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TRANSLATION AND THE "FIELDS OF SCRIPTURE"

It is rather strange fact that for many of us in the English-speaking world the most important of all books is a translation. The more we think about it the stranger it will seem but we don't think much about it; we just accept it as one of these unalterable facts, like the shape of America, for instance. And yet it is in itself a very remarkable fact. India has her sacred books, so have Persia and Japan, and those books are their own. Our sacred books, which we call the Bible,[1] are borrowed books; they did not primarily belong to us yet they do now through that very delicate and complicated process called translation.

When people quote the Bible in English-speaking countries they usually quote the King James Version,[2] still the most widely-read version in spite of repeated and not wholly unjustified attempts to dethrone it. For millions of readers it is a hallowed translation but it is interesting to note that we don't call it a translation; we call it a version. We do not speak of a version of Marcel Proust or a version of Montaigne or even of a version of Dante; but we do speak of the Greek Version, of the Douay Version, of the King James Version of the Bible. This in itself is significant. Translation and version are close kin, so far as meaning is concerned, but their connotations differ. Translation is given the preference in modern speech and may be applied to thousands of writings, good or bad, but version is different, version is almost venerable.

A version is literally the act of turning or changing. A book is turned or changed into something else but in the case of the Bible there is, as regards the King James Version, a vague and inexpressed feeling that the original has, so to speak, changed itself into itself. The reason is that this translation of the Bible is so closely connected with the thought and feeling of the English race that it has become a part of it; it is the book even of those who do not

[1] Bible est un pluriel, du grec *biblia*, les livres, d'où en français le mot bibliothèque.

[2] *Le roi Jacques* VI d'Écosse et Ier d'Angleterre.

read it but whose heritage it nevertheless constitutes. At the time when the Revised Version[3] was being introduced in this country and met with the opposition of so many people a pious man in a less enlightened part of the United States was reported to have said that, so far as he was concerned, he would never read the Revised Version, adding, with great indignation, that the Lord's words were not to be tampered with: they stood in the Bible exactly as He had spoken them and it was inconceivable that any one should dare to alter them. It became clear, upon questioning the man, that he believed the Lord to have addressed Israel in English. Now, from the strict point of view of exegesis he was laboring under a delusion but there was something very moving and very real in what he said; the race to which he belonged spoke through his lips.

Throughout the centuries the Jews have called themselves the People of the Book. The Anglo-Saxon race has an equal claim to this proud and beautiful title. Even, and I should say particularly when Anglo-Saxons revolt against it, they still belong to the Book. It is theirs and they are its own. I do not mean that it is theirs exclusively–it belongs to the whole world–but it has stamped them in a very definite way and made them what they are. When Samuel Butler[4] took his Bible and flung it into a corner he was making an intensely Anglo-Saxon gesture. He rejected the Bible violently and in doing so admitted the power of the Book over him. Had he been Italian, for instance, he would never have flung his Bible in a corner for the simple reason that in all probability he would not have owned one.

Most Anglo-Saxons,then when reading their Bible are not conscious of reading a translation. They love it as sincerely as the Jew loves the Hebrew original, and in a certain senses we may say that it is love that naturalized the Hebrew Bible and made it an English

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[3] *The Revised Version*. La version corrigée fut décidée à Canterbury en 1870. Des commissions travaillèrent à corriger les fautes de la King James. On adopta le système de traduction mot pour mot, le mot anglais collant au mot grec. Le Nouveau Testament parut en 1881 et l'Ancien en 1884. Accueillie sans enthousiasme, car toute poésie en était chassée. La plus belle Bible reste la King James.

[4] *Samuel Butler* (1612-1680), poète satirique qui se moqua des puritains dans un poème dont beaucoup d'expressions sont passées dans la langue : *Hudibras*, histoire héroï-comique imitant *Don Quichotte*, et pleine d'esprit.

book. They feel that in a way the translation is an original in itself; that the book was rewritten in English rather than translated; they believe that the spirit of the Hebrew Bible has found its way into the English Bible.[5] But of course the fact remains that the English Bible is a translation and if we compare it diligently, not with former translations but with the original, we shall discover that it is something strangely inaccurate.

Like a great many American children I was brought up on the King James Version. My mother read it to us and she read it well, not in ministerial tones, she could not have done that, but reverently and yet naturally. She handed me the book as it had been handed to her–that is, she taught me to love it, and that love has endured; but when I was about sixteen I discovered two other versions which I read with unequal pleasure. One was a French version, the other was the Vulgate.

The French version[6] was very learned, with explanatory notes at the bottom of each page. At first I did not care for it very much. It seemed to me that this was not the Bible but I could not exactly understand why. What I considered so beautiful in the English version sounded a little flat in French and, I hesitate to use the word, a little dull. I was puzzled and disappointed.

From the Vulgate I received a very different impression. To begin with, owing to my ignorance and ingenuousness, I thought that, Latin being older than either English or French, the Vulgate must of necessity be nearer to the original. Quite apart from that, I was awed by the magnificence of the language as well as by the venerable age of the translation. This, I said to myself, is the Bible the Christian Church was reading when England was still peopled with illeterate half-savages who could barely express anything like a thought. Each sentence seemed bathed in incense. The most familiar and simplest phrases of the English Bible

[5] In referring to the English Bible I mean the King James Version. The Catholic or Douay Version is not discussed here because it was not made directly from the original tongues.

[6] C'était la Bible française de Crampon, une des plus acceptables en français, car celle de Sacy est belle et glaciale, celle de Calvin archaïque et celle de Lefèvre d'Étaples, la plus vivante, plus archaïque encore. Les traductions modernes qui se veulent plus près du texte et «scientifiques» n'en ont pas un meilleur style pour cela et sont ternes, parfois ridicules.

appeared here clothed in a majesty the like of which I had never dreamed. It was a real joy to read the Prophets in this superb language which, as it were, had "caught their shrieks in cups of gold". I did not dare entertain the thought that this book was not the Bible; indeed I might rather have been tempted to believe that it was the Bible, to the exclusion of any other version. At any rate it was not, in my mind, the same book as the King James Version; it belonged to a different world and seemed permeated with a different spirit.

I found myself in the position of a man who is presented with several portraits, allegedly portraits of the same person, and who cannot see a satisfactory likeness between them. I took it for granted that these portraits, so different in style and in spirit, were portraits of the same person because I had been told that they were and I had no means of investigating the matter. But I was not content with what I had been told though it did not yet enter my mind to controvert any part of this teaching. I assented unwillingly.

As years went by I familiarized myself sufficiently with the German language to read Luther's Version with some appreciation of its literary beauty. A new aspect of the old problem confronted me here. In many respects I found this version very similar in spirit to the King James Version. They were obviously portraits of the same person. So I was led to believe that they offered a better likeness of the original than the other translations I had examined. This was natural enough, I suppose, although I grant that my methods were anything but scientific. I must add that, in speaking of the likeness of a translation to the original, I am referring for the present moment only to a similarity in spirit or, if you prefer, to a similarity in the impressions conveyed by the two books. This similarity of spirit was not at all remarkable or fortuitous, considering how closely connected German is with English.

However, on examining certain parts of these two translations I discovered something which struck me as rather peculiar: they did not always exactly agree. For example the fourth verse in the well-known 23d psalm reads in English, as you remember, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil" etc. Whereas in German we have, "*Und ob ich schon wanderte im finstern Tal, fürchte ich kein Unglück*.!" Where was the shadow of death? Feeling a little mystified I opened the Vulgate and read, "*Nam et si*

ambulavero in medio umbrae mortis, non timebo mala." What had become of the valley? The German version kept the valley and did away with the shadow of death. Saint Jerome gave us the shadow of death but deprived us of the valley. The English gave us both, and for that matter so did the French, but why didn't the Latin and the German?

Of course the meaning of the verse was substantially the same in the four translations. But turning over the leaves of the English Bible I came to psalm 84 for which I had always had a particular fondness, "How amiable are thy tabernacles..." Verses 5 and 6 of this psalm read as follows in the King James Version: "Blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee; in whose heart are the ways of them. [Here I paused, as I always did, wondering if I quite understood what I was reading but I went on.] Who passing through the valley of Baca make it a well; the rain also filleth the pools." This was very obscure; neither did the marginal notes help me much by telling me that the valley of Baca was the valley of mulberry trees. So I opened the Vulgate an this is what I found: "*Beatus vir, cujus est auxilium abs te: ascensiones in corde suo disposuit, in valle lacrimarum, in loco quem posuit*."

I rubbed my eyes. The rain-filled pools had disappeared like a mirage. I made sure that I was reading the same psalm, picked up the German Bible and in the corresponding place read as follows: "*Wohl den Menschen, die dich für ihre Stärke halten und von Herzen dich nachwandeln, die durch das Jammertal gehen und machen daselbst Brunnen; und die Lehrer werden mit viel Segen geschmückt*." So the pools were there after all and with them, astoundingly enough, teachers. My investigations ended there for the moment and I closed the book with a feeling of uneasiness and also a feeling of distrust which I could not quite conquer.

In one of the most famous books written by Jewish mystics, the Zohar, there is a very remarkable passage on the Bible. As I remember it the Bible is compared to a large and mighty fortress. People walk around the high walls and look up at the battlements but that is about all they see of that fortress. Inside the stronghold, however, there is a very beautiful girl. She is a prisoner and tries to communicate with her lover who is outside. He looks and looks at the walls and suddenly, through a crack between two stones, the girl's hand is seen waving to him. The girl, of course, is the spirit of hidden meaning of the book; her lover is

the Bible student who is in love with the holy word.

I too felt that I was standing in front of a fortress when I read translations of the Bible and the prisoner in that fortress was the Hebrew language which could only peer, as it were, through the cracks in the somber walls and make signs to the lover of the book.

In 1919 I attended the University of Virginia. It was there, at a bookstore, that I had my first glance at a Hebrew Bible, which I immediately bought with a grammar to accompany it. I could not get back to my room fast enough to start on the alphabet but my troubles began then and there. I had to ask a Jewish student how to pronounce the consonants and he hinted broadly that since I wasn't a Jew I could never do this successfully. When he revealed to me that I should have to master no less than seven conjugations I was appalled. I suggested that he read me the very first verse in Genesis. He did, with infinite solemnity. It seemed to come from the very beginning of creation; now soft, now raucous, the strange syllables carried one back through an almost unthinkable space of time, back and back through the centuries to the days when man first addressed himself to the Almighty, using, I fancied then, these very sounds to express his thought.

The very antiquity of Hebrew had something dreadful about it. So did the grammar. I had somewhat taken heart when I heard my Jewish friend read the opening words of Genesis but my enthusiasm waned considerably when, upon being left alone, I opened the Hebrew grammar and came up against the rules of accentuation. Very soon I closed the book and put it away with the Hebrew Bible in an honorable place, on the top shelf of my bookcase. The fortress looked grimmer than ever.

My interest in Hebrew revived suddenly ten years later after much time spent in floundering among contradictory versions of the Bible. But now I was determined to arrive at some kind of result. So I consulted a friend of mine at the Collège de France (I was then living in Paris). He advised me to ask a rabbi to teach me Hebrew, adding that rabbis were the only people who really knew that language.

It was not very difficult to find a rabbi in Paris in 1935. I doubt that mine knew anything but the Old Testament but that he knew from cover to cover, by heart and in the

original tongue.[7] This knowledge I envied him more than words can express. He produced a typewritten grammar of his own which I immediately proceeded to learn by heart and on the second day we plunged forthwith into the first chapter of Isaiah. This too I learned by heart. Page after page of the Bible was committed to memory in true Oriental fashion. Never had I made such an effort in my whole life but I was amply repaid. After many months of obstinate work I acquired a slight knowledge of Hebrew and thus I was able to catch a glimpse of the face I had known heretofore only through the medium of portraits.

Now at last I could walk through what the *Imitation of Christ* so beautifully calls the fields of Scripture, *prata Scripturarum*, nor did I any longer have to depend on a translator to find my way about; I ventured to run away from my guide, for a few steps at first, then for long rambles during which I more than once fell into ditches or got lost in what commentators call *loci desperati*, but I knew enough to realize that I was wandering in a land the beauty of which I had only faintly suspected; it was one of the oldest countries in the world but to me it seemed as new as though the weary armies of translators had never set foot in it. The 23d psalm was not simply a series of fair-sounding words to be chanted in a church; it was an oasis like those I had seen on the skirts of the African desert, with the shade of date-palms darkening the waters of rest. And when the wind arose, as it so often does in the Old Testament, it was not simply "an horrible tempest"; it was something sinister that screeched and howled through the guttural Hebrew consonants. When David rages against his enemies he did not do so in the exalted style of an English divine of the 17th century; he was more like a wild-eyed desert chief, with rasping sounds coming from his throat, and frantic gesticulation.

All this of course was only a first impression but it was a very powerful one. I sensed that it was what translators cannot translate, try as they may, learned and sincere though they be; however diligently they may compare the result of their efforts with the original, the Hebraic quality of the book cannot pass from one language into another; to be sure the spirit is there–Israel knew how to speak to the whole world–but something is lost which can be

[7] Il s'agit de *M. le rabbin Moïse Ventura*, qui écrivit une méthode hébraïque et fut à la tête de la communauté juive d'Alexandrie.

retrieved only by going back to the source.

It was an exciting experience, this working my way back to the original of a book I had always so deeply admired, but I was imperfectly equipped for the task; my knowledge of Hebrew was very scanty, and I can never hope to acquire the feeling for that language that a man of Jewish blood might possess. Nevertheless it taught me much about the difficulties of translating. I remember that one day when I had finished reading a difficult passage in Isaiah with my professor I asked him if he considered that a good translation could be given of these verses. He instantly said no. I asked him why. "It is a poem," he answered, a little evasively.

This in itself might appear a sufficient reason to many but there are other difficulties. As I have said before, since translations sometimes differ to an amazing degree it is a thankless task to try to get at the correct meaning of a Scripture text by comparing one translation with another. This verse may yield a more satisfactory meaning in the French translation whereas the following may sound more logical in the English, and so forth from Genesis to Malachi. Is there such a thing as a perfect translation of the Bible? That admirable feat of scholarship, the Revised Version, often shows signs of bewilderment in the face of mangled or corrupt readings.

Some books of the Bible have fared better than others in their long journey through the centuries. In spite of serious gaps the historical books as a whole afford a good and consistent meaning; but many chapters in the Book of Job, for instance, have come down to us in such a state of mutilation that the work of translators is reduced almost to guesswork. One of the most authoritative works on the subject, the translation and commentary of Father Dhorme, offers an extraordinary picture of what might be called the battle of translators. Biblical students of every creed and language are profusely quoted, some verses allowing as many as twenty different interpretations. In many cases only three or four tantalizing words remain where we should need a dozen to make a satisfactory meaning. How much would be left of our own books had they undergone such disfigurement? There is a very beautiful

poem[8] by Victor Hugo about a beggar whom the author takes into his house and feeds. The beggar is cold and weary and the cloak around his shoulders is drenched with rain. So the poet gives him a bowl of milk, makes him sit down, and taking his cloak from him holds it up to the fire to dry it. The cloak has a great many holes in it and as it is held up in front of the fire the glow of the flames shines through the holes like stars in a black sky. The Book of Job is like that beggar's cloak: it is torn to shreds but through the rents in the texture one can see the stars gleaming.

I realize that the difficulty I have mentioned is more directly connected with criticism than with translation proper but the trouble with some of our older and venerable versions is that they did not always have sound criticism to back them. When they felt uncertain they gave us a paraphrase. Now this raises a question of enormous interest to translators at large: in cases where a literal translation would not "sound well" isn't it justifiable to use a paraphrase–that is, to substitute for certain words others which are not exact equivalents but do convey the same general meaning?

In Hebrew, as in all languages, there are words and phrases that cannot possibly be translated literally because they would lose much of their meaning in the process. For example, one does not say in Hebrew that a man is forty or fifty; one says that he is the son of forty or fifty years. From a philosophical point of view I am sure this goes very far. In the same way a person guilty of a capital crime is called the son of death. The translators of the English Bible, when confronted with expressions such as these, did their best to render them into English as literally as possible. They were so penetrated with the value of each word in the Scriptures that they preferred to run the risk of making English wear Hebrew garments, as it were, rather than force the language of the Scriptures to dress up as English, lest English betray the spirit of the original. Perhaps I can best explain what I mean by drawing attention to what was happening to the Bible in 17th-century France. A translation was being made

[8] *Victor Hugo, Les Contemplations,* «Le mendiant».
«Son manteau, tout mangé des vers, et jadis bleu,...
Piqué de mille trous par la lueur de braise,
Couvrait l'âtre, et semblait un ciel noir étoile.»

there also but the approach was different. Here, thought your French translator, is an Oriental book which I shall try to turn into a French book in order that the French reader may understand it. The principle he went on seemed sound enough in those days–it would have been sound for any book except the Bible. As a result, in some passages where the English Bible uses the good old word *belly* the corresponding word in the French Bible is *heart* because heart is more polite.

It is interesting to see how modern the English translators were in their attitude towards translating. They were determined to give England a Hebrew book and, within certain limits, they succeeded; they succeeded because–and this is the point I want to stress–they understood that in the case of such a book as the Bible only a literal translation will do. This is all the more striking since they lived at a time when foreign books were translated with anything but literal accuracy, in English or in any other tongue. A fascinating study could be made of Hebrew phrases that have crept into the English language and have become a part of it through the English Bible.[9]

But the real problem of translating a book goes far beyond coining happy phrases and giving us smooth-reading sentences; it is that of catching the spirit of the language from which the translation is made. Ernest Renan used to say the Hebrew is a child's language. Indeed, it has the limitations and the virtues of a primitive language; its vocabulary is very small compared with the vocabulary of classical Greek, for instance, and its syntax allows little variety in expressing thoughts or telling a story. Moreover it is curiously deficient in some of its parts and almost superabundant in others. Its very elements seem contradictory. To a certain coarseness of texture it allies an exquisite variety of tones; it is like a rich and delicate embroidery on rough material. A modern philosopher would feel very much hampered were this language his only means of exposing his views; it is significant that later Jewish philosophers of the pre-Christian era resorted to Greek to express themselves. Yet it is most interesting that the book which tells us of the invisible world in terms of unsurpassed

[9] One expression I strongly suspect of being Hebrew in origin rather than purely English is "to set one's heart upon something," for this is literally and word for word what the Hebrew says to express the same though. "High-handed" might likewise be traced back to a Hebrew origin.

magnificence should be written in a language so closely bound to the world of the senses.

Some languages offer a better medium than others to the translator of the Hebrew Scriptures. French cannot be considered very propitious because French, like Latin–and French, as Remy de Gourmont[10] said, is Latin ("du latin continué")–tends towards the abstract; English I suppose will undergo the same process in time but in English as we know it a more primitive element, almost lacking in French, has been preserved. French could never furnish us with such an emotionally disturbing word as *doom*; it would say "final judgement," with a direct appeal to the intellect. *Jugement dernier* makes me think whereas the Crack of Doom makes me feel like running for shelter under a mountain. And there lies the difference.

In preference to the more intellectual beauty of Latinistic words the barbaric beauty of many Anglo-Saxon words is invaluable to the translator of the Bible. There is also a rhythm in the English language that is akin to the rhythm of Hebrew poetry–that rhythm which has so felicitously been compared with "the rapid stroke as of alternate wings, the heaving and sinking of the troubled heart." In the words of Tyndale, "The properties of the Hebrew tongue agree a thousand times more with the English than with the Latin. The manner of speaking is both one, so that in a thousand places thou needest but to translate it into English, word for word."

It would therefore seem desirable that the translator of the Bible consider himself the slave of the Book, repeating, if possible, word for word what his master tells him. The Bible has not fared well at the hands of writers who where too conscious of their art. From the point of view of French, Renan's translation of the Book of Job is an admirable piece of work in that simple, easy, slightly oily style which subsequent writers tried hard to imitate. But is it the Book of Job in its stark majesty? I rather think that it gives us, instead of Job, a picture of Ernest Renan seated in his frockcoat among the ashes. So far as the translation of the Bible is concerned, no art at all is consummate art. Every ten years or so, or oftener, new versions of the Bible are produced in one language or the other. This is a sign of the

[10] *Remy de Gourmont, Esthétique de la langue française.*

enormous vitality of the book and of the difficulties that confront its interpreters. Translations become odl-fashioned and it sometimes happens that the very language in which they are written ages and dies. But Scripture remains ever young, ever fresh, with a perpetual challenge to the art of translating.

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