

# Perfidious Fidelity

The Untranslatability of the Other

27.4.'94 *From Apartheid's dying grip, gently, gently ease the idea it turned against us with such murderous force — 'the untranslatable other'*

28.4.'94 *The funeral pyre's torched. Speak the idea differently now — for those who survived and those who didn't?*

These are rather rough-grained sketch notes towards 'recoding the international' — a task both massive and daunting. My focus is essentially on two things:

1. To move towards reindexing the international space which I should like to describe as the 'scene of translations'. Beyond the demand for assimilation, beyond absolutist notions of difference and identity, beyond the reversible stances of 'self and other' in which the Eurocentric gaze fashions itself as the other, as the intoxicating exotic as in the heady stuff of a Smirnoff ad — in the 1990s, we have come to see the international space as the meeting ground for a multiplicity of tongues, visual grammars and styles. These do not so much translate into one another as translate to produce difference. Have we been all too affirmative about this difference-producing space? How might it be recoded in the light of a more inflected concept of translation? In everyday terms, we see translation as the business of imperceptibly passing through from one language to another, not unlike stacking panes of glass one on top of another, a matter of sheer transparency. But is it no less about taking the measure of the untranslatable, about groping along and clawing at dividing walls, about floundering in an opaque stickiness? This might seem like flying in the face of our workaday

notions of translation. Yet words and images as much mimic as stand off from and pull faces at one another. How therefore to recode translation taking on board ideas about its limits and dead-ends, its impossibility,<sup>1</sup> the notion of the untranslatable, what we might call 'the untranslatability of the term other'?

2. My second focus is on trying to recode what the scene of translations throws up — hybridity — to recharge it in a double-turn, a positive and negative force in one go. On the one hand, the idea is to see it as a creative force: since each language seems to have its own system and manner of meaning, the construction of meaning in one does not square with that of another. From their very opacity to each other, from in-between them, translation thus cooks up and creates something different, something hybrid. On the other hand, the idea is to ask if the hybrid might not also be seen as the product of translation's failure, as something that falls short of the dream-ideal of translation as a 'transparent' passage from one idiom to another, from self to other.

Two issues, therefore, need to be explored. Is there a danger of hybridity — made-up lingo and style or visual Esperanto — becoming the privileged, prime term, a danger of its swapping places with the notion of stylistic purity? Is it heading towards operating as a catch-all category in which we lump together as diverse works as those of Yasumasa Morimura, Jamelie Hassan, Huang Yong Ping, Doris Salcedo, Vivan Sundaram, Vuyile Cameron Vuyiya, Lani Maestro, Sue Williamson and Rasheed Araeen? With this, hybridity — vehicle for demarcating and disseminating difference — seems paradoxically to flip over into its opposite, to function as the label of flattening sameness, as 'new international gothic'. At stake is staving off the tendency for hybridity to settle down into a one-dimensional concept, into what Gayatri Spivak speaks of as 'translatese'<sup>2</sup> — what we might liken to bureaucratese or officialese. The concern is with safeguarding its volatile tension, its force as a double-voicing concept. A recoding would need to affirm its bright and cloudy dimensions — the fact that it is at once the 'success' of translation and its 'failure': that it marks the site of an unceasing tussle between something hard won out of opacity and the impossibility of transparency.

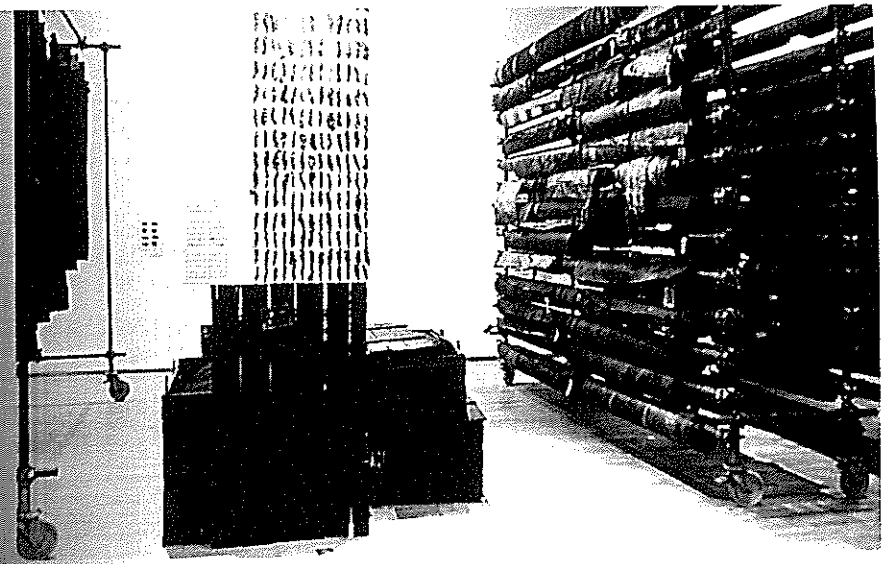
The notion of 'untranslatability' was given a singular twist by Apartheid for its own ends. It projected the impossibility of



translation, of transparency, to argue that self and other could never translate into or know each other. This sense of opacity served to underpin its doctrine of an absolute 'epistemic barrier' — grounds for institutionalising a radical sense of ethnic and cultural difference and separateness. Self and other were deemed to be locked in their own discrete, pure spaces. Recoiling from Apartheid's 'pessimistic', violating scripting and staging of the untranslatable, the drive has been to promote hybridity as its 'optimistic' flip side — as the triumph over untranslatability. How to recharge 'hybridity' so that it is prised free from this oppositional coupling? The aim is to prevent it from narrowing down into a reductive, celebratory term. To recode it in more circumspect key involves defining it as a concept that unceasingly plumbs the depths of the untranslatable and that is continually being shaped by that process. It is to reinscribe it with a double-movement that cuts across 'optimism and pessimism, the opaque and the crystal-clear' — to activate it as a play-off between the poles. It amounts to reindexing hybridity as an unfinished, self-unthreading force, even as a concept against itself. At any rate, as an open-ended one that is shot through with memories and intimations of the untranslatable. I have expressed the above in rather clear-cut, decisive terms — in an English kitted out in sturdy, sensible shoes and off on a brisk walk. I should say immediately, however, that it hides much that is undecided, hesitating. For behind the above map lies a vast panic-making searching and exploring that stretches back to my earlier, even more tentative attempts at probing the lines of the inter-cultural 'epistemic barrier'.<sup>3</sup>

Zarina Bhimji  
work in  
progress,  
1998–2001

Chahrah  
Feyzjoui,  
Boutique  
Product of  
Chahrah  
Feyzjoui,  
1997



Paradoxically, perhaps scandalously, to find solace for my sense of panic and to get to grips with the process of recoding itself, I turned to the *Panic Encyclopedia*, to the section on Panic Hamburgers, skipping over other hair-raising, heebie-jeebie entries.<sup>4</sup>

An ordinary hamburger, as I suppose all of us take for granted — whether diehard or dithering vegan or not — is filled with wholesome chunks of succulent meat. These are, in the *Panic Encyclopedia's* thinking, metaphors for chunks of nutritious meaning, portions of semantic substance. The Panic Hamburger, on the contrary, devoid of such content, has practically no decent filling to its credit. We might even suspect it of harbouring some sort of synthetic stuff, perhaps even slivers of a textured soya spun mix. At any rate, hardly any semantic substance to sink our teeth into. Except that we might see it in terms of a variety of constructions and recordings: a hamburger for every occasion — for the happy hour or for the blossoming or broken romance. A hamburger constructed as the family afternoon treat or a hamburger for the cranky vegan. I am sure we can agree this has little to do with either McDonalds or other fast-food joints — it's strictly about the process of inscription, erasure and recoding. Are some centuries longer than others? How might we construct and recode the new international century as the longest of them all? — as one that takes in the ancient and modern Jewish diaspora through to the transportation of the enslaved to the Caribbean and US, from the indentured and colonised to the postwar 'dark migrations' and the contemporary scene thick-scribbled with foot and fingerprints of refugees, exiles, deportees. One of Joyce's panic-stricken 100 letter desperation/diasportation words from *Finnegans Wake* evokes it:

Lukkedoerendunandurraskewdylooshooferoyportetooryzoo  
ysphalnabortansporthaokansakroidverjkapakkapuk

The word for 'shut door' in six languages, it captures the unhinging, trapping fear that accompanies the new international order and its sense of exhilaration, both its closures and openings. What Joyce hammers out is an unspeakable, untranslatable Babel word.

*Boutique Product of Chohreh Feyzjou* — this is how the exile artist of Iranian Jewish background bills her work. Framed as the 'Bazaar of Babel', the installation cites and cancels at least four acts and scenes of translation. Firstly, it stages the stereotyped Jewish space — the entrepreneurial scene of exchange, speculation, transaction. If it marks the still, traditional sacred space of the Talmudic scroll it is no less the tumultuous, profane space of buying, selling, shopping and over-the-counter commerce.

An ashen Auschwitz dust powders the scored, weather-beaten surfaces — space of the diaspora, deportation, death. Lastly it stages the Situationists' avant-garde space. Exasperated with the commodification of art, they had demanded that it be churned out by the metre in a parody of its commodified fate — not unlike stacked rolls of cloth and fabric on display. Browsing through this space one might ask for a metre or two of painting please. But the translations do not square, each overshoots the other and is opaque to it. An excess silently dribbles out. Between the constructions we are left with the remainder of the untranslatable.

Translation, as Derrida therefore puts it, is quite unlike buying, selling, swapping — however much it has been conventionally pictured in those terms. It is not a matter of shipping over juicy chunks of meaning from one side of the language barrier to the other — as with fast-food packs at an over-the-counter, take-away outfit. Meaning is not a readymade portable thing that can be 'carried over' the divide. The translator is obliged to construct meaning in the source language and then to figure and fashion it a second time round in the materials of the language into which he or she is rendering it.

The translator's loyalties are thus divided and split. He or she has to be faithful to the syntax, feel and structure of the source

language and faithful to those of the language of translation. We have a clash and collision of loyalties and a lack of fit between the constructions. We face a double writing, what might be described as a 'perfidious fidelity' or, to use Joyce's words, a 'double-crossing' loyalty — tressing, cross-dressing, double-crossing, treacherous. We are drawn into Derrida's 'Babel effect'.

Marcel Duchamp's remarks on the English translation by Richard Hamilton (1960) of his handwritten *Green Box* notes (1912-34) anticipated something of this view of translation. He complimented the English version by noting its 'monstrous veracity' — touching on its skewed fidelities, its truer-than-true unfaithfulness to the original. Referring to the project as a 'crystalline transubstantiation' rather than as a translation — he was to throw together the qualities of sheer transparency against those of the opaque, theological mystery of transformation. His stress is on transmutation — the sense of translation as a semiotic gear-switch, a break from one system of signs and images to another.<sup>5</sup> We might scan the scene of translations taking as its symbol Duchamp's lamp from *Etant Donnés* — the project he secretly worked on from 1946 to 1966. But what more magical a lamp than Aladdin's — which touches on the processes of translation as transmutation and transformation rather than as transfer. The word Aladdin — pronounced in old colonial English fashion with the accent on the first syllable — is itself Allah Din, religion of Allah. It changes to A'laddin — the stress is on the 'l' as north country English and Hollywood meet and mix.

A contemporary cartoon raises the transmutation stakes by representing the see-through, spectral genie in Scottish tartan kilt and sporran. Aladdin further translates into the Bengali-voiced Alauddin and Co., UK Sweetmeats, Brick Lane and Tooting Bec. We step into the scene of translations of Britain today, into the rough present of the 'dark migrations' — out of what might have seemed like a remote, abstruse linguistics debate between thinkers about the nature of translation.

The Western tourists have come and gone, bird-vanished as swiftly as they had arrived. Only their litter on Sri Lankan shores — photo bulbs, empty shampoo sachets, discarded bottles and jars, ballpoints, sweet containers, clapped-out batteries, cassettes, disposable cameras, throwaway plastics, Coca-Cola cans bobbing on the waves.... Picked up by some Sri Lankans they are crafted and wrought into objects of everyday use — colanders, graters, bowls, spoons and mugs, ladles. A treasure

trove, an Aladdin's Cave of utensils hammered from tourist-junk. We have chanced upon an Aladdin's lamp made from local waste materials — tinned food can, light bulb, string wick, newsprint.

The tourists have flocked back delighted with these magical objects and utensils. They buy them, admiringly, affectionately. Overseen by the Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen in Stuttgart, Dr Grotheus's collection of such 'objects from foreign lands' went on exhibition-tour across Germany. It was requisitioned by the Sydney Biennale '93 — for a less formal, less museum style display. It was thus translated for the third time by being displayed as something between the ethnographic item, the avant-garde readymade and the everyday object. As the indeterminate object between Sri Lanka, Stuttgart, Sydney, the hybrid stands before us: beyond it, traces of untranslatable leftovers?

Where translation is understood as a process of 'carrying over' and simply in terms of 'transparency' it tends to encourage a superficial, if seductive, attitude to 'multicultural translation' as the immediate visibility of all elements of multicultural community to one another — even in the face of an adverse actuality that thwarts and distresses such an ideal at every turn. Dare we hold on to the ideal, however, for the value of its critical demand — a utopian horizon against which multiculturalism might be scanned, kept on its toes, and shown up for having fallen short of its own claims?

But to focus on untranslatability is not only to acknowledge from the start the impossibilities and limits of translation. It is to highlight the dimension of what gets lost in translation, what

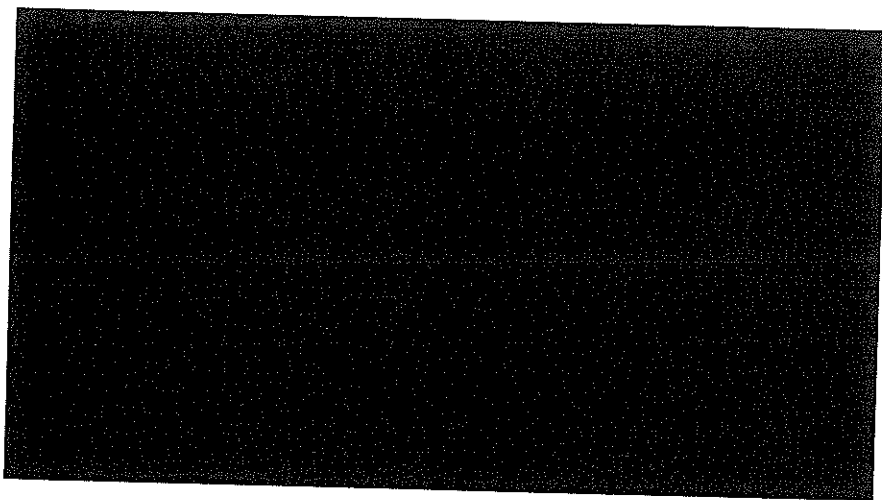
happens to be left over. Since what is gained in the translation tussle — elements of hybridity and difference — is so impressive, it is easy to slip into thinking of it as an outright overcoming of the untranslatable. The concept then begins to function as the mirror image of 'purity' with no less of the latter's triumphal overtone. It takes on an all too positive, optimistic ring billed as the new international visual Esperanto — a tellingly hunky-dory word, Steiner reminds us, that half-echoes the Spanish for hope.

What antidote for this drive towards becoming a reductive, one-dimensional term? A recoding would need to index hybridity as a site shot through and traced with the untranslatable which serves as its supplement and prop. The upshot of this is to dramatise the incomplete, unfixed nature of the category. We begin to see hybridity not so much as a self-standing, fixed term but as an interdependent one — changing and rechanging as it interacts with the aura of the untranslatable, with the remains and leftovers of the translation exercise. These need to be accounted for and acknowledged at every turn, for, to use Adorno's words, like blood stains in a fairytale, they cannot be rubbed off.

But can the untranslatable be voiced at all? How to articulate the leftover inexpressibles of translation? Is it perhaps to be glimpsed in a back-to-front crazy word, an image's shimmer, the flick of a gesture, the intimacies of voice, in listening to its silences — an attentiveness that opens on to an erotics and ethics of the other beyond its untranslatability? Having kicked off its sturdy walking shoes, my English is in danger of perhaps becoming too comfortably slipped at this point.

Lothar Baumgarten's installation *Imago Mundi* for the *Wall to Wall* show (Serpentine, London, 1994) stages the international space — quite literally reindexing it through a look at the codes, lens, optics and manuals of representation itself. Wherever we stand, wherever we position ourselves, we are not able to grasp the dispersed elements of the drifting continents. However acrobatically we twist, turn and contort ourselves to bring things into view, it only serves to make us aware of the limits and blindspots of the view and viewing.

Africa, Asia, Australia, Europe — no position permits a viewing without itself turning into the viewed. What prevails is the sense of watching as we are being watched, of someone looking over our shoulder as we look *l'autre l'ailleurs* — the other, elsewhere, everywhere and besides. The very transparency blocks off and



shutters, occludes. We are unable to totalise this mapping of the world, each time something slips out of our grip. We grapple with the leftovers, the remainder of the untranslatable. How to signal this except perhaps through Derek Jarman's blank-screened *Blue* (1993) — *silent, throbbing*.

Sarat Maharaj

#### Notes

1. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, 1981, pp. 71-72 and 'Des Tours des Babel' in *Difference in Translation*, Ithaca, 1985, pp. 165-207 and 209-48, in which the object of commentary is Walter Benjamin. 'The Task of the Translator' in *Illuminations*, New York, 1969, pp. 69-82.
2. Gayatri Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, New York, 1993, pp. 179-200.
3. 'The Congo is Flooding the Acropolis' in *Interrogating Identity*, Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 1991-92, pp. 13-42. Also A. R. Chakraborty, *Translational Linguistics of Ancient India*, Calcutta, 1976.
4. A. Kroker, M. Kroker & D. Cook, *Panic Encyclopedia*, London, 1989, p. 119.
5. Marcel Duchamp to Richard Hamilton (26.11.'60) from the Duchamp/Hamilton unpublished letters (1957-68).

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