The Translation of the Bible
Some Questions of Principle[1]

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When King James I commissioned a translation of the Bible, the first of the "Rules" laid down ran as follows: "The ordinary Bible read in Church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit." Our (so-called) Authorized Version, therefore, was in principle a conservative revision of an existing version—as it turned out, of several existing versions. Its language was from the first not quite contemporary. Indeed, it has been said that it is more old-fashioned than that of some of its immediate predecessors. Certainly it preserved much of the character of the version of Tindal, already nearly a century old. With the passage of time, and the accelerating changes in English usage, the stamp of archaism has become deeply marked. No one denies this; many welcome it, feeling that a certain remoteness from our common speech lends dignity and impressiveness to the English Bible, whether it be regarded as one of the glories of our literature, composed in a period when the language was at its best, or as the sacred book of our religion. In so far as the Bible is used liturgically, a touch of strangeness (it is urged with some weight) is not out of place. The language of worship may well admit words which are evocative rather than explicit, and when this language, admirable in itself, has generations of tradition behind it, it may have a value of its own, not altogether dependent on a clear understanding of its meaning.

Yet in Christian belief the Bible is meant to appeal to the intelligence. The first recorded Christian missionary, it is said, addressed as his first question to his first potential convert (whom he found reading the Old Testament), "Do you understand what you are reading?" The question must always be pertinent. That much of the language of the Authorized Version is in fact not understood by a large part of the contemporary English public is a fact too widely attested to be doubted; and where it is not actually unintelligible it sounds unnatural and unreal in the ears of a new generation, and confirms their suspicion that the Christian religion has little to do with actual life as it is lived to-day. The astonishing success in the market of various private "modern" versions in itself attests the need.

It was such considerations as these that led the governing bodies of the various Christian communions in this country (the Roman Catholics excepted; they already have their own admirable modern version) to commission the preparation of a new translation. After some discussion of alternatives the Joint Committee of the Churches came to a firm decision: "The work shall be a new translation, not a revision of the A.V. or of the R.V., having as its object to render the original into contemporary English." It will be observed that this decision means

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that any idea of correcting or improving the A.V. itself (an idea which still controlled the revision of 1870—1895) is definitely abandoned; and this, it may be said, is consistent with the character of an English classic, which is claimed for the King James version. We do not now, in general, think it proper to improve the classics of English literature. As a monument of sixteenth (rather than seventeenth) century English the A.V. stands on its own feet, and its text is best not tampered with. But it is in fact a reproduction, not an original work of art, and it may well be possible now to make a better reproduction, or at any rate a reproduction which better serves the needs of this generation.

The decision, however, to make a genuinely new translation directly from the Hebrew and Greek, without reference to what has previously been done, challenged the translators to think out the principles on which the work should proceed. That they are bound to give a faithful rendering, and a faithful rendering of the best text now attainable, may go without saying. But what is a "faithful" rendering? Upon one level, a work is said to be faithfully translated only if each word is conscientiously replaced by a corresponding word in another language, considered to be the nearest equivalent in meaning. Such "translation", I understand, is considered satisfactory where the terms to be rendered are capable of scientific definition—where they are in effect agreed and convenient symbols, like those of mathematics. There may also be a place for such word-for-word translation when documents are discovered in hitherto unknown tongues—say Hittite, or the Ugaritic of Ras Shamra. The student without direct access to these documents or to the language in which they are composed, wants to be made acquainted not only with the vocabulary but also with the grammatical structure of that language. But if the documents deciphered go much beyond the range of catalogues or recurrent formulae the word-for-word rendering is no more than a first step towards elucidating the meaning. Where any work of literature is concerned, the "crib" is of limited value. The once familiar Bohn cribs no doubt proved a very present help to the schoolboy in difficulty with next day's "prep", but they were only too likely to blunt his sense for Greek or Latin literature, perhaps permanently. Such word-for-word translation of the Bible has sometimes commended itself to those for whom the jot and tittle of Holy Writ is sancrosanct. A notable example is Aquila's painfully literal Greek version of the Old Testament; and there exist "fundamentalist" versions in English of a similar kind. But it is an illusion to suppose that the meaning of the original can be transmitted, in any serious sense, by such mechanical methods.

The fact is that above the level at which words are quasi-mathematical symbols there is no such thing as an exact equivalence between words in different languages. Each word is the centre or focus of a whole circle of meaning, and the circles in the several languages may overlap but seldom coincide. Even so simple and concrete an English word as "man" has no exact equivalent, covering precisely the same area of meaning, either in Welsh (with *gwr* and *dyn*) or in German (*Mann* and *Mensch*) or in Latin (*homo* and *vir*). In Greek the dic-

tionaries say that *anthrôpos* means 'man'; but *anthrôpos* is of common gender, and if you want a word for a "man" as distinct from a woman you need a different word, *anêr*. Hebrew has at least four different terms whose range of meaning overlaps that of the English "man". And even so we have not allowed for the indirect implications and associations which attach to these terms in different languages. *Anthrôpos*, e.g., has often a subtly depreciatory nuance, which sounds rather like the English "fellow". If so simple and concrete a concept commands so little equivalence in the vocabularies of different languages, what are we to expect of more complex or abstract ideas? The Greek term *logos* (a very important one, as it happens, in the Bible) requires more than five columns of Liddell and Scott's Lexicon merely to list its "dictionary" meanings. And if you go to the Hebrew term which underlies some of the Biblical uses of *logos* you tap a fresh reservoir of meanings.

The difficulty which this makes for the translator lies in the fact that the whole range of meaning covered by such a term (*exempli gratia*) as *logos* is present, at least potentially, in the mind of a Greek writer who uses it on any occasion. It is not accurate to say that *logos* means (a) "word", and (b) "reason" (and so on with (c), (d) and the rest), as if these were counters which could be pigeon-holed and brought out, the one or the other, as required. The first meaning may be predominant in one context, the second in another, but they form part of a single constellation of meaning, shifting kaleidoscopically with the movement of thought. So with other terms. How would it be possible otherwise for a Greek writer to say "The *pneuma* blows where it chooses . . . so is everyone who is born of *pneuma*" (John iii, 8)? We have no word in English which expresses both the physical idea required in the first clause and the metaphysical idea required in the second, yet the Greek holds both within a single term, and both at once. We can hardly do otherwise than render first "wind" and then "spirit", but we have in some measure obscured the meaning. In any given context the translator must take responsibility for deciding which particular aspect of the meaning is determinative in that context, and to choose his word accordingly, knowing all the time that he is inevitably losing something of the content of the original.

It follows that the word as such should not be treated as the unit for translation. The way in which a given term is rendered on each occasion will be determined by the context, and the context may vary in extent according to the nature of the subject-matter. At the least it will be the clause or sentence, and it may be much more extensive. It would not be safe to decide upon the translation of the opening words of the Fourth Gospel (e.g.) until you have arrived at some understanding of, at least, the whole of the Prologue. King James's translators, therefore, were right in disclaiming (as they do in their preface) any obligation to render the same Hebrew or Greek word always by the same English word. If they rendered the single Greek verb *katargein* in seventeen different ways, they did well to let the sense of its context affect their choice of English words in each place, and not the sense alone, but the rhythm, the sequence of sounds, and the shape of the sentence as they

designed it. In so far as the Revisers of 1870—95 made some attempt to "improve" the A.V. in this respect, this may have helped to give to their version that slight flavour of pedantry which many readers have felt. The new translation will in this respect return to the sound principle of King James's men.

Granted, then, that the sentence is the normal unit for translation, the question arises how far the grammatical structure of the sentence should be carried over into the new language. Here there are two schools of thought. The one maintains that a good translation should read like an original composition by a good English writer. For the other school a translation should communicate the exotic flavour or "feel" of a foreign language. The Old Testament, for example, in passing into English should remain unmistakably an oriental book. One thing, however, may be said: it is generally a mistake to suppose that by retaining the syntactical structure of the sentences the "feel" of the original can be communicated. When Robert Browning, in "Aristophanes' Apology", offered his rendering of the *Hercules Furens* he presumably believed that the tortured inversions and non-natural combinations of words, imitated directly from the Greek, would give his readers an impression comparable, at any rate, with that which Euripides gave to his hearers or readers.

> Zeus' Couchmate—who of mortals knows not me,
> Argive Amphitruon whom Alkaios sired
> Of old, as Perseus him, I—Hercules?
> My home, this Thebai, where the earthborn spike
> Of Sown-ones burgeoned; Ares saved from these
> A handful of their seed that stocks to-day
> With children's children Thebai Kadmos built.

But did Euripides sound in the least like that? At best it is "quaint", and quaintness is the last quality an Athenian found when he listened to the play in the theatre of Dionysus. Browning's reader gets an exotic flavour, no doubt, but he is sadly mistaken if he thinks it is the flavour of Euripides.

This may be an extreme example. But the translators of 1611 would seem to have had some such aim in view. The astonishing thing is that they have so often been able to carry over the syntactical structure of the original and yet to produce rhythms and cadences which give the purest satisfaction to the English reader. Yet not infrequently they have fallen into the trap.

> For you yourselves, brethren, know our entrance in unto you, that it was not in vain; but even after that we had suffered before and were shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we were bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God, with much contention. (1 Thessalonians ii, 1—2)

The words are English, but they are the thinnest possible disguise for a Greek sentence. But is that really how Paul's letter sounded when it was read at Thessalonica in A.D. 50? Does it make on us anything like the impression which the easy-going "unbuttoned" style of the apostle in his familiar correspondence made upon his first readers? It seems improbable. The attempt to convey the flavour or "feel" of the

original by a slavish reproduction of the shape of the sentence has defeated itself. And if the object be to make the passage as intelligible as it may be to English readers, we can only say that it has not been fully attained.

The aim of the new translation, in this respect, is unequivocal. The directions issued under the authority of the Joint Committee come down definitely on the other side:

> Regard shall be paid to the native idiom and current usage of the English language, and Hebraisms, Grecisms, and other un-English expressions shall be avoided. Freedom shall be employed in altering the construction of the original where that is considered necessary to make the meaning intelligible in English.

Clearly, the overruling principle is intelligibility. Upon the translator, therefore, is laid the burden of pondering over his original until the meaning of the context as a whole has soaked into his own understanding, and then of attempting to give fresh expression to that meaning in his own language, and in doing so to make it as clear as it was to its first readers (so far as he can compass it). The result will often look very different, superficially, from the Hebrew or Greek, either in the original or in a version which sets out to reproduce the structure of the original. The shape of the sentences will be different; the words and phrases will follow a different order; some words may not be translated at all, in the "dictionary" sense of translation (Greek particles, for example, expressive as they are, can seldom be translated directly without sounding strained and unnatural in English; the nuance they give can sometimes be represented by order or emphasis; sometimes it must be sacrificed). It does not follow that such a rendering is less exact, less accurate, or less faithful than a literal or imitative rendering. It is intended to be, and it is hoped it will be, a *more* faithful representation of the meaning—of the explicit meaning and, so far as possible, of the implications that lie behind it—than one which precisely represents the words one by one. And to convey the meaning as clearly and unambiguously as is possible in the nature of the case, is the primary aim.

This does not mean that no account is to be taken of style. It would be a poor version of the New Testament which did not make the reader feel the difference in manner, in tone, in spirit, between, let us say, the plain narrative of the Acts, the baffling simplicity of the Gospels, the studied rhetoric of the Epistle to the Hebrews, the astonishing variety of the Pauline epistles, moving easily from the tone of conversation to that of a gnarled and knotty argument and from that to a stately solemnity not far removed from the liturgical, and even to a sudden and occasional lyrical outburst. To attempt imitation leads nowhere. If the translator tries self-consciously to stylize his work the result is likely to be artificial and unpleasing, at any rate to our present taste. (On the whole, we no longer care to read the Odyssey in Butcher and Lang, and we like Conford's Plato better than Jowett's.) As we have seen, the attempt to carry over unchanged the rhythms, the sequence of sounds, the combinations and contrasts of words—all of which are a large part of style—tends to defeat its own ends. The

translator is set a more exacting task. He is not to be satisfied with imitation or pastiche. He is to let the originals make such an impact on his own mind that they suggest of themselves a certain spontaneous choice of words, constructions, and rhythms; genuinely English constructions and rhythms; genuinely contemporary, too, for not the use of words only, but the rhythms of English speech alter with the passing of time. And in this way he is to try to find language which will in some measure evoke in the reader a response corresponding to that which was evoked in the minds of the first readers by the original. That complete success in so formidable a task will be attained is improbable. It is a first qualification for a translator that he should know that he practises an impossible art. Yet it is permissible to hope that from time to time the ideal may be realized in part. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating; the new translation will not be published until 1961.

Double Dutch

Even in such closely related European languages as English and Dutch one can come across unsuspected distinctions that are a pitfall to the uninitiated and the unwary. The word 'leg' affords an instance. The novice will learn that the Dutch word for 'leg' is *been* (pronounced, ominously enough, 'bane'), of which the plural is *benen*. However, there is a minor complication in that *been* also means 'bone', but then the plural is (except for certain idiomatic exceptions) *beenderen*. So that every time you want to say 'legs' you must pause to make sure that you do not say 'bones' instead! But do not imagine that all is then plain sailing or you will be sadly disillusioned. One day, in triumph that you have correctly remembered this distinction, you refer to the legs of a table as *benen*, only to be greeted with shouts of laughter, since you have conjured up in the minds of your audience the picture of a table with *human* legs! Inanimate objects, insects and animals do not have *benen* but *poten*. You promptly add this un-English distinction to your thinking, but you are not quite finished: sooner or later you will discover that the horse, unlike all other animals, has not *poten* but, like human beings, *benen*! It would appear that a Dutchman's esteem for this noblest of beasts has a similar effect upon his language to that of an Englishman's sentiment for a ship!

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Rectification

We regret that there was a serious printing error in the last issue, October 1959. On page 190 four lines are missing between the 29th and 30th lines. These are to be found almost exactly opposite, on page 191, beginning with the word "context, ..." and ending ".....II Pe. 1 : 21 proves".