



# "One doesn't translate the words but life and human beings." An Interview with Mireille Gansel



By [Olivia Snaije](#)  
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*Native language is not a set of grammar rules and regulations, it is the child's spiritual nourishment.*

*-Janusz Korczak*



Mireille Gansel, photo Jean-Yves Masson

Translation, for Mireille Gansel, is a “delicate seismograph at the heart of time”; words must be continuously re-examined, and interpreted, depending on their cultural and historical framework. One of today’s foremost translators, Gansel grew up in post-war France. Her family was Jewish from Eastern Europe, where they lost everything to Nazi Germany. German had been their lingua franca, and Gansel chose to study it, in order to be able to communicate with her family—even if for her father, who grew up in Hungary, German was the language of “persecutors and those who humiliate”. Gansel’s slim and sensitive memoir, *Translation as Transhumance*, has just been elegantly translated into English by another outstanding translator, [Ros Schwartz](#); it opens with Gansel’s father translating a letter from Hungarian for his family in France.

In her foreword, [Lauren Elkin](#) explains the significance of Gansel’s title (which is roughly the same in French): “Transhumance refers to the seasonal movement of a shepherd and his flock to another land, or humus. It is the opposite of settling and farming: it is a form of nomadism, a search for richer grass, and it provides an apt image for her own trajectory as a translator.”

Elkin describes the memoir as “a family history of languages and exiles: what does a language retain of the violence it has been used to commit?”

Gansel relates her search for the German language, bloodied by its recent past. She also translates the work of an East German poet who had been deeply influenced by Czech poetry, spending a long time with him to understand the intricacies of his prosody. But Gansel does not only remain in Europe. She travels to North Vietnam

during the war, to work on an anthology of Vietnamese poetry to be published in French, as a riposte to American bombs. On a visit back to France she goes to see the poet René Char, “the embodiment of intelligence and humanity,” who gives her a handful of his poems, one of which is called “Liberty”, that he has dedicated for the Vietnamese poet Te Hanh.

Gansel goes on to translate the entire body of work of the German-language poet [Nelly Sachs](#), and even if Sachs is no longer alive, she leads Gansel “every step of the way along a pre-existing path that was the path of her inner identity, the language of her soul.”

Most recently, before turning to her own writings, Gansel translated the work of [Eugenie Goldstern](#), an ethnologist born in Odessa, who was a refugee in Vienna and lost her life in Sobibor camp in 1942. Goldstern had roamed what Gansel calls the “alpine arc, defying borders, sharing, discovering, understanding and describing the lives of people who lived in the most remote valleys, undeterred by frontiers from which she was pushed back more than once.”

Goldstern’s complex research, which included studying both exile and belonging, somehow mirrors Gansel’s: there is a deeply insightful and humanistic approach to their work.

Mireille Gansel kindly answered a few questions for Bookwitty.

**Your starting point for studying German seemed to be the desire to understand the mysteries and history of your family. Your father, understandably, hated German, but did he come to accept and even admire your work as a translator?**

Among the different languages I learned, I chose to study German in order to speak with my family in Hungary, a Jewish Hungarian family. I wanted to speak this Central European German which was the common language of Jews throughout Central Europe. Then I went on studying German further to try to understand what happened under the Nazis—what happened? Why did it happen? How was something like that possible? I had the feeling that unless I learned German and studied the German context I would never understand this.

My father died before my work was widely published.

**You describe working in the archives of Bertolt Brecht in East Berlin in the 1960s, and getting to know the theater troupe he founded with his wife, which wanted to give Germans the possibility of “listening to their language again,”?**

I went to East Berlin just after the Wall [was erected] in order to work in the Brecht Archives and meet [artistic director and wife of the late Brecht ] Helene Weigel. I needed to understand the work of the Berliner Ensemble theater as I was writing a dissertation on Brecht's *Antigone* for a post-graduate degree at the Sorbonne university. Brecht wrote *Antigone* on his way back from exile, as a struggle to win back the German language so distorted by Nazi ideology, as described in Victor Klemperer's book, *Lingua tertii imperii*. Brecht was of the lineage of writers and scientists who saved the soul of the German language - like Nelly Sachs, during her exile in Sweden, and Eugenie Goldstern, born in Odessa, both of whom I later translated.

**I wondered if you had seen the documentary *Traduire*, by Nurith Aviv. In it, a Palestinian translator from both Arabic and Hebrew speaks of his relationship to Hebrew: “I’m aware that the Hebrew language they use to give military orders to bomb Palestinians in Gaza is the same language that [playwright, poet, and philosopher] Hanoch Levin, Natan Zach, and Yeshayahu Leibowitz used. It is a really complicated relationship, somehow mysterious for me...”**

**How can people separate a language from history? From an occupier?**

I know the documentary *Traduire* by Nurith Aviv. I would say that what you evoke here could be said of every language, every human, all people in the world.

**You became involved in a project during the Vietnam War to publish Vietnamese poetry. Did this initiate from a political place, and evolve into**

## **something else? How did living and breathing the Vietnamese language and poetry change you as a translator?**

I was invited to work in the Hanoi Foreign Languages Publishing House by Nguyen Khac Vien, the founder and director, to join his project of producing an anthology of Vietnamese literature in French translation for the first time since independence. The project was to let the world know this literary heritage, as well as the struggle, over thousands of years, of the Vietnamese people for their freedom and independence.

Translating this Vietnamese language and poetry, I realised once more, that it is not the other who is a stranger but it was I who had everything to learn from the other.

## **I read that you had wanted to stop translation after you finished Nelly Sachs' work, and then you translated Eugenie Goldstern's work. Do you still translate or are you mainly writing, and if so, why?**

This is an interesting point: translation can be a way to one's own inner language. So now I am mainly working in my own inner language.

## **Until World War II, German was the language of expression for so many authors and poets who were not necessarily German—in order to pick up these cultural subtleties in the language, in your own work you researched as much as possible the history and culture of the author, and when possible you met with them. What can you recommend to young translators starting out—what research is essential for them and what traps should they avoid?**

I would recommend that young translators should indeed leave their computers and offices and start going away to meet, if possible, with the authors or at least know their surroundings so as to understand the context. One doesn't translate the words but life and human beings.

Translation as Transhumance was published by the independent, two-year-old London-based [Les Fugitives](#), (and by the [Feminist Press](#) in the US), which has a specific mission: to publish short books that have been written by award-winning,

*female, francophone writers who have previously not been translated into English. Les Fugitives published books that were both on the 2017 Albertine Prize for Translated Fiction shortlist, Nathalie Léger's [Suite for Barbara Loden](#), which also won the 2016 Scott Moncrieff Prize, and Ananda Devi's [Eve out of her Ruins](#), also shortlisted for the Best Translated Book Awards.*

*Top photograph of the shepherd René Alcazar in the Gorges du Bachelard, France, copyright Patrick Fabre*

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