

Black Madonnas and White Eagles: Religious Hermeticism, Proselytism, and Untranslatability

My purpose is to demonstrate the reality of “absolute” or “inherent untranslatability” – an existential rather than purely linguistic or cultural problem.¹ Although I am certainly not implying that we should therefore abandon all attempts at translation, I hope to show that some barriers to translation are not relative and negotiable, but *absolute* and *inherent*, although they may pass unnoticed as “trivial”. They do not lie in the sphere of language alone, though they are intrinsically linked to linguistic problems, and involve incongruities of *experience* and *group identity*.

I shall begin with my own definition of “inherent (absolute) untranslatability”:

Inherent (absolute) untranslatability occurs whenever a text is presented for translation the full comprehension of which by its source-language recipients requires the application of extra-textual subjective information or, more generally, extra-textual emotional experience which is inaccessible to the recipients of the target language for the translation. Ultimately absolute untranslatability involves irreconcilable differences of collective social identity between the group of recipients of the original text in its source language and the target group of recipients of the translation in the target language. These irreconcilable differences of recipients' communal identity create insurmountable, absolute barriers preventing the full transfer of the original message in the translation – however good its linguistic quality.²

By “extra-textual subjective information” I do not mean *individual* differences of a text's reception, but those features of reception which are specific and exclusive to the whole of the particular group of original recipients.

Cases of absolute untranslatability so defined are legion; translators are subconsciously aware of their irritating presence; yet in the practical pursuit of translation tend to ignore them. In *The Scandals of Translation*, Lawrence Venuti uses the terms “domestication”

¹ I originally used the expression “absolute untranslatability” for this phenomenon, but later colleagues suggested “existential,” “inherent,” or “ontic untranslatability” as better terms. In this essay I shall use “inherent untranslatability.”

² See the definition in Bałuk-Ulewiczowa 2000: 173-174.

– “the domestic assimilation of a foreign text” (1998: 80) – and “foreignisation.” Though this concept of “domestication” is a welcome tool for my study, in certain texts there are limits beyond which “domestication” cannot be pushed: limits which defy the simple “rewriting of a foreign text in domestic dialects and discourses” and “its inscribing with linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies”; limits which frustrate the translation's attempt to “answer to particular domestic interests” (Venuti 1998: 67). Some texts are simply not intended for proliferation beyond the original, closed (not necessarily ethnic or national) community of recipients for which they are written; they are hermetic by their very design and composition, and defy full translation.

My ideas first grew out of an observation, based on practical experience as a translator, of the untranslatability of the political propaganda issued by totalitarian régimes. In the mid-1970s, when I first came to Poland, I was asked by certain official academic institutions to translate short reports on work in the humanities and social sciences designated for circulation among other similar academic institutions in other countries, mostly in the Communist Bloc. The texts were couched in the language and ideas of Marxism, as materialised in the official Polish translations of Karl Marx. This was in the time before the current vogue for Marxist terminology, phrases and ideas in contemporary English. I found that I was totally unable to produce reasonably accurate translations into English that did not sound “strange” because of the “strangeness” of the verbal and conceptual fixtures and fittings of Marxism in which the otherwise quite academic subjects were communicated. The untranslatability of totalitarian propaganda into the languages of cultures which had not experienced an oppressive political system had already been observed by German emigrants fleeing the Nazi régime and endeavouring – unsuccessfully – to compile an English/Nazi-Deutsch dictionary. The failure was accounted for by the same reasons: an intrinsic unbridgeable gap between the source community's extra-linguistic experience of their social and political realities, and the total lack of any parallel experience by the target community allowing them to identify the messages embedded in the original text.

But the political propaganda of the totalitarian state is only a special case of the phenomenon. There also exist natural barriers to full social communication, often dependent on time and place, ephemeral like the totalitarian propagandist's directive, which after a time may become impenetrable even to successive generations of the same nation; or, alternatively, more long-lasting though subject to change with time, but essentially determined by the

nature and social identity of the original group within its own natural conditions. Messages which are transmitted across such natural barriers through the act of translation are transmuted versions of the original message – transmutations regardless of the quality and effects of the linguistic performance applied in the translation. They are transmutations determined by the nature of the recipient group and its ability to read the message as intrinsically NATIVE and relating to its own subjective group experience, or – in translation – as intrinsically EXOTIC, relating to the emotional experiences of a foreign group or society.

Such transmutations in translation are unavoidable and come into play whenever group identity is involved in the process of message-reception. They defy mitigation by explicitation, contextual definition, footnoting – the translator's usual devices to cope with cultural problems – because they are lodged in the source community's subjective, emotional group experience, which frustrates all attempts at rationalisation. You cannot “explain” a totalitarian harangue to one who has not lived in a totalitarian system so as to make him “know the fear” in the same way as the victim who has suffered. Describing it in a history-book manner is the best you can do; straight translation yields a science-fiction effect: the non-involved audience experiences the message in much the same way as they might the reading of *Brave New World*, or the myriad screen or novelists' fantasies. But the totalitarian tirade is only a special case. This field of inherent untranslatability is much wider, and it includes national literature, especially national epic; religious and devotional scriptures; philosophies and ideologies; and writings which involve distinctive codes of aesthetic values. All of these spheres of human communication are different depending on whether you read them as an INSIDE MAN or as an OUTSIDER, as one of US or one of THEM.

Inherent untranslatability in religious and ritual discourse is a particularly interesting case to study, because it is precisely in this aspect of life, in the language humankind uses to worship its deity or deities, that a peculiar overlap occurs – of the hermetic isolationism of the closed-off group, with its missionary impulse to expand by winning new devotees. The very word “religion” bears out this dichotomy, its etymological derivation suggesting the Latin verb *religo, religare*, “to bind” – recognition that the phenomenon of religion is social in nature, yet characteristic of the particular community involved. I shall illustrate my observations by referring to one of the world's major religious structures, Roman Catholicism, because, again, its bilateral tradition and policy, of universality (“Catholicism”)

and inculturation, provides an excellent testing ground to demonstrate the problems of untranslatability as they may affect the language of religious worship.

Since its origins Christianity has been tackling the task of adapting its message to communities of diverse cultures. The problem is presented already in the *Acts of the Apostles* (2. 8-11), and St. Paul's epistles, especially *Romans*. The epithet and concept the Christian Church (Churches) are so fond of: "Catholic", "universal", that is aspiring to encompass the whole world, shows Christians are aware of the vastness of the problem. The Church has endeavoured to implement that catholicity by acknowledging all the diverse local cultures it has encountered in its missionary activities, and adapting as far as possible to them. In recent times an enormous amount of attention was again devoted at the Second Vatican Council to these issues, culminating in official statements made in many of the sixteen concluding documents published in 1963-64, and also in a pragmatic innovation: the introduction worldwide of local languages for the celebration of the universal liturgy, hitherto conducted in Latin. The term "inculturation" made its appearance and was quickly disseminated after the Council itself, around 1974-1975 (Standaert 1994). In its Christian sense it is defined as "the process of the setting down of roots and establishment of the message and reality of Jesus Christ's Gospel in the world's diverse cultures and religions" (Waldenfels 1997).

But there is a converse process to the familiar patterns and end-results of Bible translation into all the world's languages. In the long history of cultural adaptation in Catholicism worldwide, local variants have grown up which have developed components that are strictly regional and defy all attempts at diffusion in their full content. One such territorially bound "variation" in Roman Catholicism is the well-known Polish tradition of devotion to the Virgin Mary. While the veneration of the Mother of God is a global characteristic of Roman Catholicism, its Polish brand evolved in the specific socio-cultural and political context of that nation's experience, in particular the 123 years during which it was entirely, and a subsequent 45 when it was partially, deprived of sovereignty, along with the countless wars including the two world conflagrations that were played out on its territory. Thus Polish Roman Catholicism became a protective device preserving the nation's spiritual identity, also in the secular sense, against external aggressors who tended to be non-Catholics. The pristine meaning of the term "religion", "that which binds a society together" was indeed enhanced, turning Poland's Roman Catholicism into a distinctively hermetic phenomenon, with a focal point in the national devotion to the Virgin Mary. This situation suddenly became

more complex following the election of a Polish cardinal to the papacy in 1978, the fall of Communism and subsequent changes in Europe's distribution of political and economic systems a decade later.

One outcome both of the Pontifical pilgrimages worldwide and of the general opening up of Poland as a country to visit has been that more and more places in that country are seeking to attract tourism. A significant branch of the Polish tourist industry is religious tourism, with Częstochowa, the major place of pilgrimage, annually attracting 4-5 million visitors, including well over half a million from abroad (Jackowski & Kaszowski 177, Soljan & Jackowski 160-162). A place which has hitherto been rather unassuming on Poland's dense grid of sites of pilgrimage and religious worship is the Shrine of Licheń, where the Virgin is reputed to have appeared to two men (an ex-soldier and a cattle-grazer) in the mid-19th century. In 1999 Licheń gained prominence in the Catholic media, thanks to a two-day visit there by the Pope. Its proprietors, the Marian Fathers, who have built a gigantic new church in the middle of forests and open fields, are now trying to attract pilgrims from a worldwide catchment area (for pictures of the huge new church see websites listed at the end of this essay).

The trouble is that the devotional message associated with Licheń has traditionally been hermetic. Its straightforward translation into English produces incomprehensibilities embedded in a text that was never intended for anyone except Polish Catholics, but is now being addressed to the *global* pilgrim. Here are a few extracts from a book I was commissioned by the Marian Fathers to translate prior to the Papal visit of 1999. The communicative incongruities (highlighted) become more apparent when the text is juxtaposed with pictures taken during the Papal ceremonies:

- To those hearts in which **Polish blood** flows... O, beloved Mother of God, O, Mary, Sorrowful Queen of Poland, I humbly beseech You to grant many graces and blessings, and especially the Gifts of the Holy Spirit to the one who has now taken up this booklet which tells the story of Your great mercy on the **Polish Nation** and on each and every human being without exception.

- What you are about to read here is for you and others, for the Holy Virgin's message has always been addressed to those hearts in which there is Polish blood, wherever they may be in the world.
- Our country's enemies have tried to do everything to prevent people from finding out about Our Lady's apparitions at Licheń, Poland's Lourdes. What the foreign partitioning powers found most unbearable was the fact that the Virgin Mary would appear with the Polish White Eagle on her heart, that She forecast the restoration of Poland, that She promised Her spiritual assistance, and that She confirmed the Nation's flagging spirit.
- [In 1852, under the Russian Partition] The Governor and the Government Commission declared that this likeness of the Madonna could not be worshipped publicly because it carried overtly Polish national, patriotic attributes. This would have a bad effect on the attitudes of the Poles, who tended to be excessively patriotic and were continually stirring up rebellions against their Russian masters. It would be better if the picture were moved to Kalisz and deposited in the Governor's safe-keeping, or perhaps to Konin and kept by the military captain. The Bishop's delegate and the Church Commission explained to Prince Golitsyn that the picture had no Polish patriotic attributes at all. The Madonna was holding the Holy Ghost in the form of a dove, not the crowned White Eagle of Poland. They seemed to be getting nowhere in trying to persuade the Russians, who continued to scrutinise the picture, when the door was flung open and four churchwardens came into the room carrying the heavy collection-box into which people had put donations for the building of the chapel. Father Kosiński asked the Commissioners to open the box and count the money in it. There were copper, silver and gold coins in the box. After the money had been counted, the Government Commission finally agreed to write in the official report that the Virgin in the painting carried a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove. The report never mentioned the donations collected in the box.

Some 40% of the book contained similar material, perhaps confusing, perhaps irrelevant or incomprehensible to Catholics from other countries coming to Licheń to worship. Furthermore, not so many of those who do not share the Polish “experience” of their East Slavonic neighbours’ reputation as susceptible to bribery could be expected to guess what

happened to the money in the box, and what's more – share in the emotions that accompany recollections of this group experience of a particular stereotype. But above all they would be totally unable to “understand” in the same way the text is “understood” by those who share in the community experience referred to by the text's communicatively inaccessible passages. It is this lack of participation in a community experience – an incongruity of group identity and awareness – that constitutes a total block to full translatability. Parts of the original text would need to be re-edited, omitted or replaced, as I pointed out to my commissioners. But only those who had spent long spells of pastoral work outside Poland appreciated this.

The more general conclusion to be drawn from the experience is that there may be other local varieties of Roman Catholicism (or other world religions) which have developed and cherish their own, untranslatable religious traditions. I am thinking particularly of South America, with its own, multifarious local customs of pilgrimage and worship. Perhaps other world-famous shrines like Guadalupe also have their untranslatabilities? I leave this as an open question to my South American colleagues, but also to any other inquirer into the paradoxical phenomena of social occlusion and proselytic expansionism in religious discourse anywhere in the world, and the way in which this dichotomy is reflected in translation or the obstacles to translation.

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Pictures of Licheń Basilica may be viewed on:

<https://picasaweb.google.com/Gmitruk.S/Liche#slideshow/5140977413230307266>

<https://picasaweb.google.com/109110840908537222419/PodrozeZJo#5310590957721511106>