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Defying norms through unprovoked violence

The translation and reception of two Swedish young adult novels in France

Valérie Alfvén

Abstract

This chapter examines the translation and reception of two Swedish young adult novels – *Spelar död* [Play Dead] and *När tågen går förbi* [When the Trains Pass By] – published in France in the 2000s. Both books use unprovoked violence in a realistic genre for adolescents, something no French author had dared to do previously. The two novels ignited a moral panic in France that led to heated debates in the French literary field. This chapter retraces the stormy reception of these novels in France and analyzes the constraints to which translations of unprovoked violence are often subject, especially when translated from a source culture whose norms are more liberal than the target culture. Linking translation strategies with reception, this chapter uses Even-Zohar's polysystem theory to determine how the two novels became 'innovative' (in Even-Zohar's sense of the term) in the French literary field in the 2000s.

Introduction

- Nu brinner han! garvar Någon.
- Det var fan på tiden.
- Pissa på'n då annars brinner han upp.
- Det gör väl fan ingenting.

Jag känner hur elden fräser till. Det stänker i ansiktet. När jag öppnar ögonen ser jag Någons kraftiga lem ovanför mig. Den riktas mot mig. Pisset skvalar. Det träffar ömsom min kropp, ömsom mitt ansikte. (Casta 1999, 118).

Backtranslation:¹

- Now he burns! says Someone laughing.
- Finally, it was not fucking too early.
- Piss on him, otherwise he will burn up.
- Well, that fucking doesn't matter.

I feel how the fire frizzles and I feel drops on my face. When I open my eyes, I see Someone's vigorous male organ above me. It is directed at me. The piss squeals. It hits my body, sometimes my face.

Although this example is extreme, violence has become a common theme in contemporary young adult and adolescent literature. As Mary Owen (2013, 12) points out,

[i]n today's YAL [young adult literature] there is virtually no topic that is off-limits. Readers can vicariously explore gay love, AIDS, rape, teen parenting, depression, violent acts (physical and psychological), passionate vampires and fairies, suicide, incest, murder, political choice and belief and concerns about money, society, the environment and the future.

But just how explicit can an author be in describing violence? Even while YAL authors today have greater freedom to include violence in their books, some types remain taboo. When are graphic depictions *too* graphic? How do such works transcend national boundaries? How are they translated? This chapter applies these questions to the case of the reception and translation of two Swedish novels for adolescents translated into French in the 2000s. The goal is to better understand how the French literary field dealt with such a sensitive topic at the turn of the century.

Swedish literature for adolescents is one of the most open-minded literatures in the world, particularly with regard to sensitive topics (Delbrassine 2006; Christensen 2011; Kokko 2011; Svenbro 2011).² Swedish young adult and children's literature often highlights dark and difficult themes that may be considered taboo or sensitive in other countries. Unprovoked violence is one such theme. In a way, violence feels less shocking or is comprehensible or even acceptable when it happens in a fantasy world. The same can be said of stories that take place during another period or in an environment with serious social problems that can explain the violence (such as in some 'hard

1 All backtranslations and glosses are by the author unless otherwise noted.

2 Sensitive topics include, for example, sexuality, homosexuality, suicide, violence, rape, religion and depression.

suburbs' with deep social inequalities). In these cases, adolescents are violent because they are victims and must defend themselves against adolescent bullies, disorderly adults or an unjust society. But it is still rare for realistic novels to depict adolescents engaging in violence against other adolescents *for no apparent reason*.

Even today, it is difficult to translate novels describing unprovoked violence from Swedish, Danish or Norwegian into other languages because of reticence regarding the topic and the age of the intended readers of these works. Such topics broach notions of norms, ethics, and morals, which differ from one country to another. More and more Swedish authors highlight unprovoked violence in their realistic novels for young adults, and it is not inaccurate to speak of a tradition within Swedish literature. Already by the end of the 1990s, the Swedish researcher Sonja Svensson had coined the term *idyllophobia* (Svensson 1995, 1999) to classify Swedish teen novels of the period. This term emphasizes the desire of Swedish authors to avoid writing idylls (which typically have happy endings) and to write instead on dark and heavy topics in realistic genres. Many contemporary novels for adolescents continue this tradition and have attained a high status in the Swedish literary system. In fact, violence in young adult literature in Sweden is so common that it is no longer considered controversial. In 2015, *När hundarna kommer* [When the Dogs Arrive], a dark, realistic novel depicting a typical adolescent engaging in unprovoked lethal violence, won the prestigious Swedish Literary August Prize. But despite its accolades, the novel has so far only been translated into Danish and Finnish.

Two Swedish novels in a realistic genre

In the 2000s, two Swedish novels for adolescents, *Spelar död* [Play Dead]³ by Stefan Casta and *När tågen går förbi* [When the Trains Pass By]⁴ by Malin Lindroth, crossed borders and were published in France. Both novels broach the sensitive topic of unprovoked violence, which was not being explored by French writers at that time (Alfvén 2016, 168–173).

3 *Spelar död* has not been translated into English. I use the Swedish or the French title in this chapter.

4 *När tågen går förbi* has been translated and published in English with the title *Train Wreck* (Annick Press, 2010). However, an English word-for-word translation of the title would be "When the Trains Pass By," as I have indicated in the gloss.

Spelar död was written in 1999 by a well-established Swedish author, Stefan Casta, and that year won the August Prize, one of the most prestigious literary prizes in Sweden. It was translated into French in 2004 by Agneta Ségol, a well-established Swedish-French translator, with the title *Faire le mort*. The story revolves around an event in which Kim, the protagonist (who is also the primary narrator), is beaten up and left for dead in the middle of the forest by his own teenage friends. The rest of the book is Kim's reflections on this act and his attempt to try to understand how this unprovoked and incomprehensible violence occurred. As Kim says:

Jag försöker hitta en förklaring. Jag ställer frågor. Jag har så många frågor.
(Casta 1999, 8)

Backtranslation:

I try to find an explanation. I'm wondering. I have so many questions.

När tågen går förbi was translated into French as *Quand les trains passent*. It was originally a Swedish play from 2005, shifting to another literary genre when it was translated and published as a young adult novel in French in 2007. The novel depicts an act of unprovoked violence told from the perspective of the tormentor. It centers around the rape of a character named Suzy P. by a group of male teenagers from her class. It tells how the female narrator was present at the violent event and simply observed it, possibly even encouraging it, without ever trying to stop it. The rape is the result of a bullying incident that escalates and has no apparent motive.

The only thing that angers the narrator during this event is when she discovers that the boys have put her own blue boots on Susie: "*Ni har knullat henne och gett bort mina bästa stövletter! As!*" (Lindroth 2005, 25–26); "Have you screwed her and given her my best boots! You asshole!" (Lindroth 2010, 40, trans. Marshall). This reinforces the revolting nature of the situation through an absurd and selfish reply.

In these two situations, the ferocity of the violence used by the teenagers is intensified by the fact that the adolescents could be defined as 'normal' or 'average.' The characters are from a middle-class background with few financial or social problems. They also live in quiet areas of the city and not, for example, in poor suburbs where poverty could be a motive for the violence. Their language is colloquial but is not marked by a unique dialect that would indicate a restricted social class or environment. Their violence makes no political, social or religious demands. In other words, they could be considered typical, normal teenagers, passing from kind to monstrous, from innocent to nasty.

A stormy French reception

The books evoked strong reactions from different actors in the French literary field. In the daily paper *Le Monde* in 2007, Marion Faure accused the novels of being too ‘dark’ and ‘wicked’ for teenagers to read and said they might even be dangerous. She highlighted *Quand les trains passent* in particular. Likewise, *Faire le mort* was considered by critics to be unnecessarily dark literature for adolescents because reading it creates a “malaise. A big one” (Citrouille 2004, 31). When its literary qualities were recognized, protestations were not far behind. In the same Citrouille review, Gégène describes the book as a “wintry novel, dark, violent, too much for some, nevertheless deeply human. Only Jan Guillou’s book, *Ondskan*,⁵ (...) has impressed me as much” (Gégène, 2010).

Fauvre’s article set off a moral panic, leading to a virulent debate among publishers, editors, authors and illustrators (see *Liberation* 2007; Tanguy 2009; *La Liberté* 2007; Joubert 2008; Combet 2007). Various translators such as Blandine Longre (2007) and authors such as Simon Roguet (2007) were compelled to defend their practices and their choices (Barnabé 2012). The following year, a clinical psychologist, Annie Rolland, analyzed this controversy in her book *Qui a peur de la littérature ado?* [Who’s Afraid of Teen Literature?] (2008). A wide-ranging media debate began in which the editor, Thierry Magnier, had to defend his editorial choices (France Culture 2007). Along with Magnier, the editors François Martin, Jeanne Benameur and Claire David responded to the criticism in *Le Monde* by arguing that young readers were “intelligent” and had the right to read literary works, being, as they were, “capable of knowing the difference between being a voyeur (...) and being a reader” (*Le Monde des livres* 2007).⁶ But other editors, such as those at Bayard Publishing House, disagreed and admitted that there were “taboo topics” and that “not everything is publishable, even if it is very well written” (*ibid.*).⁷

Additionally, Magnier was even the target of censorship pressure from the government’s special commission tasked with monitoring publications for children and young adults (*Commission de surveillance et de contrôle*

5 *Ondskan* (Norstedts, 1990) by Jan Guillou, translated into French as *La fabrique de violence* (Agone Editions, 1990), is the story of a male adolescent at a boarding school who is severely and violently bullied.

6 In French: “Nous croyons aussi que les jeunes filles et les jeunes gens sont intelligents et qu’ils ont droit à la littérature. Ils savent faire la différence entre la place de voyeur qui leur est largement offerte dans les médias et celle de lecteur” (*Le Monde* 2007, 12–20).

7 In French: “Oui, les sujets tabous existent (...) tout n’est pas publishable, même un texte très bien écrit” (*Le Monde* 2007, 12–20).

des publications destinées à l'enfance et à l'adolescence), created in 1949. The commission sent Magnier a letter in November 2007 in which it strongly recommended reducing the size of the font in *Quand les trains passent* to make the text look less attractive or less affordable to younger readers. It also recommended adding a label on the cover warning potential readers of the book's violent themes and indicating an appropriate reading age – which the commission suggested should be fifteen years old (Delbrassine 2008, 10).

The debate shifted to the classic (and maybe endless) questioning of what is moral or amoral to talk about in children's literature. The moral panic crystallized a social fear and was a way to react against a deep, ongoing societal change. *Faire le mort* and *Quand les trains passent* were received as 'deviant' novels compared to other, non-translated literary works in French. Because they present sensitive topics, the works are associated with something violent and "become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen 2011, 1). As literature for adolescents and children has long been seen as a literature with primarily pedagogical aims (Nières-Chevrel 2009), fears arise when this literature goes beyond doxa or social morals and begins addressing taboo and dark topics. At any rate, the French reception of these two novels reveals the reaction of the French literary system to be similar to what played out in Sweden in the 1970s, when Swedish young adult literature was changing, thanks to the introduction of new, controversial topics, including violence (Poslaniec 1997; Thaler and Jean-Bart 2002, 155; Delbrassine 2006, 51; Escarpit 2008; Perrin 2009). This reaction also clarifies the differences in standards and norms between the French and Swedish systems, where the former rejects dark topics and the latter wishes to discuss them. In France, talking about nasty adolescents may feel like a threat for an (adult?) reader because unprovoked violence not only rejects lawfulness, it also seeks to destroy it. And once the absence of laws has been posited, violence can repeat itself indefinitely (Kriegel 2002, 23–24).

Translation of violence into French

In a French context of strong pedagogical norms and reticence about dark and difficult topics, the risk that the Swedish texts would undergo restrictions in the translation was high. An analysis of the translation of violent passages provides a good indication of the current standards and norms in the French system. Perhaps surprisingly, I found that the changes were minimal and that the translators chose to translate close to Swedish norms, in the Touryian sense (see Toury 1995). Violence takes places in different ways in the texts.

The most evident is physical violence, such as the rape of Suzy P. or when the adolescents batter Kim. But there is another form of violence in the stories which operates on the level of register and lexical choice, particularly in the use of swearwords and insults.⁸ Choosing milder words or even suppressing them could be a way to reduce this violence.

Lexical choices: Swearwords and insults

According to the translator Agneta Ségol (interview with Agneta Ségol 2014), Swedish uses more swearwords than French, and given the pedagogical nature of children's literature, there is a strong tradition in French not to use swearwords in literary texts, especially literary texts for children. But in the context of violence, swearwords and insults play a reinforcing role. The French translation of *När tågen går förbi* (*Quand les trains passent*) by Jacques Robnard is very close to the original and uses the same register:

Jag ville bara slå henne. **Ett käftslag.** Det var nära. (Lindroth 2005, 21)

Je voulais la gifler. **Lui foutre un coup sur la gueule.** C'était pas loin.
(Lindroth 2007, 42, trans. Robnard)

Backtranslation:

I just wanted to smack her. **To punch her in the jaw.** It was close.

In comparing the Swedish text with the published English text (*Train Wreck*) and French text (*Quand les trains passent*), the English version seems to include more indirect judgements that are not in the source text, as shown in the example below. The narrator, who is a female adolescent, enters the classroom and discovers her boyfriend and some of his friends raping Suzy P. The word 'rape' is never employed in the source text; rather, the word *knullat* [fucked] is used. It is translated into French as *baisée*, whereas the English version uses the vague expression "something horrible" (this is why I use backtranslation throughout this article):

Det luktade helvete därinne. Fylla, spya...

Jag, här, hon där...Sussi P. för helvete...du får liksom...resa dig...

⁸ We focus here on the comparison between the French and Swedish texts. I provide glosses in English.

Dom var fyra. Han och hans kompisar. Jag förstod att dom...**varit på henne. Knullat henne...typ**...Man förstod det för hon var helt naken. Eller nästan då... Så när som på ett par mocka stövletter...mina mocka stövletter, dom blå... (Lindroth 2005, 25)

Ça puait là-dedans. L'alcool, la pisse, le vomi...
Moi ici, elle là... Suzy P. bordel... tu devrais... relève-toi...
Ils étaient quatre. Lui et ses copains. J'ai compris qu'ils avaient...**été sur elle. Qu'ils l'avaient baisée**... On comprend pourquoi elle était complètement à poil. Ou presque. Elle n'avait qu'une paire de bottines en daim...mes bottines en daim, les bleues... (Lindroth 2007, 51–52, trans. Robnard)

Backtranslation:

It stank in there. Booze, vomit...

I, here, her there... Suzy P., damn... you should... get up...

There were four. He and his friends. I understood that **they... were on her. Fucked her... kind of**... you understood that because she was completely naked. Or almost so... except for a pair of suede boots... my suede boots, the blue ones...

It smelled awful in that room. Alcohol, vomit... Still I stood there. And she – Susie P., for chrissake! You should...get up. There were four of them. Him and his friends. I knew right away **they had done something horrible**. Because she was completely naked. Or almost. Right down to a pair of suede boots. My suede boots, the electric-blue ones. (Lindroth 2010, 39, trans. Marshall)

Jacques Robnard chose to translate swearwords using equivalents in French even if some of the insults are a bit outdated. For example, the Swedish text uses the word *mesig* (Lindroth 2005, 3), which means 'wimpish,' to characterize Susie P. Robnard translates it as *bouchée à l'émeri* (Lindroth 2007, 7),⁹ a familiar but outdated expression for an adolescent today.

Agneta Ségol chose to keep some of the swearwords as well (as in Example 1 below) and to select which swearwords she considered significant for the force of the text. She cleared from the text those swearwords she judged to be unnecessary (Example 2 and 3) and sometimes went even further; while

9 The word-for-word translation is 'sealed with emery,' which means 'to be dumb.' It is an old expression referring to a process for hermetic sealing of bottles with a dark, abrasive granular rock.

omitting the swearword, she sometimes used a complex phrase structure (as in Example 3), suppressing its orality and raising the register:

- (1) **Käft**en nu då! tjtatar Criz. (Casta 1999, 19)

Shut up now! nags Criz. (Backtranslation)

Vos gueules! crie Criz. (Casta 2004, 28, trans. Ségol)

Shut up! screams Criz. (Backtranslation)

- (2) Äh, **vad fan**, säger Many. Det kunde du väl ha sagt (Casta 1999, 19)

Oh **what the hell**, says Many. Well, you could have said that before.

(Backtranslation)

T'avais qu'à le dire avant. (Casta 2004, 29, trans. Ségol)

You should have said that before. (Backtranslation)

- (3) **Fan** vad jag är glad att ni dök upp alltså, säger hon. Jag höll på att dö när jag märkte att ni inte var vid vägen. (Casta 1999, 106)

Damn I'm so glad you showed up, she says. I thought I was going to die when I noticed you were not on the path. (Backtranslation)

Vous pouvez pas vous imaginer *comme j'ai été heureuse quand je vous ai vus*, dit-elle. J'ai cru mourir quand vous n'étiez pas au rendez-vous. (Casta 2004, 139, trans. Ségol).

You can't imagine *how glad I was when I saw you*, she says. I thought I was dying when you were not at the rendezvous. (Backtranslation)

But even if the French translation of *Spelar död* has been polished a bit more to be closer to French norms and to keep the literary aspect of the text, in general the text is adequate in terms of Swedish norms. After an experiment with Swedish native speakers who also speak French fluently and French native speakers who speak Swedish fluently, it appears that readers who read the Swedish text and the French one perceived more violence on a scale of 0 to 5 in the Swedish text (an average of 5) than in the French one (an average of 4). However, if only the French text was read by only French-speaking people, the violence is felt to be identical to that of the original text (average of 5) (Alfvén and Engel 2015).

The role of the translators and editors

By choosing to remain faithful to the source text and to Swedish norms, the translators and editors attached to *Faire le mort* and *Quand les trains passent* played pivotal roles in how the books traveled from Sweden to France. The French translator of *När tågen går förbi*, Jacques Robnard, is not part of the children's literature system. Robnard used to translate plays for adults. During the 1950s, he worked in Sweden at the Royal Opera in Stockholm, learning Swedish in the process. He then worked for different French cultural institutions around the world before retiring. Translating is an activity he does 'on the side.' When Tiina Kaartama, a Finnish stage director, proposed that he translate Malin Lindroth's play, he accepted. Reflecting back a few years later, he said of the project: "I had never translated a work for children or young adults before Lindroth (...) and when I translated it, I never considered it as children's literature" (interview with Jacques Robnard, 2014). He translated it as a play, and it was then, when talking with an editor at Actes Sud Junior, that he began to take out the stage directions and transform the text into a work of prose. Robnard's purpose was to produce a translation as close as possible to the original text. He was not particularly aware of the norms of the French (or Swedish) children's literature system.

The French translator of *Spelar död*, Agneta Ségol, is Swedish, but has lived in France since the 1970s. She became interested in children's literature early on in life. During the 1990s, she worked at the famous publishing house Père Castor Flammarion, where she met, among others, Soazig Le Bail, who later became editor at Thierry Magnier and agreed to publish *Faire le mort*. Ségol has translated many novels and picture books from Swedish to French, including works by Astrid Lindgren, Henning Mankell and Annika Thor. She has attained a very well-established and respected position that has given her legitimacy and the opportunity to introduce new work. She "hope[s] not to be conscious of the norms in children's literature and think[s] first of the force of the text" (interview with Agneta Ségol, 2014). For her, the literary aspect of the text is most important.

A translator's position in the literary field plays a role in the translation process and has bearing on the final text. Robnard approached his translation from outside the field of children's literature and is thus free from its norms, while Ségol was inside the system, where she enjoys a high and respected status. This position, and her close relation to Soazig Le Bail, editor at Thierry Magnier and commissioning editor at that time, made it possible for *Faire le mort* to be published. Likewise, the positions of the publishing house and editor were pivotal in shaping the import and distribution of the two works.

Actes Sud Junior and Thierry Magnier are not the largest publishing houses in terms of distribution and economic capital (compared to Gallimard or Hachette),¹⁰ but they have strong symbolic capital in the Bourdieusian sense (1992) and are well respected by other actors in the field. On the surface, these are two different publishing houses, but in fact they are quite homologous. Indeed, Thierry Magnier merged with Actes Sud Junior in 2006. Although they remain two distinct publishing houses, the same man, Thierry Magnier, an editor and publisher with strong standing in the field, heads both houses. His clout facilitated the importation and then the distribution of the two novels. The presence of *Faire le mort* and *Quand les trains passent* owe their existence in the French system to the role of their translators and the will of their editors. This combination was crucial to the introduction of the topic of unprovoked violence in France, which in turn made it possible for French authors to adopt the Swedish model.

Transforming norms?

I argue that the Swedish novels discussed in this chapter are *innovative* in Even-Zohar's sense of the term (1990). According to his polysystem theory, the position of a translated work in a literary (poly)system may become significant and play an active role in "shaping the center of the polysystem" (Even-Zohar 1990, 46), where high literature and literary models reside. Translation can introduce new models into a literary system, particularly at a time when older models no longer correspond to the needs of a new generation. To determine the position of *Faire le mort* and *Quand les trains passent* in the French system, it is necessary to identify whether they are connected to *innovatory* ("primary") or *conservatory* ("secondary") repertoires" (*ibid.*) Even-Zohar distinguishes three situations where this can happen:

- (a) when a polysystem has not yet been crystallized, that is to say, when a literature is "young," in the process of being established; (b) when a literature is either "peripheral" (within a large group of correlated literatures) or "weak," or both; and (c) when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature. (Even-Zohar 1990b, 48)

10 Thierry Magnier publishes more Scandinavian novels for adolescents than any other French publisher (Alfvén 2016, 166). Actes Sud Junior is also interested in literary and sometimes cheeky texts.

Measured by these criteria, it seems that *Faire le mort* and *Quand les trains passent* arrived in France at a historical moment where old models and norms were no longer tenable, as illustrated by the moral panic that ensued (Alfvén 2016, 145–148). Both are literary and consecrated novels that won literary prizes and are recognized by critics, underlining the literary quality of the texts. The translation of the works adheres to Swedish norms and introduces a topic rarely exploited until now by French authors in a realistic genre. Only Guillaume Guéraud, with *Je mourrai pas gibier* (2006), dared to write on unprovoked violence, but he did so by focusing on a specific, gory style with lots of bloody scenes. Later works, such as Julia Kino's *Adieu la chair* (2007) and Clémentine Beauvais's *La pouilleuse* (2012), can be said to be French children's novels that follow the Swedish example. The transfer of the two Swedish novels addressed here also shows the pivotal role of both the editor and translators. Their positions inside or outside the system, and the strong symbolic capital of the editor and one translator were important factors that made their publication in France possible at the time.

The translation and reception of *Faire le mort* and *Quand les trains passent* highlight a deep and durable change in the norms of the French system. By introducing and shaping unprovoked violence in a realistic genre, these works filled a vacuum in the French system and injected it with a new dynamic. They made possible the introduction of new models and created openings for topics that had previously been taboo. Since their publication, some French authors have even dared to write about unprovoked violence themselves (Alfvén 2016, 168–173). The cases examined here suggest that the significance of Swedish literature for adolescents is far greater than the modest numbers of translated titles suggests. Indeed, *Spelar död* and *När tågen går förbi* can be seen as early markers of an evolution in young adult literature playing out not only in Sweden and France, but in (poly)systems around the globe.

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