

# The Charitable Work of Translation

## Abstract

The literary translator must involve himself in a process as complex as that of the original author, and in an equally demanding act of making. To that end he must know his own language as a writer knows it. Most modern Bible translators, through not understanding this, impoverish the Bible through the inertness of their language.

**Keywords:** Bible, translation, inspiration, transcendence.

## 1

All Scripture is inspired, for St. Paul (2 *Timothy* 3:16) and for Christians who hear the Bible as the word of God. Yes, but very few Christians read the Bible itself, in Hebrew and Greek; they have to approach it in translation. Since translations are not inspired, however great the piety of the translators and the help God gives them, should we conclude that the word they transmit is less reliable and necessarily diminished?

The Catholic Church avoided the question for centuries by deciding that the Latin Vulgate possessed the same authority as the Bible. The result was that other translators, offering the Bible in their own tongue, thought it natural to translate, not the Bible, but the Vulgate. The French *Bible de Port-Royal*, for example, or the English Bible of Wycliffe and his followers, are translations of a translation. As if, in translating Sophocles into English, or Polish, one worked, not on the Greek, but on a translation into German. All this confusion concealed the problem.

To see what is at stake in translation, eminently necessary in the case of the Bible, is important and instructive in all cases. Every translation, that we read or undertake, confronts us with the multiplicity of languages and with the fact that each language constitutes a different perspective on reality and on the self, and a particular way of thinking. To learn a foreign language, if one is fully attentive, is to enter a new world, to recognize that many other such worlds exist, and to look with new eyes at the world one has always inhabited and considered hitherto as unique. This learning process – perhaps the most valuable that one can offer a student – has a deeply moral dimension. It takes us out of ourselves and allows us to experience something of the intelligence and the sensibility

of a foreigner. It may even have a spiritual dimension in the religious definition of the word: the spiritual is what derives from the Holy Spirit, if this initiation into the strange, into the foreign – and into all that is implied in a foreign language and the strangeness of everything which, before, was familiar – be transformed into the intuition of another otherness, of further presence in the customary world.

This proliferation of languages can also be disquieting. But should one decide, with a certain influential modern 'French theory', that language fails to give access to reality? Adding, to the arbitrary nature of the sign according to Saussure, Mallarmé's almost equally famous declaration: 'languages imperfect through being several, the supreme one is lacking', are we to suppose that the diversity of languages prevents us from finding truth? In a sense, yes. The Christian is aware that he lives in a fallen world, of which he is himself the most evident proof, and that language suffers from the Fall. Each language fails to name with perfect accuracy; we seek our way in the half-light of a reality excluded from Eden. Viewed thus, Babel is punishment. However, the limitation of our competence does not mean that the only reality is the one produced by our words; that beyond each of our deficient idioms, reality only exists in our own desirous imagination as a kind of dream; that what counts is our capacity to create, from the kaleidoscope of several thousand languages, a common world to which we can agree. For the Christian, the presence of God guarantees the existence of an objective reality independent of our discourse and of our will. Even those for whom God is a needless hypothesis must feel the resistance of the real, rejecting turn after turn of phrase as they seek to say it, a resistance that one discovers plainly and vividly in the writing of a poem, when attention becomes especially rigorous and complex.

It would be sad to lose this experience of reality living its own life, of a transcendence in the philosophical meaning of the word – that of the world with respect to consciousness – which can become a doorway leading to the religious meaning, to the transcendence of God. (The word *transcendence*, curiously, is a fairly recent development of *to transcend*, having been created by Shakespeare in *All's Well that Ends Well* at the beginning of the seventeenth century.) The author of *Genesis*, by narrating God's conferring on Adam the task of naming the animals, suggests that the first man had the ability to do so, because he understood perfectly – at his level, that of a creature made in the image of God – the very being of those other creatures, and that in naming them and establishing a relationship with them he added something to the creation: he instituted a human view of reality which modified it, in keeping with the truth of the animals and with the truth of humans. We no longer have Adam's gaze, clear and clean, but we still seek to name reality, we do so necessarily on the basis of what we are, and we have at our disposition the numerous possibilities offered by the abundance of our languages. As says a poem of Kevin Hart, 'The rain complete(s) its work inside our words'.

All arts offer a glimpse of what transcends the world as we perceive it. The art I know best, poetry, everywhere present in the Bible, modifies the real through the sounds and the syntactic and semantic patterns into which the real is invited, and,

by its singular forms, enables us to see otherwise and to surprise in the known world a glimpse of otherness. Poetry, even in its lightest expressions, is a serious matter. To write poems is to accept a heavy responsibility. For the poem is not content with existing. It constitutes an *energeia*, an energy, an ever active force. It is often said that a poem, or a novel, a play, does not exist without the readers, directors, actors who awake the sleeping text. Which deludes many into thinking they wield considerable power: 'Without us, Marlowe would be a dead letter'. It is more accurate to say that the work is never finished, that it operates in all those who engage with it fully, and that it modulates, to a variable extent, in the new angles of view that are brought to it, generation after generation. The work works equally through the translations by which it diversifies, and there, above all, it changes.

If the original poem is differently present in a translation, the translation also changes the real, in the modalities of the new language. The translator too is responsible, and he is so doubly: with regard to reality and with regard to the poem of which he dares to offer his own version. For the translation of a poem changes the poem. We know this, but without realizing what follows. As poetry is involved in the potentiality of the real, translation is involved in the potentiality of poetry. Translation is not merely a regrettable necessity: it is the next stage. We should speak of *the poetic work of translation*, creative and transforming; of *setting a poem to English, to Polish*, as we speak of *setting a poem to music*. This would considerably widen our demands on the translator. It supposes that one does not undertake to translate a major poem, which emerges from the depths of a foreign language and from an intense intellectual and emotional effort, so as to carry over into one's own language merely its 'meaning', its surface, as if the translator were not called upon to make as much effort as the original poet. Translation is an act of writing and a *poiësis*.

But the problem is that translators, often eminent specialists, rarely have any expertise in their own language. They do not even seem to consider the question, doubtless imagining that if one has been plunged in a language since childhood, one knows it. This lack of knowledge, of familiarity with all the recesses of one's language, this ignorance of its resources and of how to develop them, explains the poverty of the great majority of translations.

All these questions should be remembered if we wish to reflect seriously on what is at stake in the translation of the Bible.

## 2

And what occurs in the act of translating? – the *act*, as one speaks of the poetic act; the translator involves himself in a process as complex as that of the poet and in an equally difficult making. The demands of translation in poetry are indeed the most evident and the most severe. It is in the poetry of the Bible that the problem of Biblical translation culminates. The translator is faced with a multiple otherness, that he does not merely note, as would a theorist thinking about translation, but discovers progressively,

as an experience. He discovers the other language, not in general but in the life it leads in the increasing strangeness of a poem with innumerable secrets. He discovers the different real from which the poem has emerged and which it causes to exist in a new way. He discovers another being, who is not exactly the poet he could converse with in a café: rather, the consciousness and the unconscious that the poem has created, or which have created themselves through the poem's elaboration. He discovers the human being that the poet himself discovered in writing. If that being is in a way fictive, he nevertheless evokes the poet of flesh and blood, of body and mind, who assumes him and to whom the translator has to justify himself. As the latter experiences little by little the radical transcendence of a foreign language, he experiences the strangeness of the fascinating other, and this meeting with what is not himself can be transformed, in the very act of working, into a more solemn encounter, into the intuition of a further transcendence.

It is also to be hoped that the translator discovers his own language, in each effort to say, in a new and other way, this or that word, grammatical construction, rhythm cluster of sounds.

Serious translation develops line by line, word by word, syllable by syllable, like an act of attentive reading. It constitutes probably the best way of reading a poem, the most penetrating and, through the persistence of the translator, the most faithful.

And if the original poem is an energy, a force that operates in its readers, the poem that the translator composes is equally an energy, provided he undertakes his task with sufficient mindfulness. The ideal is that the translator of a major poet should be himself a major poet; this seems evident if one thinks about it, but few people do. Since such an ideal is rarely realized, what can one reasonably ask of the translator of Petrarch, or Whitman, or Mickiewicz? In his Salon of 1859, Baudelaire, thinking of the way in which certain artists 'translate' poetic works – Delacroix, for example, 'translating' Dante's *Hell* or Shakespeare's *Hamlet* – declared, with entirely justified austerity, that 'it is only permissible to translate poets when one feels in oneself an energy equal to theirs'. In the case of translation in the usual sense of the word, it is just as true that one needs not only a wide and deep knowledge of the other language, a tenacity and an ample capacity for work, but also and above all energy, a tireless fervour in imagining, inventing, sounding reality and the self, setting in motion one's language, enlarging the possible. Translation too is partly a moral activity, and Baudelaire suggests that one examine oneself before undertaking it. If the result of the self-scrutiny is disappointing, it is not *permissible* to continue.

And since the translation of a poem is a poem, the translator needs, not translation theory, but his own poetic resources. He also learns, by examining as an artist the foreign language he is preparing to serve, how false and dangerous it is to speak of mastering a language. A language is a structure more complex than our discourse, a music which surpasses our singing, a wild beast not to be tamed. Of one's own language too one is the pupil, even if, in cooperating with it, one manages to propose certain new twists. And the translator depends – quite as much as the poet faced with the blank page and

his desire for a poem – on the ideas, turns of phrase, cadences, sonorities that come, from where one isn't sure, or not. The translator can begin to grasp, quite as much as the poet, what a good thing it is to be dependent, and that dependence brings freedom and creativity.

### 3

This lengthy detour via poetry and translation in general was necessary for the better understanding, from a new perspective, of the translation of the Bible. In my book *Bible et poésie* I insisted on the fact that the unavoidable necessity of translating the Bible must have been foreseen in the process by which God was to reveal himself to the 'nations', that it is not a small detail which got overlooked. The fact that Providence was in control will help us, later on, to unravel the problem I raised at the beginning, that of the difference between the Bible and its translations. For the moment I shall concentrate on the translator, and on the conviction that translating the Bible is a great privilege, of which many translators seem to be blithely unaware, and above all a fearful responsibility. One might take up Baudelaire's warning and adapt it as follows: it is only permissible to translate the psalms of David when one feels in oneself an energy equal to his. It is not at all certain that the translators of *Psalms*, *Job*, *Song of Songs*, etc., in the numerous modern versions of the Bible, were aware of such energy in themselves, or even that they asked themselves the question. It was likewise in terms of literature in general that Baudelaire maintained that there exists 'in the word something sacred which prohibits us from using it trivially'. How much more important is this warning for someone about to disturb the words of God's word, knowing that such a word is in a mystical relation to the Word himself! Biblical translators find themselves in a particularly demanding moral situation, faced with permissions to be requested and prohibitions not to be neglected.

The translator undertakes to show – has the obligation to show – that Goethe is a great poet, and not, as he seems if the translation is mediocre, a great man who expresses himself clumsily. The translators of the Bible accept – ought to accept – the obligation to show in their own language that the Bible is the book of books, the word of God. They should turn their pen seventy times seven in their hand before writing. Beyond the energy of David, Isaiah, Matthew, Paul, is the energy of the Holy Spirit, of the living God. The translation must allow that energy, that word active and other, to pass; it can only do so if the translator, not content simply to communicate accurately a 'message', understands the immense talent he is required to possess. He examines, he seeks to hear, not only often difficult texts appearing in numerous manuscripts, but a language that is not entirely of this world, since it comes – via the inward experience, the listening and the diligence of human authors – from God. The translator encounters these other selves, products, insofar as they are knowable, of their writings, who draw him out of himself and whom he must mime in order to understand them. He encounters above all God, and an immeasurable world that is nevertheless in danger, through its apparent familiarity after two millennia of preaching and of exegesis, to lose its disquieting

and joyful otherness. Paul declares that by our intelligence we see, in the visible world, the invisible things of God, and specifically 'his eternal power and Godhead' (*Romans* 1:20). Doesn't one sense in the Bible this same power and godliness? What we see in creation, we hear in the Scriptures.

I realize that this comparison may be illegitimate, since the Bible does not make it. But the otherness of the Bible's power is certain, and the translator must accept the quite extra-ordinary task of transmitting it. The Bible is deeply foreign, like the revelation it gives and imposes and the faith it offers and commands. The translator is not asked – according to the thoughtless and ignorant supposition in a press release concerning the *Revised English Bible* – to make it 'accessible', 'available to today's reader'. As if, in providing an easy-to-read Bible, one were not depriving the reader of its richness and its mystery. We realize what we should lose in furnishing more accessible versions of Shakespeare, or Homer; why don't we see the danger of a similar treatment of the Bible?

#### 4

The opposite of an easy-to-read Bible translation is not, of course, a translation difficult to read. The translator is invited to show what he finds, simple or complex, limpid or mysterious, to allow into his own language the power of the original by finding or inventing an appropriate idiom. But how can one find that idiom if one is not a writer? And shouldn't we be surprised that most of the modern translators of the Bible are in that position? Those of the English King James Bible of 1611, as well as Tyndale, Coverdale, Luther, while possessing the necessary linguistic and theological expertise, were genuine writers, and were aware that the literary resources they found in themselves were indispensable. Without literary power, how could the Bible seize the mind and touch the heart? Yet this is how the translators of the *New English Bible* of 1970 reasoned, with startling naivety and an intellectual indolence disguised as shrewdness and modesty: 'Apprehending [...] that sound scholarship does not necessarily carry with it a delicate sense of English style, the Committee appointed [...] literary advisors'. If they recognized in themselves the absence of writing talent, why did they agree to translate the Bible? One can hardly imagine a Russian specialist saying: 'Being an acknowledged expert on Tolstoy, I have translated *War and Peace*, but, not being a writer, I asked a novelist to revise my text and to amend the style'. Knowing that one lacks a sense of rhythm, that one does not instinctively hear the sounds of language, or listen to the memory and the intimate life of words and the dialogues they conduct among themselves, is not one better off abstaining?

One might object that the Bible is not literature. In a sense this is clearly true. We ought not to read it as we read Henry James or even Milton. However, if the Bible is more-than-literary, it is nevertheless a collection of writings. As revelation, it goes beyond literature, as it goes beyond everything human, but God chose as witnesses, as writers of his word, poets, narrators, playwrights, and others whom he clearly helped rise to the occasion. Everywhere, thought and emotion are given form and specificity by the manner

in which they become language. It is shocking to read translations which do not seem to take this into account, and in which the Bible is impoverished.

One could put it another way: many modern translators of the Bible are not translators; or, specialists in Hebrew or in classical Greek and the Koine of the New Testament, they are not observers of their own language, and have never thought it necessary to be so. A translator reflects on the complex questions that translation poses: for example, should one efface all traces of the strangeness of a foreign work and leave one's language in the state in which one found it, or on the contrary allow through the foreignness of a work arriving from another culture by the modifications one makes to one's language? I do not pretend to know the answer, but I do think that Bible translators should know the question. A translator who is also a writer will certainly see the opportunity offered for bringing new words, or new senses of words, into his own language. Tyndale invented *scapegoat*, *passover*, *Jehovah* and *atonement*.

Ignorance of their own language leads certain translators to impose tasks on themselves with distressing amateurism. Those of the *New English Bible* sought, according to the prefaces, 'a contemporary idiom', 'current speech', 'the English of the present day, that is [...] the natural vocabulary, constructions, and rhythms of contemporary speech'. They confused a certain way of speaking and the energetic, supple, profound, varied, surprising English of which writers are capable. They forgot, or had never noticed, that the translations of Tyndale and of the masters of the 1611 Bible are at a happy distance from the daily English of their periods. Their idea of a 'natural English' is a chimera; their search above all for exactness and clarity, so as to make the 'meaning' of the original as 'clear' as possible, makes of clarity a fetish. They wished to offer 'the truth of the Scriptures'; they would have done well to reflect that such a truth does not always manifest itself in a see-through language. The translators of the *Revised English Bible* wanted at all points a 'fluent' English, as if one could reduce to a single style the innumerable ways of constructing sentences, creating semantic richness, playing the music and percussion of verbal sounds, and as if one should help the reader to assimilate Biblical texts with a minimum of effort.

Not knowing English, they nevertheless had the foolish idea of translating into English – of all things – the Bible. Reading their weak and uncertain 'style', one would never guess that the Bible is the word of the Creator of heaven and earth. In his third essay *Upon Epitaphs*, Wordsworth writes of 'those expressions which are not what the garb is to the body but what the body is to the soul, themselves a constituent part and power or function in the thought'. The poverty of writing by Biblical translators ignorant of this unity of thought and word, a unity that can only be achieved by labour and perseverance and which is impossible to reach without a modicum of talent, should provoke profound anger. As should the flaccid language of modern Anglican liturgies, replacements for an older liturgy that spoke to the hearer and reciter, that was searching and memorable.

In order to define the principles of Biblical translation I have concentrated on English examples – I could have added equally disturbing ones from America – because the language in which the most impressive series of Bible translations has been produced is precisely the one that has suffered in recent years from a plethora of translations patently inadequate. This failure in the transmission of God's word: lack of preparation in writing, errors concerning the translator's task, leads me to ask once again the even more fundamental question with which I began. Translations, not being strictly speaking the Bible, not being inspired to the same degree, do they inevitably muffle the word of God?

Can the story of Babel help? The confusion of language and the scattering of the people (*Genesis 11:1-9*) describes a punishment resulting from the pride of building a tower so as to 'reach unto heaven', a punishment not to be forgotten in our enthusiasm for the multiplicity of languages. Not having a language in common separates us; the fall of language, which followed the Fall of Man as a second effect of the same cause: inordinate pride, means that even in our mother tongue we have no easy, immediate and perfect access to reality. But the love of God blesses the consequences of his curses. The fall of humanity has led to the good as to the bad of history; the multiplicity of languages has created an abundance of visions of reality and of verbal musics. The profusion of languages even corresponds, strangely, to what God wanted for all living beings according to the very first commandment, 'Be fruitful, and multiply' (*Genesis 1:22, 28*). Multiplicity is as much a source of pleasure as unity: multiplicity of the creation, multiplicity of the Bible, with a plurality of Gospels; unity of the universe, unity of the word of God. The same applies to the arts. As Schiller wrote, 'There must be supreme unity, but it must not detract from diversity'. (That unity might detract from diversity is an idea to ponder.) Pentecost, the reply to Babel – in the same way that the saving work of Christ, the 'last' man, is a response to the devastating sin of Adam, the 'first' (*1 Corinthians 15:45-47*) – confirms the importance and the mystery of multiplicity. Men 'out of every nation under heaven' (*Acts 2:5*) hear in their own language what is said by the disciples, whose mother tongue is Aramaic but who, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, speak 'with other tongues' (v. 4). And what do the disciples say? They publish 'the wonderful works of God' (v. 11). Could one see in this miracle, which makes the inspired praising of God audible, according to a deliberate exaggeration, for all the peoples of the world, an image of the later profusion of translations opening the word of God, only available at first in Hebrew, to all the languages of the planet? And the promise – dare one think? – that the Holy Spirit would not remain indifferent to these translations? The Christian knows, after all, that even in a mediocre translation God speaks. He comes to us in *our* words, *our* syntax, which partake of our representations of the real and of our most intimate experience.

Yes, but Hebrew and Greek – and Chaldean and Aramaic – are they not as fallen as other languages? Calling them 'sacred languages' because God chose them to bear his revelation merely avoids the problem. If every language falls short of what it names, must one accept in the Bible an imperfection, that of human language,



and in translations an even greater deficiency because of the absence of a plenary inspiration? Or can one suppose that God has revealed what we are fit to receive of his transcendence, what Hebrew and Greek were capable of transmitting? And if translations disturb the Biblical revelation, can one assume – God being in control – that, in modifying it in line with the characteristics of the translator’s language, they rightly enable it to enter the ways of thinking and feeling belonging to that language? As God gave us the Bible, so he has given languages, and he has given us translation, the ability to pass from one language to another. Can one go further? A Polish translation of a poem by Lorca, provided it attains a certain excellence, offers the original a new life, another mode of being, ways of seeing and of singing or dancing that Spanish does not possess. An excellent translation of the Bible, by rewriting it in the spirit and matter of another language, can offer, seemingly, other points of view, which do not affect the essential: the content of faith and the way of salvation, but which make the original live in a different manner.

To take as an example a single word: the Greek of Paul’s expression already quoted, *hè te aidios autou dunamis kai theiotès*, becomes, in Tyndale’s *New Testament* and in the English Bible of 1611, ‘his eternal power and Godhead’ (*Romans 1:20*). The composite word *Godhead*, a thoroughly Germanic term inherited from the Anglo-Saxons, reverberates for an Englishman quite differently from *theiotès* for a Greek, or *divinité* for a Frenchman: along with the force in the ear of *power*, it is awesome and makes one tremble. A similar sentence from the Old Testament is transformed, in the French *Bible de Jérusalem*, into a succession of words entirely of Latin origin: ‘Arrêtez, connaissez que moi je suis Dieu’ (psalm 46:11). It is inhabited by the long memory of Latin, which lends it a peculiar flavour. The English version of 1611, ‘Be still, and know that I am God’, rewrites the original by plunging into the depths of English, its Germanic origin, the genius of its monosyllables, the slow gravity of which it is capable. The new rhythm brings to the Hebrew a new meaning. Good translation always opens on the original an unexpected window.

I hesitate to say so, but even a translation that slightly misses the sense of the original, while being thoroughly thought out, can be illuminating. In the course of his long prayer in chapter 17 of John’s Gospel, Jesus says this concerning the disciples that his Father has given him: ‘none of them is lost but *ho huìos tès apòkeios*’ (v.12). The 1611 Bible translates: ‘the son of perdition’, which is the literal sense; the *New English Bible*, in line with a recent French translation, gives: ‘the man who must be lost’. But here is Tyndale: ‘and none of them is lost, but that lost child’. One has to have read all that Jesus says in the prayer concerning his disciples, those men he loved and had in his charge, to be struck, deeply touched, by the so simple words ‘that lost child’. On first reading them, I sensed the great sadness of Jesus at the loss of Judas, whom he no doubt loved just as he loved the other disciples and whom he considers in Tyndale’s translation as a child that he has lost. (It is true that the word *child* also meant, at the time, a young man, but Tyndale guides the reader towards the more common meaning of the word.) It is difficult not to remember the moment of Lear’s awaking from madness and slowly recognising

the person before him: 'as I am a man, I think this lady / To be my child Cordelia'. *Child*, not *daughter*. Tyndale's translation is almost certainly wrong, but it encourages one to reread in the Gospels the few glimpses of the relationship between Jesus and Judas, so as to confirm or invalidate the suggestion of Jesus's genuine fondness for the person who was to betray him.

Another example from Tyndale. All translations I have seen of the brief and dramatic sentence following the martyrdom of Stephen resemble that of the 1611 Bible: 'And Saul was consenting unto his death' (Acts 8:1). This is no doubt correct; but *suneudokōn* also contains a secondary meaning, and Tyndale translates: 'Saul had pleasure in his death'. Contemplating Saul's coming rage against the followers of Jesus, and the probability that he was already shaken by Stephen's witness, Tyndale seems to enter his mind and discover a passionate and excessive reaction to Stephen's death that goes deeper than mere consent.

## 6

And what happens in the act of translating the Bible, of composing for it a certain prose, a certain poetry? I imagine an exemplary translator discovering that the process of translating is first of all a form of reading, more effective than ordinary reading, by which he strives at one and the same time to hear another voice and to hear it in his own language. But the voice that resounds in words that Biblical writers found by the usual work of writing is the voice of God; the world that is progressively delineated is the world as God shows it; the Other that one discovers is God in Person. Translating the Bible presents itself as a spiritual exercise, the encounter with an absolute transcendence, an undertaking that demands far more than erudition and research. I imagine that an alert Bible translator is aware that, here as elsewhere, he is working out his salvation 'with fear and trembling' (*Philippians* 2:12).

And translating the Bible is not really comparable to translating Virgil or Pushkin, since the Bible resembles no other book. When the Emmaus disciples realize that the person speaking to them was Jesus, they say to each other, 'Did not our heart burn within us (...) while he opened [*diènoigen*] to us the scriptures?' (*Luke* 24:32). When, having returned to Jerusalem, they rejoin the disciples and their followers, Jesus appears again and Luke specifies that he 'opened [*diènoixen*] their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures' (v. 45). We might think that neither passage concerns us, since Jesus was explaining to Jews the meaning of the Hebrew Bible that his coming had disclosed. However, when Lydia, a Macedonian, was listening later to the disciples, the same Luke states that 'the Lord opened [*diènoixen*] her heart, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul' (*Acts* 16:14). Christians too can only sound the word of God if God helps them. We too need him to open our heart and our understanding and to open the Scriptures if we are to grasp, not the surface of what is said but the depth of the voice that speaks. Otherwise, our heart is cold, our understanding blind, and the Bible remains, as for so many, a closed book.

With all his knowledge, the Bible translator depends on assistance coming from elsewhere. To translate the Bible in a spirit of humility must be an invaluable act, the experience, repeated many times over, of that graceful aid. And such a translator depends, as much as the poet and the translator of poetry, on a kind of inspiration. He too must receive, as if from nowhere, words, rhythms, sounds, syntactic forms. He too must learn what it is to *write*.

He must also, as I said, know his own language. The translators of the *New English Bible* make one excellent statement: 'the best commentary is a good translation'. Translating is a form of exegesis; the exegesis is manifest in the translation if it has adequately informed the translator's language. Reading recent Bibles in English, I discover, along with many others, that this is rarely the case. A few examples, the first from the *Jerusalem Bible*:

"Then Saul said to his armour-bearer, 'Draw your sword and run me through with it; I do not want these uncircumcised men to come and gloat over me.' But his armour-bearer was afraid and would not do it. So Saul took his own sword and fell on it".

(1 Samuel 31:1–4)

The unbelievable clumsiness of *with it, do it, on it*, each at the end of a clause or sentence, irritates the ear and distracts from the major event being recounted. Throughout the passage, the drama and the immense sadness of Israel's defeat and of the death of an anguished king chosen by God and then rejected disappear beneath the inertness of the writing.

Here is a sentence from the *New English Bible*:

"Make no mistake about this: God is not to be fooled".

(Galatians 6:7)

While Tyndale catches the concision of the Greek and the urgency in Paul's voice, in a sentence taken over in the 1611 Bible: 'Be not deceived, God is not mocked', Paul is here transformed into an official who is rather verbose ('about this' is redundant), somewhat mannered in his choice of expression ('make no mistake') and careful to maintain a certain distance from his readers. The translators, not having heard the text, missed the meaning.

The same applies to a passage in James's letter, damaged by the same translators:

"Next a word to you who have great possessions. Weep and wail over the miserable fate descending on you".

(James 5:1)

Not listening to their own language, they unwittingly introduce a complete change of tone between the first sentence and the second. In the first, the same functionary, or so one would think, seated perhaps behind his desk, informs the rich that he has something to say to them. In the second, he suddenly dons the robe of an Old Testament prophet so as to speak of grave matters, but he misses his effect, 'weep and wail' being a cliché, 'miserable fate' harking back to Victorian English. If one turns to the Bible of 1611, one finds that the driving tone of the apostle, his prophet's voice, are perfectly rendered:

'Go to now [age nun], ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.'

Here finally is the most comic and the most distressing passage, also in the *New English Bible*:

"Then he who sat on the throne said, 'Behold! I am making all things new!' And he said to me, 'Write this down; for these words are trustworthy and true. Indeed,' he said, 'they are already fulfilled.'"

(*Revelation 21:5-6*)

The word 'Behold', which would be right for the solemnity of the event, is nevertheless archaic; in 'Write this down' we seem to be listening to a man speaking to his secretary. The final sentence confirms the impression that the deity addresses John with the formality of a precise and conscientious civil servant.

These incompetent translations are not simply errors of style, literary blunders. Ian Robinson is right to suggest, in *The Survival of English*, that what one discovers in so many modern translations is failures of understanding. However proficient one may be in the Greek of the New Testament, to make God speak like this is to have missed the meaning of the Greek – not of individual words, but of the work they perform one with another. These translators were *not* eminent specialists; as Robinson writes, 'If the scholarship does not emerge in the translation itself, where is it?' This is an important insight, which one could apply to many translations, from poetry as from prose; one could say so often to the translator, 'If you translate like this, you have not grasped the original.'

Modern translations of the Bible, in too many cases, prevent the Bible from speaking; they blur the word of salvation; they hinder the work of the gospel. Rediscovering genuine Christianity demands faithful translations, faithful to God, faithful to revelation as it is written, and observant of the resources of the translator's language. Translation should be a deepening both of the Biblical faith and of the language of the translator, who might well realize, little by little, how ignorant he is.

Translation of the Bible is an art, and an art of hope. It is also an art of intense pleasure and an art of love. Whatever his frustrations, the translator must take pleasure in the handling of his language, in the manner of the Biblical writers themselves, forever searching for the words, metaphors, cadences and even puns that speak truth and do not leave the reader indifferent. One senses this pleasure, this untiring impatience, in Tyndale, in the translators of the 1611 Bible. Why does one not find it in modern English translations? What disaster has occurred that prevents us from translating with power?

To translate the Bible one needs to love the God of the word and the word of God; to wish for the good of the Bible as of one's neighbour; to love one's language and to make it perform at its best; to love the reader, to write for God and for him. The Christian virtue associated with translation is fidelity, but love seems to me more essential. Translation is a work of charity. When the translation is right, transcendence becomes a real presence.