



Agatha

**ANNE  
CATHRINE  
BOMANN**

*Translated by Caroline Waight*



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Book\*hug Press

TORONTO, 2020 | LITERATURE IN TRANSLATION SERIES

FIRST CANADIAN EDITION

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First published in Great Britain in 2019 by Sceptre, an imprint of Hodder  
& Stoughton, a Hachette UK company.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Agatha / Anne Cathrine Bomann; translated from the Danish  
by Caroline Waight.

Other titles: Agathe. English

Names: Bomann, Anne Cathrine, 1983– author. | Waight, Caroline,  
translator.

Series: Literature in translation series.

Description: First Canadian edition. | Series statement: Literature in  
translation series | Translation of: Agathe.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20200284681 | Canadiana (ebook)  
20200284916

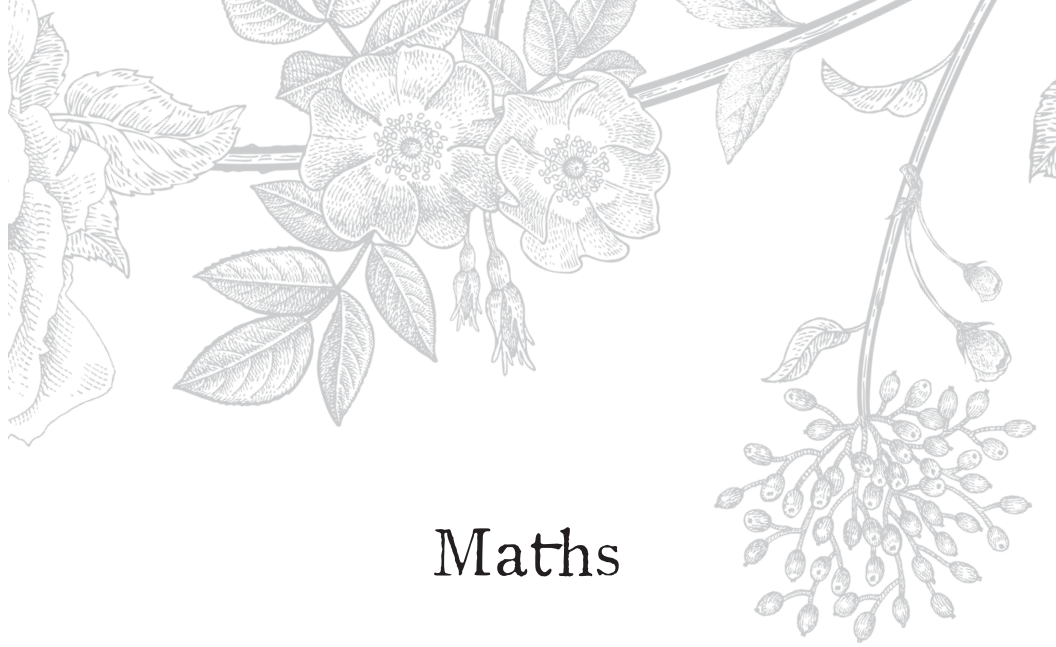
ISBN 9781771666459 (softcover) | ISBN 9781771666466 (EPUB)

ISBN 9781771666473 (PDF) | ISBN 9781771666480 (Kindle)

Classification: LCC PT8177.12.043 A713 2020 | DDC 839.813/8—dc23

Printed in Canada

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meet and work on this territory.



# Maths

RETIRING AT SEVENTY-TWO MEANT THERE were five months still to work. Twenty-two weeks in total, and if all my patients came, that meant I had exactly eight hundred sessions to go. If somebody cancelled or fell ill, the number would, of course, be fewer. There was a certain comfort in that, in spite of everything.





## Panes

I WAS SITTING IN THE FRONT ROOM PEERING out of the window when something happened. The spring sun lay across my carpet in four staggered squares, moving slowly but surely over my feet. At my side was an unopened first edition of Sartre's *Nausea*, which I'd been trying to get into for years. Her legs were thin and pale, and I was surprised she was allowed out in only a dress this early in the year. She had drawn a hopscotch grid on the road and was hopping deep in concentration, first on one leg then on both, before switching back again. Her hair was gathered into two pigtails, she was probably seven or

thereabouts, and she lived with her mother and an older sister further up the road at No. 4.

You may be thinking I was some kind of philosophical savant, sitting at the window all day long, contemplating things far greater than hopscotch and the wanderings of the sun across the floor. You would be wrong. In fact, I was sitting there because I had nothing better to do, and perhaps also because there was something life-affirming about the triumphant exclamations that now and then drifted through to me when the girl had executed a particularly difficult combination of hops.

At some point I went to make a cup of tea, and when I returned to my post she was gone. She'd probably come up with a more entertaining game elsewhere, I thought; chalk and stone had both been left in the middle of the street.

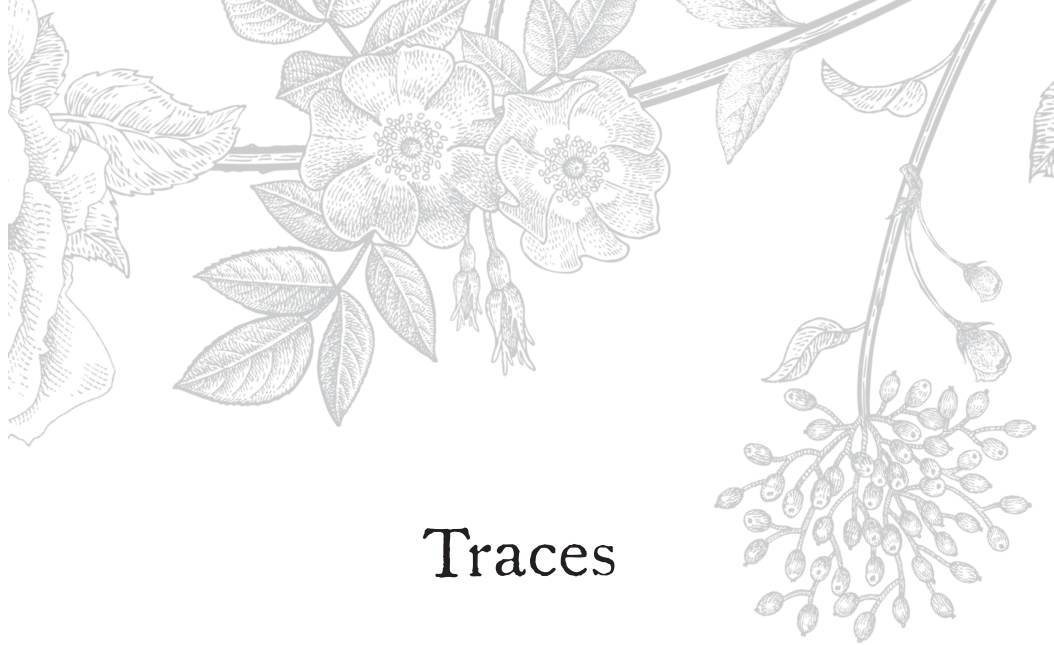
And that was when it happened. I'd just set down the cup to cool on the windowsill and spread the rug over my knees when I noticed something falling on the edge of my field of vision. At the moment a shrill scream reached my ears, I'd coaxed my stiff body back onto its feet and stepped up close to the window. She was lying at the foot of a tree, a little way down the

road to my right, where the path turns off toward the lake. On one of the branches I caught sight of a cat swinging its tail. Below, the girl had raised herself into a sitting position, her back against the trunk, while she held her ankle and sobbed.

I pulled my head back. Should I go to her? I hadn't spoken to a child since I was one myself, and that hardly counted. Would it not just make her more upset if a strange man suddenly appeared and tried to comfort her? I stole another glance outside; she was still sitting in the grass, her tear-stained face peering down the road, past my house.

It was probably best nobody saw me. Isn't that the doctor? they would say to one another. Why is he just gawping like that? So I took my teacup and went into the kitchen, settled at the table. Although I told myself the girl would soon get up and hobble home, that everything was fine, I still sat there like a fugitive in my own kitchen as the hours passed.

The tea went cold and cloudy, and darkness fell before at last I crept back into the front room and, half-hidden behind the curtain, squinted down the road. By then, of course, she was gone.



# Traces

MADAME SURRUGUE HAD GREETED ME IN THE same way every single morning since I took her on. Day after day she sat at the big mahogany desk like a queen upon her throne, and as I walked through the door she would rise to take my stick and coat, while I placed my hat on the shelf above the coat rack. Then she would run through the day's schedule and finally hand me a sheaf of case files, which were otherwise punctiliously archived in a large system of shelves behind the desk. We exchanged a few more words, then as a rule I didn't see her again before 12:45 p.m.,



when I left the office and went to take my lunch at a mediocre restaurant nearby.

When I returned she was always sitting precisely as I'd left her, and occasionally I'd wonder whether she ate at all. There was no sniff of food, and I'd never seen so much as a crumb underneath her desk. Did Madame Surrugue even require sustenance to live?

That morning she told me a German woman had phoned and wanted to come by later to make an appointment.

"I've spoken to Dr. Durand about her. Apparently she was admitted to Saint Stéphane with severe mania after a suicide attempt a few years ago."

"No," I said firmly. "We can't accept her. She would take years to treat."

"Dr. Durand also believes she ought to be readmitted, but apparently she insists on consulting with you, Doctor. I could easily find space for her in the schedule."

Madame Surrugue looked enquiringly at me, but I shook my head. "No, it can't be done. Kindly direct her to seek help elsewhere."

By the time I retired I would have been practising for nearly fifty years, and that was more than enough. The last thing I needed was a new patient.

## TRACES

Madame Surrugue eyed me a moment longer, but then continued going through the day without pursuing the subject.

“Thank you, that’s fine,” I said, taking the sheaf of case files and heading into my office. It was situated at the very opposite end of Madame Surrugue’s dominion, the large reception area where the patients could wait their turn, so neither my secretary’s clacking typewriter nor any conversation between herself and the patients disturbed me while I worked. My first patient, a woman by the name of Madame Gainsbourg, dry as dust, had just arrived and was flicking through one of the magazines Madame Surrugue occasionally brought. Sighing a little too deeply, I reminded myself that after hers there were only seven hundred and fifty-three conversations to go.

The day passed anchorless until I returned to the office after lunch and nearly bumped into a deathly pale, dark-haired woman standing just inside the doorway. I apologized for my clumsiness. The woman was strikingly slender, her eyes enormous in her pointed face.

“It’s quite all right, I’m the one in the way,” she said, walking further into the room. “I’ve come to ask for an appointment.”

She spoke with an unmistakable accent, and I realized this must be the German woman. She was clutching a map with Saint Stéphane's insignia to her chest.

"I'm afraid that won't be possible," I replied, but the woman took a rapid step toward me and said earnestly: "It's absolutely vital I get an appointment. I'm sorry to be a nuisance, but I have nowhere else to go. Please, if you could help me..."

Instinctively I stepped backwards. Her brown eyes shone fever-bright and her gaze was so intense it felt as though she'd grabbed my arms. Clearly it would take a battle to be rid of her, and I had neither the time nor the energy. Gesturing toward Madame Surrugue, I tried to force a friendly smile.

"If Madame would be kind enough to follow me," I said, edging my way around the woman, "my secretary will be able to explain the circumstances in more detail."

It was Madame Surrugue's fault the woman was here in the first place, so it was only proper she should turn her away again.

I slipped past the woman, who thankfully followed me over to the desk, where I parked her in front of Madame Surrugue with an eloquent glance.

## TRACES

My secretary raised her left eyebrow a few millimetres.

“Would you be so kind as to take over, Madame Surrugue?” I inquired, before nodding stiffly in parting and hastening into the safety of my office.

But the image of the pale woman wouldn’t leave me be, and the rest of the day it was as though a trace of her perfume lingered in the air, whirling like dust each time I opened my door.



# Uproar

TIME RAN THROUGH ME LIKE WATER THROUGH a rusty filter nobody trouble d to change. I had spoken to seven patients that day with minimal concentration and had only one left still to go on that leaden, rainy afternoon before I could go home.

Before I accompanied Madame Almeida into my office, I shot my secretary a glance. She was sitting very quietly at the uncluttered desk, staring down at its surface. The Anglepoise lamp cast her stony shadow onto the wall behind her, and she looked so dejected that for a moment I considered whether I



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ought to say something. But what? Instead I drew the door shut behind me and turned toward my patient.

Madame Almeida, who was nearly a head taller than I and thus always made something of an impression, disburdened herself of her umbrella and rain cape with frantic movements and plumped down on the couch. She smoothed her vomit-toned skirts and eyed me reproachfully through the small glasses balanced on the tip of her crooked nose.

“I have had a dreadful week, Doctor,” she proclaimed, settling herself on the couch. “I agitate myself so. It’s my nerves, I can assure you of that, and I said the same to Bernard—Bernard, I said, you make me nervous simply sitting there in your chair all day long!”

Madame Almeida was always nervous. For her there were no good days. She didn’t seem to be getting anything whatsoever out of therapy, yet she still came marching in faithfully twice a week to scold me. The mere notion of a better existence seemed to upset her, and frankly I found it hard to understand why she came at all. Normally I just let her talk, but occasionally I would interject a remark or hazard an interpretation, which she entirely ignored.

“...and then she said I owed her three francs from last week—three francs, if you please, the cheek of it! It really got to me. I nearly fainted right there in the middle of the shop, but then I told her, I said...”

Many years’ training helped me to murmur in the right places without actually listening, and if I was lucky I wouldn’t have registered a single word by the time she left the room.

Looking down I realized I’d bored the tip of the pencil through the paper in sheer frustration, so I started one of my bird caricatures instead.

“I may have sensitive nerves, but I won’t put up with impudence, I can tell you that much!” Madame Almeida was almost yelling. Outside, the rain was so violent it was impossible to see anything but blurry contours through the windows, and unfortunately the droplets beating against the panes seemed to be encouraging my patient to speak even more loudly than usual. But evidently I have to put up with trivialities, I thought resignedly, as I focused on a spot on the crown of her head that looked suspiciously thin of hair. It delighted me to think she might be balding, in which case I would have known long before she did, and I promptly added the detail to my drawing. I imagined her catching a glimpse of herself

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from behind one day, frozen between a mirror and a windowpane, her pudgy fingers frantically scrabbling, pushing the hair aside and exposing the scalp, as she screamed, “Bernard! Why didn’t you say anything, Bernard?” And so, this way or that, there passed another hour of my life. Madame Almeida thanked me for the consultation, and as I held the door for her I carefully angled the notepad away so she wouldn’t catch sight of the balding ostrich.

Six hundred and eighty-eight conversations left. Just then it felt like six hundred and eighty-eight too many.