

The Untranslatability of a Private Code: John Weir's *Eddie Socket* and AIDS Camp Humour

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Abstract: This paper deals with the untranslatability of AIDS camp. Analysing John Weir's novel *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket*, we will see how camp in general, and AIDS camp in particular, present challenges that make it difficult to translate because of camp's role as a private code. The pervasive presence of quotes and cultural references represents here not merely an aesthetic feature, but a crucial aspect of the author's poetics and the novel's message. By using gay and camp cultural references, Weir preserves a culture whose existence is, at the time he is writing, under threat; and by using camp humor to portray the experience of the AIDS epidemic he conveys the subversive attitude adopted by the gay community against homophobia in America. Camp's identity as a subculture makes it difficult to understand even for native speakers, as it presupposes a specific knowledge on the part of the reader. The use of camp is, therefore, very specific to the American LGBTQ linguistic and cultural context, and a translation into another language would not be intelligible as it would miss key aspects of the intent of the text.

Keywords: Untranslatability, camp, AIDS literature, humor

The question of untranslatability is generally related to words or expressions which are specific to a culture, where the lexical gap does not allow for the translator to effectively transpose the meaning into the target language. Jeroen Vandaele argues how humor is a notable example of untranslatability, since "relative or absolute untranslatability is generally related to cultural and linguistic aspects" (Vandaele 2010, 149) and among humor's core functions is the need to be understood quickly and not be explained. As humor is difficult to translate, subculture humor is even more challenging – and, sometimes, untranslatable. This paper aims at investigating the dynamics that are at work in the case of a specific subculture humor, camp, and the challenges that camp culture – in this case, American camp culture – pose to the translator. On top of the translation of puns or jokes, translating camp presents the additional difficulty of conveying a subculture and its sensibility. In camp, humor and puns are intertwined with high and low, obvious and less obvious cultural references, which make it all the more difficult to achieve an accurate translation and, most importantly, to achieve in the target text the same message present in the original. Double meaning and unintelligibility are key aspects in the dynamic of camp. As we will see, these characteristics make camp particularly challenging to the translator.

In her 1964 essay *Notes on Camp*, Susan Sontag describes camp as "something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques" (Sontag 1964, 275). Camp's dimension as a private language extends to literary texts, and becomes particularly significant during the years of the AIDS epidemic. In a society that already discriminated against homosexuality, the stigma brought by the virus piled on the existing homophobia in American culture, further marginalizing gay people and particularly gay men. In response, AIDS literary production during the Eighties and Nineties portrayed the experience of gay people in America in the face of oppression, in an effort to protest and to reclaim gay identity. The emergency of AIDS pushed gay authors to defend a culture

that had been, until then, quite fragmentary and relegated to the underground. In this dynamic camp, intended both as a language and as the culture articulated by that language, played a crucial role thanks to its history as a private code. Philip Core underlines the importance of camp “as a Masonic gesture by which homosexuals could make themselves known to each other during periods when homosexuality was not avowable. Besides being a signal, camp was and remains the way in which homosexuals and other groups of people with double lives can find a *lingua franca* (Core 1984, 9). In the midst of AIDS, the oxymoronic, paradoxical and unintelligible aspect of camp is important in the relationship with mainstream society, especially when it comes to humor. The use of this ‘underground private code’ helps to establish a sense of community that is crucial during the AIDS crisis: while until the Seventies American camp was mostly influenced by French culture and authors, and American gay fiction “did not enjoy the canonical status of the ... French authors” (Harvey 2000b, 149), after the explosion of the epidemic the references became more specific to the American context – which, arguably, made American camp less translatable. Camp’s quality as a private code gives literary texts an elitist, elusive dimension, according to which only those who are part of a certain community can participate. Keith Harvey makes the example of *Angels in America*, which he argues is diminished in its translation in French as “the circle of gay meanings that is channelled through a single word in the source text ... is diminished in its specificity in the translation” (Harvey 2000b, 158). Despite Angloamerican culture being highly influential in camp (suffice it to think about the influence it has had on an author like Almodóvar), it would not be appropriate to consider gay or camp culture to be the same everywhere: that means that AIDS camp can be so specific to America that it would not be intelligible to the gay community of another culture, as “metalinguistic expressions – sentences and phrases that refer to some aspect of their own linguistic form – carry meanings that are by definition internal to the language in which they are couched” (Bellos 2011, 286-7) – in this case not merely English, but American English. John Weir’s debut novel, *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket* (1989), can inspire interesting reflections on the issues of intelligibility and untranslatability when it comes to AIDS camp.

Weir’s novel was written at the height of the epidemic, and it represents a notable example of AIDS camp. The plot follows its hero in an AIDS-devastated New York: Eddie is apathetic, nihilistic, and expresses his attitude toward the world through a detached ironic gaze and by speaking through quotes all the time, instead of directly expressing himself. A blend of “humor in many forms – irony, pastiche, puns, the camp *aperçu*” (Blades 2017, 148), *Eddie Socket* belongs to a tradition of gay texts that put gay culture at the center. Humor and camp have been pervading gay texts way before Weir’s novel, but the use he makes of these elements is something new: *Eddie Socket* uses camp references as a celebration of a gay culture whose existence at that very moment was under threat, and camp humor as a weapon for cultural resistance in a context of oppression. *Eddie Socket* is probably the AIDS novel that makes the biggest use of camp and camp references, in part because of Eddie’s obsession with speaking in quotes. After the emergency of the epidemic was over, AIDS texts, including *Eddie Socket*, tended to get out of print and disappear from American culture. The novel was not translated into other languages, except for a German edition in 1990. Recently, however, a few AIDS texts are starting to be re-issued in the US, thus creating a new possibility for translations. AIDS camp texts, though, present a few challenges to the translator: camp’s unintelligibility poses the problem of harmonization with the target culture (cf. Harvey 2004, 415). Because of its use of camp, the case Weir’s novel could prove to be particularly challenging. Camp is built into the very structure of *Eddie Socket*: the name of every chapter represents a quote or a reference to cinema, musical theater or literature, and obviously the title is connected to

the content of the chapter. Moreover, as we will see, quotes and references are pervasively used in the book, and have specific functions. Weir employs camp through, mainly, two devices: humor and the use of quotes. For different reasons, we will see, these two aspects pose different challenges for the translator, particularly when they intertwine.

Humor, and specifically camp humor, is particularly difficult to translate: Vandaele rightfully notes that “the particular problem with humor translation is that humor relies on implicit knowledge” (Vandaele 2010, 150), which is not necessarily the same in different cultures. Moreover, camp presumes the knowledge of another culture’s subculture in order to get the joke. The use of quotes is connected to the same issue: besides those used, compulsively, by the title character, we find quotes and references that presume, on the part of the reader, the understanding not only of the individual reference, but also of the role it plays in gay culture. In this context, the role of the readers and their ability to follow the implications of the references become crucial, through what Leap calls “*cooperative discourse*” (Leap 1996, 160). Harvey notices how “the *space of literature* – including, crucially, translated literature – is one in which a (gay) community can be imagined by the reader” (Harvey 2000b, 147): by the same token, the reader of the translated text needs to be able to imagine the culture produced by that community in order to be able to *participate* in the text, an aspect that became more important during the epidemic, when AIDS texts had not only a literary or cultural role, but also a political one. Michael Denny describes culture as “an event that requires activity at both ends, on the part of the initiator who raises a voice to speak, and on the part of the hearer who actively attends to the word. Culture *is* the relationship between these two, and that relationship is an activity, of speaking and of attending, and that activity creates the bond that is what we mean by the word *community*” (Denny 1993, 44). Humor is obviously a feature that demands reader participation in order to be effective, and its “meaning effect has an undeniable, exteriorized manifestation ... , whereas the ‘meaning’ of other texts is sometimes ‘less compelling’ in terms of perception” (Vandaele 2002, 150): therefore, not only the translation needs to be accurate as it pertains to the meaning of the text, but, in order to convey such meaning, the text has to provide an effect (laughter) which can be constructed, or explained, only to a point. Humor, argues Vandaele, “is not necessarily a consequence of merely the ‘literal’ meaning of sentences” (Vandaele 2002, 151), but needs something more. When humor is a crucial part of the meaning and intent of a text, the humorous effect cannot be explained away with a periphrasis. A quick reaction and understanding on the reader’s part is necessary, capturing, in this case, the incongruity of the situation of the gay community: merely making the reader laugh is not sufficient. In the case of camp, the humorous utterance or the reference carry implications that go beyond the literal meaning, therefore an effective translation is problematic: “while the denotations can roughly be translated into a different language, the connotations cannot” (Diot 1989, 84). We can observe this in the case of puns and semantic wordplay, for example with the main characters’ names: Eddie Socket and Polly Plugg. In the first chapter, we learn that Polly’s name is real, while Eddie “had instantly changed his name to go with hers” (Weir 1989, 7). Apart from the ‘socket-plug’ pun, the names convey a sexual double meaning and challenge gender assumptions “in an act of resistance ... , parodying and reversing the process that would make men’s names stable and unchanging and women’s names dependent upon men’s, a process that would also insist on the man being the ‘plug’ and the woman the ‘socket’” (Kruger 1996, 198). Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, the names give the reader an essential clue about the main character and his approach to life. The translation of the last names into another language would sound old-fashioned and artificial, but at the same time the pun has to be intelligible to the reader, so keeping the original names would not work. Beside the names, the novel is

filled with puns: for example, Eddie refers to sex as ‘the wild thing,’ and toward the end of the novel he says: “you spell that with an *e*, I ever tell you that? For gays, I mean, the Wilde Thing. As in Oscar” (Weir 1989, 248). It would be difficult to maintain the expression, which is used repeatedly throughout the novel, and then keep the Oscar Wilde reference, which is obviously significant in a context of gay culture.

In his writing, Vandaele points at linguistic denotation and connotation and at metalinguistic communication to identify the elements that make a text untranslatable, but camp further complicates the issue: it is not only that the pun is difficult to translate, but also that the pun references something that the reader might not be familiar with – as aforementioned, a private code. In this “highly referential comedy” (Diot 1989, 84), what is referenced is often obscure to the mainstream reader – or, more accurately, even when the references can be captured their role in the context is not fully intelligible. AIDS camp belongs in the underground, and the language of this milieu has started to come to the mainstream only recently, with products like FX’s *Pose*. References are signs and symbols that are specific to a culture and, in the case of camp talk, to a language. Leap recognizes the origin of gay references in “films and Broadway plays that have gay-centered messages, and anecdotes from the life stories of famous entertainers and other persons with recognized gay appeal” (Leap 1996, 26). With the first category, Leap identifies contents that are explicitly gay, while we should also add elements that may not be explicitly gay in their content, but nonetheless have been assimilated into the gay canon. References to camp and gay culture pervade AIDS camp texts and humor: Monica Pearl argues that the use of “cultural objects that a gay reading audience will readily identify as gay will encourage a knowing reading and cement a sense of belonging” (Pearl 2013, 29), which was crucial in a time of struggle. Among these cultural objects, the most notable are undoubtedly movies, particularly old Hollywood films from the Thirties and Forties, and even though many of them are classics (like *The Wizard of Oz* and *All about Eve*), many quotes come from films that had moderate or little success, often when the star was already in decline: the best example is the notorious Bette Davis quote ‘What a dump’ from *Beyond the Forest*, later canonized by Albee in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. This feature of camp did not start with AIDS, but the epidemic gave it a new significance. Bette Davis is undoubtedly the name that gets referenced more often in AIDS texts, including *Eddie Socket*: the novel opens with a quote from *Deception*, “then the war came and we were swept apart” (Weir 1989), and *All about Eve* is referenced several times. Georges-Claude Guilbert argues that Davis’s appeal as a gay icon was due “not only [to] her cold, hard bitch aspects but also [to] her ‘masculine’ sides” (Guilbert 2018, 55). Her demeanor was theatrical, excessive, very campy, so much so that, Guilbert argues, “she evoked a man in drag” (Guilbert 2018, 56). These aspects escape the non-camp-savvy reader, and the parodical use of sources cannot be translated accurately. Moreover, in AIDS texts these cultural references are often mixed with political references of the time: for example, it is necessary to know the rumors around New York Mayor Koch’s sexuality and connect them to his policies to understand most jokes about him. One of the most challenging passages, from this point of view, is Eddie’s nightmare:

Eddie dreamed he went on David Letterman. It was a camp nightmare, sort of a musical comedy cross between Dostoyevsky and *Grand Hotel*, with an all-star cast (Jane Fonda, Jodie Foster, Bette Davis, and Vanessa Redgrave, his favorite women, for the dramatic interludes) and a crucifixion scene with taps and feathers. It took place in the ice-skating rink at Rockefeller Center, where David Letterman told AIDS jokes. He turned to one of his guests, Ed Koch, and said, ‘Hey, Ed, do you have AIDS?’ and Ed said, ‘Well, uh, no, uh, David, no, I certainly, um, do not,’ and David Letterman said, delightedly, cuing the band, ‘Then you’re the asshole I’ve been looking for,’ and Bette Midler, strapping on a dildo like something out of *Lysistrata*, came out singing with a hundred dancing boys dressed up like

tubes of K-Y jelly. ... Eddie [was] nailed to the hood of a 1965 Ford Mustang convertible, the centurions, consisting of the Reagans, the O'Connors (John Cardinal and Sandra Day), the Decter-Pods (Midge and Norm), John Simon, William Buckley, Hilton Kramer, and Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, all in togas. ... Dressed in a lavender gown, and drinking New Coke from a straw, he wore a cap that said 'I.H.S.' (which stood, he knew, for 'I Hate Sodomites') and he said, 'I thirst,' and 'I have such a yearning,' Doris Day came on at the end and sang 'Dream a Little Dream of Me' (Weir 1989, 228-29).

In this passage the challenge lies not only in translating the references, but also in conveying the necessary sensibility to understand *what is funny* about this. There is no AIDS text that incorporates the element of quotes as much or as well as *Eddie Socket*. Eddie quotes obsessively, and just as obsessively asks his interlocutors, 'who am I quoting?': "his head was stuffed with advertising slogans and images, big clocks of solid colors shaped to suggest penises, ... television jingles, 'Lost in Space,' and literary references, and Bette Davis draining a martini and saying, 'Fasten your seat belts, it's going to be a bumpy night,' he didn't know how to think, or feel, but only how to avoid thinking, or feeling" (Weir 1989, 102-03). Therefore, camp elements cannot be normalized in translation, as they are one of the main character's fundamental traits. To make references explicit cannot achieve the same effect as in the original, because a crucial part of the dynamic is *if* the reader gets it: the reference cannot be explained. Today, these references could also be considered as relics from a lost world – which, of course, they are. The text itself is, in a way: an argument about the untranslatability of these references could have been made at the time of publication, and today we can add the issue of time, on top of cultural, distance, regarding the translation of references to Liberace, or to Rock Hudson and Doris Day: "Eddie dropped his head in silent tribute to Rock, who wouldn't have done the wild thing with Doris, anyway" (Weir 1989, 66). The repeated references to Doris Day are crucial in capturing character descriptions (Eddie calls his mother 'Doris Day'), but they might have a different effect on foreign readers, as all the implications of Day's relationship with Hudson, who contracted the virus as a closeted gay man, are very specific to America's pop culture. The concern, again, is not literal translation, but an understanding of why the use of these references is ironic or funny. Humor, writes Vandaele, "depends on *implicit* cultural schemes" (Vandaele 2010, 150), and camp brings this dynamic to a more complex level. Camp elements are central in conveying the novel's message, even in explicitly sentimental moments, as when Eddie tells his mother about his diagnosis by referencing *Since you went away*: "so listen, now, and here's the point, I'm on the train, I'm riding down the platform, and I'm waving and waving good-bye. I want this moment to be sentimental. This is my David O. Selznick moment, Mom, because I have a terminal disease..." (Weir 1989, 192).

One of the keys when dealing with a subculture in translation is to understand its relationship with mainstream culture: Harvey argues that with camp "we find a trace of much larger socio-cultural attitudes with regard to issues of subcultural identity/community, attitudes which form part of the complex context within which the translator acts" (Harvey 2000b, 158). The role of camp as a private code, we have seen, entails its unintelligibility even in the original text: Vandaele quotes Maria Tymoczko and her argument that "one has to be part of a 'comical paradigm' to even appreciate – let alone translate – certain paradigm-specific humor" (Vandaele 2010, 150). This is true of camp in and of itself, *before* any discussion of translating the text: many native English speakers would not know what Eddie Socket is talking about – among them, in the novel, his own father. When Eddie is in the hospital with AIDS, he receives a visit from his estranged father, whom he calls Joseph Stalin, and the incommunicability between them is clear: "you're Shirley MacLaine. ... Quick, go out in the hall, circle the desk, bang your fists

for medication.’ Joseph Stalin grinned sheepishly, in a bewildered way that made Eddie want to take care of him. ... ‘I suppose a sense of humor is important’” (Weir 1989, 231). Parents usually represent mainstream culture in AIDS texts, and the fact that they don’t get it has a significance in the text that goes far beyond the individual sentence: camp reinforces ‘gay solidarity,’ as “to understand the slang or catch on to the allusion is also to feel that one belongs to the community” (Harvey 2004, 407). Harvey argues that “translation is not just about texts: nor is it only about cultures and power. It is about the relation of the one to the other” (Harvey 2004, 421). Camp expresses the relationship of an underground culture with a dominant one, and this relationship, we will see, is at the core of its subversive intent. Parody, for example, is a crucial aspect of camp, but it is “only accessible to those who are at least vaguely acquainted with the parodied discourse” (Vandaele 2010, 149). Parody poses the challenge of the intelligibility of references, as one has to be able to understand what is being parodied in order to get the humorous tone, as in the following example: “that is worthy at least of Margo Channing, I think, snapping off the stems of my carrots for emphasis” (Weir 1989, 59). This is language in the second degree, and the second-degree meaning is what gives it its ironic dimension. Usually, the problem is not that there is a piece of lexicon that is difficult to translate into another language, but rather that the sensibility, or mood, or intention of the text pass through *the way* those words are intended. This is why we refer to camp as a ‘private code.’

Considering its role as a private code, the crucial feature of camp humor, and especially AIDS camp humor, is based on political incorrectness and the subversion of the status quo: Harvey notices how the “inappropriateness ... accomplishes an act of critical resistance” (Harvey 2004, 407). It’s not only about a lexical gap, but about an intertwining of lexicon, culture and underground sensibility. AIDS camp stands out because of a combination of irreverence, sentimentalism, and sometimes cynicism: the fact that gay authors took the liberty of using humor to address the tragedy of AIDS and to reclaim their identity and culture in the face of the homophobic backlash is an essential aspect in the understanding, and therefore the translation, of AIDS texts and AIDS camp. In the Seventies, despite Stonewall and the sexual revolution, the gay community and gay culture in general were not as cohesive as they would become in the new millennium. AIDS stands in between. During the epidemic, the strategy of the gay community has been carried out “by affirming, not by sacrificing, a gay identity” (Jones 1993, 118), and this was obviously a subversive act. This is why the cultural implications of AIDS camp cannot be dismissed in translations: the act of recognition declares “participation in the cultural subversions of camp”, marking the beholder “as someone who is in the know, who is in on the secret of camp, already initiated into the circuits of shared perception and appreciation that set apart those who are able to discern camp and that create among such people a network of mutual recognition and complicity. ... The ability to identify a particular object as camp ... thereby creates the basis for community” (Halperin 2012, 189). The idea of preserving gay culture, therefore implicitly looking toward the future, was obviously significant in the context of a deadly epidemic. Through AIDS camp, gay authors regain control of their narrative, even subverting their tragic circumstances through humor: while he is in the hospital, Eddie laments that “even the orderlies who mop the floors are terrified of catching what I’ve got, like all I have to do is quote a line from *Sunset Boulevard* and they’re infected” (Weir 1989, 239). This is perhaps the most challenging aspect of translating AIDS camp: writing about camp translation Harvey usually refers to older texts, but in the AIDS age the urgency makes camp more relevant and, therefore, an element to translate more accurately. The distinction between illocution and perlocution, or between intention and effect, is at the center of the problematics of camp translation. Language, especially in literature, contributes to the elaboration of gay identity, and by

using camp “gay authors ... consciously and imaginatively seek to undermine mainstream expectations about appropriate AIDS-related discourse” (Leap 1996, 158). In AIDS camp texts, cultural references express a culture whose survival is at risk and whose preservation is among the goals of authors like Weir. The use of camp in *Eddie Socket* has to be intended as a sign of resilience on the part of the author: the novel becomes “a celebration of the remnants of gay culture and imagination” (Clum 1990, 667), evoking many elements of the gay and camp canon.

The crucial point about AIDS, culture and the role of camp has been effectively summarized by David Bergman, who argued that “camp is the voice of survival and continuity in a community that needs to be reminded that it possesses both” (Bergman 1993b, 107). These times create a completely new role for gay culture, the greatest contribution that AIDS camp has given to gay history. This structure of quotes and references assumes the role, in the environment of a culture under threat of extinction, of “helping preserve a ‘gay world’ in danger of being lost” (Kruger 1996, 186): the idea of people and texts containing multitudes, to borrow a Whitmanesque metaphor, implies a purpose of resistance. In this perspective, the tendency to choose a humorous and campy attitude to preserve the culture is subversive, and needs to be conveyed properly in order for the text to maintain its core meaning in the target language. In *Notes on Camp*, Sontag argues that to try and explain camp represents a risk of producing involuntary camp. If we consider, as I think we should, translation as a form of interpretation, I would conclude that camp could be neither made explicit, due to the risk of involuntary camp production and the loss of humorous effect, nor could its references be adapted to the target culture, as that would entail the loss of crucial information about the context. Therefore, when it comes to AIDS camp translation, an essential portion of the text inevitably goes missing. This difficulty might be the ultimate proof that one needs to delve into the subculture in order to participate in it: if you get it, you should read the text in the original, otherwise, you would not get it anyway, not really. But then again, it is not guaranteed that you would get it even reading as a native speaker. As Bette Davis would say, draining her martini, ‘Amen.’

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