

Dereification of the Politics of Untranslatability and Interminability

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Abstract: This paper proposes that untranslatability and interminability in translation are both linked not only by the Derridean constant deferral of meaning or difference but also by another consequential factor of reification. A text is labelled and defined as ‘untranslatable’ only after several attempts at translating it and because it is ‘untranslatable’ future efforts to revert to the original or re-readings of the translations themselves, efforts to make the unknown known and accessible will continue making interminability both the source and product of untranslatability and vice-versa. In the process, then, untranslatability becomes a commodity which is measurable and quantifiable in relation to other commodities. It is assigned a definition and category changing cultural and social relationships to substantial ‘thing’ which permeates life in a capitalist society. This definition of untranslatability is repeated structurally and paradoxically gives rise to a market based on interminability of translation production. It is only when one can dereify untranslatability along the models of Cixous who prefers defamiliarizing languages to make it her own and especially Spivak when she speaks of becoming the thing translated, of originary translation which forges a responsible subject, can one think of an apolitical inclusive stance in translation which is crucial to the ethical question that plagues translation and Translation Studies.

Keywords: Untranslatability, interminability, reification, dereification, originary translation, culturing as translation, ethical responsibility

Even its title is extraordinarily difficult to translate and has been mistranslated (in English) for over ninety years, since Constance Garnet called it *Notes from the Underground* in 1918. Subsequent translators have stayed with that version, with or without the definite article. But it is not what the Russian title means. The Russian title means, literally, “Notes from Under the Floorboards”. That, indeed, is what we would have liked to call this translation. We decided to keep to Constance Garnett’s title (without the definite article) because, by now, it is the title by which all old readers will recognize it and all new readers will be looking for it. But it is wrong “The underground”, even in Mrs Garnett’s day, had acquired connotations of conspiracy, insurgency, early tremors of revolution. But in 1864 *podpolye*, the space under the floorboards, referred essentially to the shallow space uninhabitable by humans but inhabited by rodents and, according to Russian folk legend, the abode of devils, demons, evil spirits and other representatives of what Russians call the Unclean Power (*Nechistaya Sila*): creatures more sinister even than conspirators, insurgents or revolutionaries. (Zinovieff vii)

This is an excerpt taken from the translator’s Introduction of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*. This excerpt clearly deals with the problems of translation, the inaccuracy and impossibility of translation due to the encounter of different cultures and different historical periods or contexts. The impossibility of translation has somewhat been widely agreed upon by most theoreticians and translators citing either different lexical registers or, its extension, the different cultural and contextual registers as the impediments that plague translation and the history of Translation Studies. However, the passage unwittingly reveals a fundamental paradox – not only have there been numerous translations before but there will also be translations following these for subsequent readers

who “will be looking for it”, thereby suggesting a perpetuity of translation. The translator cautions against the untranslatability but simultaneously engages in translation which he/she deems ethical because it is a literal word-for-word translation which is held as the only legit way of accessing the original. The question of ethics in translation is indeed all-encompassing because it deals with the intellectual property/effort of both the original author and the translator. The ways a text should be translated, whether literal or including equivalent cultural idioms or as Benjamin and Schleirmacher, studying the self-reflexivity of language, suggest translating in a way which qualitatively enriches and expands the target language itself while keeping the ‘foreignness’ of the original text intact even in the target language, have been highly debatable issues adding to the scholarship of Translation Studies. Ethics then, is as varied as the perspectives on translation. One must, however, remember translation is the end-product by and for the service of humans – beings for whom their Being is an issue. Therefore, any ethical question is more often an ontological question and even translation, which seems primarily to be a literary activity having no direct association with the Being of an individual, can also have a more universal ethical stance based on the human ontology for whom translation has come into being. This will gradually make itself apparent by the end of this paper. Coming back to the translator’s excerpt, one finds a correlation and interdependence between untranslatability and interminability. The translator proclaims that the Russian title is incorrect and has been mistranslated and then proceeds to rectify the error. In the process the translator performs yet another translation which involves finding other referents of equivalence, giving birth to a chain of synonyms leading to a perpetual deferring of meaning. If the ‘sign’ is resistant to translation, it inevitably leads to an investigation of ways to represent it, to further referents, to other ‘signs’, to interminability. Not only is each translation a ‘differance’ but also because it is a ‘differance’ it solicits a constant comparison with the original which it can never directly refer to but refer to only by difference and deferral. The first part of this paper seeks to propose that untranslatability and interminability are both integrally linked not only by a constant deferral of meaning perpetuated by untranslatability but by another far consequential factor – that of reification. The second part of the paper engages in ways to dereify the translation industry by specifically looking at Spivak’s model of an ethical apolitical and inclusive translation practice.

That translation is essentially a ‘production’ is clear from its very nature and aim. It is a literary piece but one with a clear intention of being publicly circulated as a commodity specifically designed for consumption and distribution. One may say that all literary works are commodities. True, but here what must be considered is the intention. Works like those of Kafka (which he never published and ordered his friend, Max Brod to burn the unfinished manuscripts), Gerard Manley Hopkins (burned most of his early works after becoming a Jesuit), Nikolai Gogol (burnt the manuscript of *Dead Souls*, part 2) and many others were intentionally kept away from circulation but the intention of translations are just the opposite – translations have come into existence because of the demand of circulation. However, interestingly, what escapes notice is the politics of untranslatability, that untranslatability is also a commodity and an instance of reification. If the excerpt cited in the beginning of the paper is perused carefully, untranslatability as a commodity manifests itself, “ We decided to keep to Constance Garnett’s title (without the definite article) because, by now, it is the title by which all old readers will recognize it and all new readers will be looking for it. But it is wrong” (vii). By referring to the incorrectly yet famously translated title, by the ‘deciding’ to retain the “wrong” but more recognisable title, it is untranslatability that is being sold and measured. The translator is wary of the untranslatability but uses it deliberately as a bait for former and future readers. To have been assigned the definition and category of ‘untranslatable’, a text has had to undergo

repeated attempts at translation. Untranslatability then is a result of translations and has been structurally reproduced as a category which, far from ceasing, perpetuates its production. Untranslatability has become a commodity permeating into life of a capitalist society. To term something as untranslatable requires agency and reification is a structure built through agency. Complex cultural idioms, inter and intra relationships of languages, encounters with the 'other' and all other such distinct social relations are reduced to a substantial solidified concept or thing or commodity called untranslatability. Untranslatability which is a complex of human relationships has through reiteration and performance (paradoxically, through interminable translations) assumed the form of the objectivity of the natural sciences. It is one of the forms of social appearance, that is, the way in which things appear or give themselves to consciousness in a capitalist society. It has been observed, experimented with, explained and almost created so that it becomes a quantified category, a law which spreads to the whole social system determined by the capitalist mentality. Once it is created, it also becomes manipulable in subtle ways which make individuals relate to it and engage with it as an object of technical control. For instance, if one looks at the arc of thought in a distinguished translator and poet like William Radice regarding his craft, one can find this aspect of untranslatability and reification as an almost inescapable yet an underlying inconspicuous, rather all-prevalent condition. In his Introduction to the *Selected Poems* of Rabindranath Tagore in 2005, he writes that *Gitanjali* has not stood the test of time" because "most of the lyrics that Tagore chose to translate are actually *songs*, intimate combinations of words and melody." He vehemently resists translation by maintaining the stance of untranslatability, "Let me simply say here that I do not believe you can translate songs, and I have not tried to translate songs in this book" (n.p.). However, its very untranslatability poses a challenge to be overcome by Radice himself a few years later as he writes, "My new translation attempts to distinguish the various styles and forms in the Bengali original that Tagore was not able to convey in his own, prose translations" (xi). What was once untranslatable is now looked upon as a commodity whose value has to be restored by re-translating thereby ending up as an interminable process entwined in reification. By experimenting with it, he actually reaffirms its untranslatable nature and confirms its status as a quantified category which is why he treats untranslatability with the technical control that a reified commodity requires to perpetuate. This is apparent in the translation of the *Gitanjali* that Radice engages in a few years later in 2011 where he begins to rethink untranslatability and work through it but unwittingly reveals the mechanistic and technical nature it has assumed in the process:

Sonnets I translate as sonnets; ballads I translate as ballads; in all the poems where metre and rhyme are important I try to find flexible English equivalents. The songs, however (many of the poems in *Gitanjali* are songs), I have translated in a way that I hope will instantly convey their song-like character. I preserve the repetitions of the lines that are obligatory when the songs are sung, I indicate the four-part structure of the song by inserting line-breaks. . .(xii)

The rationalisations behind the concept of the untranslatable gives rise to a sort of Marxian fetishism where several abstract ideas which fuse together to give rise to some sense of untranslatability are in fact dispelled by branding untranslatability as a concrete phenomenon which just like price governs the translation market and to some extent the academic world of Translation Studies. It determines interminability, it determines which texts should gain accessibility and wider distribution, it determines which languages are to be rendered significant or insignificant, it determines cultural relationships, it also determines the fate of an author and the politics of the 'other'. It becomes more real than all these real relations combined, leading to a quantification of social reality through pricing or in this case, through measured untranslatability. In this form of reification, the translators as well

as the target audience/readers become alienated from the actual spontaneous verbal and non-verbal idioms and processes of the untranslatable and view them as a single mechanized unit which has already acquired a definition through multiple performances.

Though the translator and the readers are immersed in and socialized into a certain capitalist understanding of Being, it is the translator and sometimes the native reader who, in moments of disruption (untranslatability), become aware of the untranslatable as a commodity, as reified. Heidegger in his revelatory *Being and Time* says, "Dasein is ontically 'closest' to itself and ontologically farthest. . ." (37). The reification of untranslatability and consequently interminability is as pervasive as water is to fish so that the ontical beings and objects enmeshed in it are the nearest to it and therefore the farthest because they are not deliberately conscious of the all encompassing phenomenon. It is so pervasive and built into everything, every relation, even language that it becomes very difficult for one to become aware of it. One does not see it but sees everything in terms of it, through it. However, if the water begins to dry up, a disruption occurs, then a new mode of Dasein emerges where one begins to consciously deliberate and begins to notice properties thereby bringing an intentionality characteristic of the Cartesian subject-object duality. The Heideggerian 'ready-to-hand' mode of being becomes the 'present-at-hand' mode of being. Both are daseins but in the split moment of coping with either of the daseins, a moment of void, a moment of fundamental Dasein arrives which makes things and itself intelligible to us. This moment may be thought of as similar to the moment of class-consciousness to the worker. It is a moment when the worker becomes more than a worker, he becomes the self-consciousness of the commodity as it were and recognizes the flourishing reification of which he is part, as Lukacs adeptly focuses on this moment of self-knowledge:

The quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as a process of abstraction of which he is the victim, and which cuts him off from his labour-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialized process that has been rationalized and mechanized, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanized and rationalized tool. . . . The quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive , qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence. (Lukacs 166)

In this case the translator substitutes the worker and it is he/she who has the ability to become the self-consciousness of the commodity, namely untranslatability and interminability, while being integrated into the process of reification himself/herself. Once this discovery of class-consciousness is made, once he/she is able to see this matrix of rampant reification, once the difference between appearance and reality is laid bare, the translator is ready, much like the worker, to bring about a revolution, to change the fundamental logic of social life, or here, the theories of translation. It is at this moment that the possibility of dereification can overhaul the existing reified manipulative system and establish a more ethically sound system. One can think of Tahira Naqvi's tryst with the translations of Ismat Chughtai who, thanks to Naqvi's translations, is now a well-known writer in Urdu literature. In most of her translations Naqvi does not deal explicitly with the problems of translation intending perhaps the work to speak for itself but some of her rare deliberations on the matter help understand how conscious she was of the problem of untranslatability as a commodity and how delicately she tries to work through it and escape the essential condition of reification. She is aware of the commodification of untranslatability as she maintains:

Editors and publishers, here and in India, are still looking for smooth translations, demanding idiomatic English, searching for equivalents of Urdu lexicon and syntax in Standard English, mistaking smoothness for authenticity, for quality. In the case of Ismat, you can continue to abbreviate and simplify in an effort to achieve idiomatic accuracy and very soon Ismat is no longer recognizable as herself.

She speaks of all the “textures, sounds and rhythms, its cultural burdens” that must be transported while translating but at the same time acknowledges its impossibility. She understands that untranslatability is essential to the life of a translated text but she is also sensitive of the fact that she, as already being involved in this reified process, needs to accept it and re-examine the terrain of translation, “we must review and reform the ways in which we have handled translation until now.” (Naqvi)

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay, “Translation as Culture”, provides one such possibility of a dereification process by looking at translation more as an ontological exchange and forging than an industry. To her translation is a very personal phenomenon, an intimate affair in which she strips it of all politics (as much as feasible) and seeks an ethical understanding of it. Translation becomes a means of subject formation and culture formation because more than a literary activity, translation is a life-process, the terms of communication, the source of the ego, through which every one of us inevitably undergoes:

The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing (*begreifen*) of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a ‘translation’. In this never-ending weaving, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. (Spivak 13)

If certain terms are substituted by others pertaining more directly to the literary activity of translation then the infant and the inside may stand for the translator-reader and the outside may stand for the foreign text. If one now attempts to re-read the passage in this light then one can understand how the external and internal shape each other and how this act of “grabbing” or translating is absolutely essential to the constitution of the ego, the “conscience” which in turn translates or codifies the external ending up in the translator becoming that which is translated and vice-versa. Here, the term “violence” must be noted because violence is associated with any kind of translation. Violence which can be further explained as some intrusion or deprivation is an essential condition underlying translation. Where then can this site of violence be located? Ofcourse the site of violence is both inside and outside of the subject which is constructed by this violence. More specifically, the site of violence is the translated text, “Thus ‘nature’ passes and repasses into ‘culture’, in a work or shuttling site of violence.” (13) Culture and the self are both products of this constant shuttling translation. Therefore culturing is a form of incessant translation and it is at the site of violence where “originary translation” (14) takes place or the subject comes into being as a “precarious subject of reparation and responsibility” (13). The translated text is moulded out of violence and untranslatability is the violence which is perpetually encountered and overcome (to some extent). The excesses, the deficiencies, the substitutions, the coinage of new forms and terms of equivalence, the struggle to bring oneself and the Other into being are all aspects of the untranslatable (the violence) which is necessary in all works of translation. It is this violence which necessitates the evolution of responsibility and accountability. When translating from one language to the other, “every ‘original’ is a place-holder for the mother tongue” (14-15), there is a sense of guilt from which arises responsibility or the obligation of reparation. The idioms and singularities of the mother tongue are internalised, belong to the “inside” and constitute the “inside” therefore any attempt to translate the mother tongue is an act of subordination and guilt because one is compelled to view it not as the only existing language but a

language existing among several other scripted and non-scripted languages and/or dialects. This act of translating, Spivak says, is an act of reparation too because one feels responsible towards one's mother tongue:

This originary *Schuldigsein* – being-indebted in the Kleinian sense – the guilt in seeing that one can treat one's mother tongue as one language among many – gives rise to a certain obligation for reparation. (14)

Interestingly, in her essay “Coming to Writing”, Helene Cixous also speaks about this violent displacement and subordination of the mother tongue, trying to come to terms with objectifying the language which has constituted her being:

Mother German is the body that swims in the current, between my tongue's borders, the maternal lover's soul, the wild tongue that gives form to the oldest the youngest of passions, that makes milky night in the French day. Isn't written – traverses me, makes love to me, makes me love, speak, laugh from feeling its air caressing my throat. My German mother in my mouth, in my larynx, rhythms me. Horror the late day when I discovered that German can also be written. Learning German as a “second language,” as they say. Trying to make the primitive language, the flesh of breath, into an object-tongue. (Cixous 22)

Cixous is torn between the language she should write in. Neither French nor English seems to give voice to her seething desire to write herself into language. Neither of them are intimate enough for her to engage in and undo discourse, to make herself visible in language. It is German which is her primordial nourishment, which runs in her veins and which never wants to be something other than herself. However, this personal intimacy with German has taught her something significant which can be understood in terms of Spivak's approach to the mother-tongue or any language that has to be translated. Though Spivak and Cixous come from different backgrounds and their stance towards language and translation differs, one thing which yokes them together is the profound rapturous intimacy with language that they constantly wish to engage in and the treating the body itself as language which brings a deeply personal experimental flavour and attitude towards defamiliarising language and making it their own. Spivak says that the body becomes a script (Spivak 14) due to the process of culturing or translation and one should become that which is translated so that translation can become more responsible and ethical. Cixous proclaims the same relationship of love with the foreign text (default mother-tongue), a love which arises also from responsibility to the mother-tongue which has taught her to love and make love to the Other and never impose ownership on it, to let herself be immersed in and let the language absorb her instead of she imposing herself on it:

The mother I speak has never been subjected to the gramma-r wolf. In me she sings and muses, my accent is right, but my voice is illiterate. It is she who makes the French language always seem foreign to me. To her, my untamed one, I am indebted for never having had a rapport of mastery, of ownership with any language, for having always been in the wrong, guilty of fraud, for having always wanted to approach every language delicately, never as my own, in order to lick it, to breathe it in, to adore its differences, respect its gifts, its talents, its movements. . . .If you do not possess a language, you can be possessed by it: let the tongue remain foreign to you. Love it like your fellow creature.(Cixous 22-23)

While apparently Cixous insists on retaining the foreignness of the language and Spivak insists on becoming that language, they both have different approaches but are united in making a case for ethical translation, for self-reflexive, introspective, responsible translation born out of love. In slightly contradictory stances both eventually offer possible methods of dereification of untranslatability and interminability.

Translation should not be quantified or measured by trying to standardize the native tongue because according to Spivak:

the founding translation between people is a listening with care and patience, in the normality of the other, enough to notice that the other has already silently made that effort. This reveals the irreducible importance of idiom, which a standard language, however native, cannot annul. (Spivak 21)

Many translators, as Spivak says, exult and assert their success by subjecting native tongues to the “gramma-r wolf” but it is only the worker (in the capitalist society) and in this case only the loser of language who can see through the illusion. The loser of language can be the translator as well if he/she is part of a language in which he/she no longer thinks in but remains dormant inside as part of his/her Being. To Spivak, the loser has a privilege which the assertive translators wish to claim as their own but can never appropriate it simply because they have not undergone the extension or catechresis of translation, the culturing of originary translation which the losers have undergone:

When we establish our reputations on transcoding such resistant located hybridity, distinct from the more commonly noticed migrant hybridity, we lose the privilege of the loser because we claim that privilege. The translators in Cataldi and Napaljarri’s book placed their effort within resources for a cultural performance of the second degree. They were not themselves constricted by the violence of this culture performing itself, as originary and catachrestic translation – the coming into being of the responsible subject as divined by Klein. (16)

Lukacs’ worker echoes the same receptive and discerning perspective of the loser of language and even though the capitalist has the privilege of a seemingly objective view, his view is distorted as he thinks he is the source of all activity but the worker who is the real loser and formed by the catachrestic translation of reification in a capitalist society can see above this illusion and is the actual wielder of the privilege being claimed by someone else:

But for his [capitalist] consciousness it necessarily appears as an activity (albeit this activity is objectively an illusion), in which effects emanate from himself. This illusion blinds him to the true state of affairs, whereas the worker, who is denied the scope for such illusory activity, perceives the split in his being preserved in the brutal form of what is in its whole tendency a slavery without limits. (Lukacs 166)

Rabindranath Tagore’s English translation of the *Gitanjali* is different from Radice’s mentioned before because Tagore has the privilege of the loser of language. Radice was never subjected to the violence of Bengali culturing the subject whose mother-tongue it was. Having never been exposed to this violation of originary translation which enables the becoming of a subject in one’s own mother-tongue, Radice cannot yet become a responsible and ethical subject. Tagore, however, has, through the repeated performances of the culturing of his mother-tongue, undergone the process of violation and becoming. His prose translations of *Gitanjali* are then not a failure of translation but his ethical stance which he has gained by the process of originary translation followed by the necessity of reparation which is possible only when one can find equivalences among languages, abandoning the idea that the mother-tongue is the sole exclusive language and instead looking at it as just another language among many others. Translation becomes more ethical when this sense of guilt at looking at one’s mother-tongue as an equal among equals contrarily also gives one perspective about the status of languages and why it is important to become that which is translated. Tagore says in an interview to *Musical America*, 1920:

A translation may be a re-incarnation but it cannot be identical. . . the sound of a word has a significance utterly apart from its meaning, . . . as you cannot take the sound of a word but only its meaning into another language, just so you can never really translate from one language into another.

Elsewhere in an interview to the *Portland Press in Washington*, 1916, he says:

My English translations are not the same. Each country has its symbols of expression. So when I translate my work I find new images and present new thought and finally it is something almost new. The fundamental idea is the same but the vision changes. *A poem cannot be translated, it can only be relived in a different atmosphere.* (Dasgupta)

Tagore's translations of Gitanjali are what they are because to him English and his mother-tongue occupy an equal status. He becomes the language/text he translates by thinking of it as a "re-incarnation". He understands the issue of untranslatability but he rethinks it through Spivak's ethical working of translation which for him at that time was encapsulated in the concept of it being a re-incarnation, a new site of semantic and semiotic intercourse in the language he is translating, a respect born paradoxically from the guilt of reparation towards his own mother-tongue.

To dereify translation and the untranslatable industry, to preserve the privilege of languages being translated, the act of translation has to begin to develop a responsibility akin to what Spivak poses. To Spivak, responsibility is an ethical stance of completion, of dialogue, of exchange and of response which significantly consummates the relationship between the speaker and the listener, leaving enough discursive space for the Other to exist as equal, in a bond of love. This act of love is Spivak's and an ethical translator's imperative to translate:

This founding task of translation does not disappear by fetishizing the native language. Sometimes I read and hear that the subaltern can speak in their native languages. I wish I could be as self-assured as the intellectual, literary critic and historian, who assert this in English. No speech is speech if it is not heard. It is this act of hearing-to-respond that may be called the imperative to translate. (Spivak 22)

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Whereabouts* is a work of self-translation from the original Italian version which she had written. She has spoken at length about this process of intense reading and re-reading. What emerges noticeably in her awareness of the process of translation, is the bond of love, the attachment that she feels and experiences for both English and Italian, a bond as it were between two separate consciousnesses. This is because translation becomes a dialogue with two parties of equal status. Translation becomes ethical because it relies on the act of "hearing" the Other in order to "respond":

But working with Italian, even a book that I have myself composed slips surprisingly easily in and out of my hands. This is because the language resides both within me and beyond my grasp. The author who wrote *Dove mi trovo* both is and is not the author who translated them. This split consciousness is, if nothing else, a bracing experience. . . I now have a certain residual affection for *Dove mi trovo*, just as I do for its English counterpart—an affection born from the intimacy that can only be achieved by the collaborative act of translating as opposed to the solitary act of writing.

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