

Andrzej Wierciński
Faculty of *Artes Liberales*, University of Warsaw
International Institute for Hermeneutics

On (Not) Welcoming God into the World: Porous Borders and Hardened Hearts

In John 1:11, we read: Εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. The King James Bible renders it as “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” It is noteworthy (*fragwürdig*) that in the first instance, “his own” is neuter (τὰ ἴδια), which indicates the place where the Messianic hope was expected to be fulfilled. In the second instance, “his own” is masculine (οἱ ἴδιοι), and refers to the dwellers waiting for the Messiah. The Vulgata translation makes the distinction between τὰ ἴδια and οἱ ἴδιοι very perceptive: “In propria venit, et sui eum non receperunt.” It indicates strongly that Jesus came into the world that is his, and his are also people to whom he came. The final “received him not” (αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον), literally not took him in, is an unapologetic complaint about being rejected by those who were especially loved and cared for as the people of the covenant. The failing reception will only intensify the Theo-dramatic: The divine offer can only be received by the free act of will of the human being. By coming into the world, God chooses to participate in the drama happening between heaven and earth. He takes this drama upon himself. A human being becomes God’s drama.

The powerful complaint of being rejected by his own people severely overshadows the joy of the first verses of the Good News that the Redeemer has been born and saturates it with an unparalleled sadness. The bigger the love and devotion, the more severe the pain of rejection. However, pain, darkness, and sorrow cannot outshine the absolute novelty in the history of humankind: The mystery of Incarnation.

The Incarnation changed the understanding of the familiar and foreign forever. Did we learn anything from God becoming man (*in carne*, which is a Latin translation of J 1:14: ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο) in the 2000 years that separate us from this salvific event? The expression, καὶ ἐγένετο (from γίγνομαι) refers to something that happened. And here, something unimaginable became visible, something impossible possible. God becomes a human being, in the flesh, like us. And he dwelt among us (J 1:14 καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, et habitavit in nobis). This dwelling determines not only being in the world but also an intimate communion with the human being. The verb σκηνῶ, inhabited, suggests an architectural form (tent, tabernacle) that guarantees safety under the watchful eye of God.

Recently, a child who frequently travels with his parents and feels very comfortable in different houses, in different countries, among different people, and different languages, asked their mother, “Mom, where is home?” Home is where we are. And nobody can absolve us from the care of our own home. We need to build this home, always remembering nonetheless what we read in the King James translation, “Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it.” (Psalm 127:1)

The futility of toil is perfectly reflected in the *Vulgatae* translation: “Nisi Dominus aedificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt, qui aedificant eam.” Any effort to build up becomes nothing but vanity and futility, a deceptive effort by useless servants.

Building a house and caring for it is, above all, caring for ourselves. Having a home, we must learn to dwell in it and host and accept ourselves in it. To be ourselves with ourselves in our own home. Otherwise, we will be like migrants searching desperately for a physical place to rest or homeless people who have consciously given up the struggle for their own homes. The Christmas message will leave us untouched.

The Word of God became flesh and chose to be among us as his dwelling place. God has found a way to translate his ineffability into the human language of love and care. The joy of hearing this divine translation prompts us to translate our belonging to this new κοινή, a new language that we can share with others. Just as Mary shared with Elizabeth the joy that things that are happening transgress human capacity, so too can we share what we recognize on the level of faith as the time (καρπός) of witnessing to the fulfillment of God’s promises. Instead, we can, however, seal the boundaries to prevent what is most important: a personal encounter with the newborn Jesus. He will be born, but the meeting with him will not occur. As always in life, some people cannot cross borders. Others will never enter uninvited and unwelcome. Still, others will inspect for any leaks so that no one enters the territory they consider their own. Regrettably, they forget that “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.,” as the King James edition brilliantly renders the original. “Domini est terra et plenitudo eius orbis et habitatores eius,” says the *Vulgatae* translation of Psalm 24: 1.

Eine undichte Grenze, une frontière perméable, una frontiera permeabile, niebezpieczna granica, a porous border! It is not a matter of learning more languages to express the desire to (not)cross the borders, nor about learning techniques and providing the means to build fences to separate or, worse still, tear people apart. It is about awakening our minds and hearts to understand the Christmas event (*Ereignis*) as a call to radical hospitality toward the unknown, the stranger, but also the familiar and one’s own. God comes as the one who wants to reconcile us with himself, (2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Colossians 1:20-22; Galatians 2:20) caring as a father for everyone (*omnes*) and everything (*omnia*), “And hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation.” (Acts 17:26). Developing this land into an inhospitable space is, in itself, a perverse crossing of the boundaries of indifference and insensitivity.

<p>Wisława Szymborska, <i>Psalm</i> (1976)</p> <p>O, jakże są niebezpieczne granice ludzkich państw!</p> <p>Ile to chmur nad nimi bezkarnie przepływa, ile piasków pustynnych przesypuje się z kraju do</p>	<p>Wisława Szymborska, <i>Psalm</i> (1976)</p> <p>How porous are the borders of countries and states!</p> <p>Incalculable clouds float liberally over them, how much desert dust travels across the frontiers,</p>
---	--

kraju,
ile górskich kamyków stacza się w cudze włości
w wyzywających podskokach!

Czy muszę tu wymieniać ptaka za ptakiem jak
leci,
albo jak właśnie przysiada na opuszczonym
szlabanie?
Niechby to nawet był wróbel - a już ma ogon
ościenny,
choć dzióbek jeszcze tutejszy. W dodatku - ależ
się wierci!

Z nieprzeliczonych owadów poprzestanę na
mrówce,
która pomiędzy lewym a prawym butem
strażnika
na pytanie: skąd dokąd - nie poczuwa się do
odpowiedzi.

Och, zobaczyć dokładnie cały ten nieład naraz,
na wszystkich kontynentach!
Bo czy to nie liguster z przeciwnego brzegu
przemycy poprzez rzekę stutysięczny listek?
Bo kto, jeśli nie mątwą zuchwale długoramienna,
narusza świętą strefę wód terytorialnych?

Czy można w ogóle mówić o jakim takim
porządku,
jeżeli nawet gwiazd nie da się porozsuwać,
żeby było wiadomo, która komu świeci?

I jeszcze to naganne rozpościeranie się mgły!
I pylenie się stepu na całej przestrzeni,
jak gdyby nie był wcale w pół przecięty!

I rozlegnie się głosów na usługnych falach
powietrza:
przywoływawczych pisków i znaczących
bulgotów!

Tylko co ludzkie potrafi być prawdziwie obce.
Reszta to lasy mieszane, krecia robota i wiatr.

and countless mountain pebbles plunge into the
foreign land
in provocative springs!

Do I need to specify every single bird that is
flying,
or takes rest on the lowered barrier?
It might be just a robin – with his tail out in the
strange
and his beak in familiar quarters. Moreover,
tossing and wriggling like crazy!

Out of the innumerable insects, I will single out
only the ant
between the soldier's left and the right boot
she cannot be bothered being asked for the
destination.

To see all the chaos at once,
on every continent!
Is it not a privet on the far bank
smuggling the hundred-thousandth leaf across
the river?
And who but the octopus, with audaciously long
arms
muddles the sacred zone of provincial waters?

How to talk of any kind of order
when we cannot even rearrange the stars
to be sure which one shines for whom?

Not to speak of the fog's shameful drifting!
And dust blowing all over the steppes
as if they hadn't been cut in two halves!

And the voices sailing on attentive
airwaves:
startling squeals and weighty
bubbles!

Only what is human can indeed be foreign.
The rest is mixed forests, trickery, and the wind.

Between last Christmas and this one, I have spent many days reading and writing about what fascinates me: understanding our being in the world. I have also written many academic reports, letters of recommendation, reviews on education, Sufi hermeneutics, Gadamer, Virginia Woolf, Henry Miller, and Charles Bukowski. How much have I learned from bumping into what I probably wouldn't have read, at least at this particular point in my life? But I read and wrote with dedication, passion, and the necessary patience. Today I will only mention Charles Bukowski, a poet born in Germany with a Slavic surname, almost unpronounceable to Americans, whose turbulent life in Los Angeles is poetry in itself. Seemingly, his writing is not the best choice for Christmas. How much did Charles Bukowski and Henryk Chinaski, the poet's alter ego, have to struggle to understand anything about homelessness, looking for a home, and coming home? Living always at the edge, always in-between, deceived and seducing, perpetually drunk, in the fumes of cigarette smoke, but never in the service of mediocrity. Only God's elect can write like Buk. Everything it is so simple and light that after reading it, you cannot help but read it again, and again, and never enough.



Charles Bukowski, *Christmas Poem to a Man in Jail*

hello Bill Abbott:
I appreciate your passing around my books in jail there, my poems and stories.
if I can lighten the load for some of those guys with my books, fine.
but literature, you know, is difficult for the average man to assimilate (and for the unaverage man too);
I don't like most poetry, for example, so I write mine the way I like to read it.
poetry does seem to be getting better, more human,
the clearing up of the language has something to do with it (w. c. williams came along and asked everybody to clear up the language)
then
I came along.
but writing's one thing, life's another, we seem to have improved the writing a bit but life (ours and theirs) doesn't seem to be improving very much.
maybe if we write well enough and live a little better life will improve a bit just out of shame.
maybe the artist haven't been powerful enough,
maybe the politicians, the generals, the judges, the priests, the police, the pimps, the businessmen have been too strong? I don't like that thought
but when I look at our pale and precious artists, past and present, it does seem possible.
(people don't like it when I talk this way.
Chinaski, get off it, they say, you're not that great.
but
hell, I'm not talking about being great.)

Charles Bukowski, *Wiersz bożonarodzeniowy do mężczyzny w więzieniu*

cześć Billu Abbocie:
Dzięki, że dzielisz się w więzieniu moimi książkami, wierszami i opowiadaniem.
jeśli mogę odciążyć niektórych z tych facetów poprzez moje książki, w porządku.
ale literatura, wiesz, jest trudna dla przeciętnego człowieka do zrozumienia (i nieprzeciętnego także);
Nie lubię większości poezji, na przykład, więc piszę swoją tak, jak lubię ją czytać.
poezja wydaje się być coraz lepsza, bardziej ludzka,
oczyszczenie języka ma z tym coś wspólnego (pojawił się w. c. williams i błagał wszystkich, by oczyścili język)
następnie
pojawiłem się ja.
ale pisanie to jedno, życie to co innego,
wydaje się, że poprawiliśmy nieco pisanie ale życie (nasze i ich) chyba nie stało się dużo lepsze.
może jeśli będziemy pisali wystarczająco dobrze i żyli trochę lepiej życie nieco się poprawi choćby tylko ze wstydu.
może artysta nie był wystarczająco genialny,
a może politycy, generałowie, sędziowie, księża, policja, sutenerzy, biznesmeni byli za mocni? Nie sądzę
tak
ale kiedy patrzę na naszych bledych i drogich artystów,
dawnych i dzisiejszych, wydaje się to prawdopodobne.
(ludzie nie lubią, kiedy mówię w ten sposób.
Chinaski, przestań, proszę,
nie jesteś tak wielki.
ale
do diabła, nie mówię o byciu wielkim.)
to co mówię to
że sztuka nie polepszyła życia w taki sposób jak powinna, może dlatego, że była zbyt prywatna? i pomimo tego, że dawni poeci

<p>what I'm saying is that art hasn't improved life like it should, maybe because it has been too private? and despite the fact that the old poets and the new poets and myself all seem to have had the same or similar troubles with: women government God love hate penury slavery insomnia transportation weather wives, and so forth. you write me now that the man in the cell next to yours didn't like my punctuation the placement of my commas (especially) and also the way I digress in order to say something precisely. ah, he doesn't realize the intent which is to loosen up, humanize, relax and still make as real as possible the word on the page. the word should be like butter or avocados or steak or hot biscuits, or onion rings or whatever is really needed. it should be almost as if you could pick up the words and eat them. (there is some wise-ass somewhere out there who will say if he ever reads this: "Chinaski, if I want dinner I'll go out and order it!") however an artist can wander and still maintain essential form. Dostoevsky did it. he usually told 3 or 4 stories on the side while telling the one in the center (in his novels, that is). Bach taught us how to lay one melody down on top of another and another melody on top of</p>	<p>nowi poeci i ja wydaje się, że wszyscy mieli takie same lub podobne problemy z: kobietami rządem Panem Bogiem miłością nienawiścią nędzą niewolnictwem bezsennością transportem pogodą żonami, i tym podobnie. piszesz do mnie teraz że mężczyźnie w celi obok nie podoba się moja interpunkcja stawianie przecinków (zwłaszcza) a także sposób w jaki robię dygresje żeby coś dokładnie powiedzieć. ach, on nie zdaje sobie sprawy z zamysłu by rozluźniać, uczłowieczać, relaksować i nadal robić to tak prawdziwie, jak tylko możliwe słowo na stronie. słowo powinno być jak masło lub awokado albo stek czy gorące herbatniki lub cebulowe obwarzanki lub cokolwiek co jest naprawdę potrzebne. powinno być prawie tak, żebyś mógł brać słowa i jeść. (pewnie gdzieś jest jakiś dupek który powie jeśli kiedykolwiek to przeczyta: „Chinaski, jeśli zechcę zjeść to wyjdę i sobie kupię”) Jednakże artysta może wędrować i nadal utrzymać świetną formę. Dostojewski to robił. zwykle opowiadał 3 lub 4 historie na boku podczas rozwijania jednej fabuły w centrum (to dotyczy jego powieści). Bach uczył nas jak budować jedną melodię nad inną i kolejną melodię nad jeszcze inną i</p>
---	--

I have translated, with considerable satisfaction, Wisława Szymborska into English and Charles Bukowski into Polish. Two different languages, two different locations, Kraków and Los Angeles, two genders, two different kinds of *ars poetica*. Translating helps us to see that understanding is a patient journey from one shore to the other, an attempt to see what is known from different sides, as well as the strange and alien from both sides. This movement back and forth, and again from the beginning, is a hermeneutic event of understanding. Translation is a human being's way of living with oneself (*soliloquium*) and the Other. By living, we translate, and by translating, we live. Therefore, each translation affects our self-understanding and is, therefore, education in its most profound sense. It is also decisive for our relationships with ourselves and with others. Hence, it is an ethical eventing in the deepest sense of understanding ethics. The paradigm of translation discloses what happens to us and in us when we translate. Linguistic hospitality is not a matter of saying a few nice words in another language. Rather, it is an openness to what this language can contribute to my self-understanding. And how it can enrich others' understanding of themselves. Translation cannot be reduced to the question of perfect word matching or formal linguistic correctness. The question is whether we exist in different languages and communicate in our essential incommunicability.

Some people may be happy to receive a copy of *Newsweek*, the *Times*, or practically anything for Christmas. Perhaps it might be impossible to reach them. Police, soldiers, border guards can block access to isolated (confined) Others. The Christmas message is not a memorandum of compliance with applicable terms and conditions. It is the message of the Angel who announces great joy. In fact, it is a message that God is with us. It is up to us to accept him, rejoice in him, and celebrate with him. Maybe he really does come, as he came into the world, when there was no political peace when a young girl gave birth wherever she could lay down her head. Today, they may be the marshes of the river Bug or the forests of the Białowieża National Park. Or maybe the borders of Mexico and the USA, both Koreas, Calais, and Dover, and probably thousands of other sensitive and irritable points on the world map, which for some of us, often for reasons known only to ourselves, are a paradise we would like to reach on our earthly pilgrimage.

Let us not the boys who assume to have form and power impose form on us. It is a matter of taste, as Zbigniew Herbert would say. Indeed, taste and decency. So let these boys worry about everything leaky, let them deceive each other, seduce each other, barricade as they believe they must. Christmas reminds us that God enters the world as it is. He does not scream for a majestic bed. You can show your own needs in different ways. Hospitality too. Isn't it brilliant that the one Christmas event can reveal so much to us (φείνεσθαι)? And teach us how to live as guest and host, insider and stranger, friend and foe. What we really need is a hermeneutic eye and a hermeneutic ear. "Only what is human can indeed be foreign. The rest is mixed forests, trickery, and the wind."

A very Merry Christmas. *Christus natus est nobis!*