=gdpr-consent)> [accessed 3 June 2018] (para 6 of 15).

<sup>7</sup> Kate Briggs, *This Little Art* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017), p. 89, p. 266 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> David Bellos, 'Sameness, Likeness and Match: Truths About Translation', in *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 332-336 (p. 334).

has certainly communicated this in his translation.

All in all, this deeply intimate and emotional narrative is what makes *Histoire de la Violence* (and Stein's *History of Violence*) not only a moving story, but a powerful exposé of social and political issues in French society — from racism and homophobia to class discrimination — as well as a fresh and complex voice within the #MeToo movement. Quoting from Hannah Arendt, Édouard (as narrator) explains that it was his 'ability to deny the facts' — to lie, or use his imagination — that 'saved' him from the trauma of his experience, much like Louis (as writer) uses fiction or imagination in his novels to speak about reality (p. 179); perhaps we can allow Stein the same recourse to invention for the success of his translation too.

## Bibliography

- Bellos, David, 'Sameness, Likeness and Match: Truths About Translation', in *Is That a Fish in Your Ear?* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 332-336
- Briggs, Kate, *This Little Art* (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2017)
- Cain, Sian, and Édouard Louis, 'Fact or Fiction: Autobiographical Novels with Édouard Louis', *Guardian Books Podcast*, 28 February 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/audio/2017/feb/28/fact-or-fiction-autobiographical-novels-edouard-louis-books-podcast>> [accessed 3 June 2018]
- Chrisafis, Angelique, 'Édouard Louis: "I want to be a writer of violence. The more you talk about it, the more you can undo it"', *Guardian*, 9 June 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jun/09/edouard-louis-i-want-to-be-a-writer-of-violence-the-more-you-talk-about-it-the-more-you-can-undo-it/>> [accessed 10 June 2018]
- Delistraty, Cody, 'Can Lorin Stein Translate Michel Houellebecq Into a Great Writer?', *Slate*, 16 October 2015 <[http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon\\_valley/2015/10/16/michel\\_houellebecq\\_a\\_writer\\_who\\_benefits\\_from\\_translation.html?via=gdpr-consent](http://www.slate.com/blogs/lexicon_valley/2015/10/16/michel_houellebecq_a_writer_who_benefits_from_translation.html?via=gdpr-consent)> [accessed 3 June 2018]
- Houellebecq, Michel, *Submission*, trans. by Lorin Stein (London: William Heinemann, 2015)
- Louis, Édouard, *En Finir avec Eddy Belleguele* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2014)
- , *Histoire de la Violence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2016)
- , *History of Violence*, trans. by Lorin Stein (London: Harvill Secker, 2018)
- , *The End of Eddy*, trans. by Michael Lucey (London: Harvill Secker, 2017)

Copyright © Alice Horne 2019