

THE ETHEL M. WOOD LECTURE

Mrs Ethel M Wood was daughter of Quintin Hogg, founder of the Regent Street Polytechnic, and herself deeply interested in education. When she died in 1970, she left a bequest to the University to provide for this annual lecture on the English Bible. The bequest made possible the continuation of the series initiated in 1947 by a lecture on 'The Bible and Modern Scholarship' by Sir Frederick Kenyon and directly supported by Mrs Wood during her lifetime. She also presented to the University her unique collection of Bibles, together with a sum of money to enable that collection to be extended. It was her love of the English Bible and her belief that it forms so rich a part of the cultural heritage of this country that led her to these generous actions and we express our appreciation on today's occasion.

It is an honour to be invited to join the long list of distinguished lectures on this foundation and to take up one aspect of that love of the Bible in English to which the series is dedicated.

ENGLISHING THE PSALMS

THE ETHEL M. WOOD LECTURE 1982

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by

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ENGLISHING THE PSALMS

My chosen title has evoked more than one raised eyebrow, and indeed some expression of scepticism as to whether there really is a verb 'to English'. Those whose favourite reading is the Oxford English Dictionary will know better. But I must acknowledge that, much as I enjoy the leisurely exploration of words in that now so conveniently miniaturized work - not, I may say, with a view to finding suitable candidates for use on 'Call my Bluff' - my choice of this title did not come directly to me from there. I am unable to say precisely how it did emerge, though I strongly suspect the unconscious influence of the collection of essays with which Monsignor Ronald Knox commented on his own Bible translation and on some of the problems he faced and the criticisms he met in that monumental undertaking. He called that volume 'On Englishing the Bible'.¹ I have searched, but in vain, for some source on which he might himself have drawn. Experience tells me that some more knowledgeable member of today's audience will kindly inform me of such a source. Some few years back I wrote a small book on the Psalms to which I gave the title *Doors of Perception*² and expressed my thanks to Father Harry Williams from whose writings I derived it,³ and, with his prompting, expressed indebtedness also to Aldous Huxley who used the phrase in the title of a book;⁴ I was rather dismayed to be told afterwards that I must of course have been aware that the phrase derives from the poetry of William Blake.⁵ Chasing the origins of quotations is an occupation much beloved of the scholar whose estimate of the weight of scholarship lies in the obscure footnote. I am content here to acknowledge an unattributed debt.

I have some suspicion that our indebtedness may be to William Wyclif, whose use of the verb 'to English' stands first in the series of quotations in the OED: significantly so, since he comments on Bible translation: 'To Englisshē it aftir the word wolde be derk and douteful'⁶ - a warning to all translators that the process is more subtle than finding at each point an equivalent of the words of the original;⁷ and with that goes the reminder that a translation can never be a crib from which the original could be reconstructed by the simple process of rendering backwards on the assumption that the same English word will always satisfactorily do duty for the same word in the original Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek.⁸ The ancient versions of the Bible, which have themselves exerted such influence on the long process of translation and interpretation, are reminders of that truth;

so too the often absurd literalisms of an Aquila, or their modern equivalent in an interlinear Hebrew-English text, point to the extreme danger to sense which is not always avoided in translation.

Questions about the verb 'to English' sent me to Fowler,⁹ that stand-by of authority on usage. It is, of course, familiar that appeal to authority is always qualified. If Fowler supports our particular prejudices - he tells me that envelope is more correct than the pseudo-genteel *onvelope*¹⁰ - then we approve his judgement. If, as in the case of 'to English', he does not, then even Homer can nod - and Fowler was not Homer. He assures us that 'to English' is a Saxonism: this is his derogatory term for the deliberate re-instatement of an old, disused word, and one which, in his view, is unnecessary. In fact the OED gives attestations of its use in each century from 1388 to 1872 - the last being from that pillar of respectability Charles Spurgeon in his *Treasury of David*.¹¹ And on Fowler's own criterion that a word should not be so re-instated unless it can be seen to provide a convenient and concise equivalent to a longer and more cumbersome expression, 'to English' must be justified on the grounds that its alternative will be 'to translate into English'. In this instance, I will maintain, Fowler is wrong!

I

There is a further reason for my choice. It is, of course, true that 'Translating the Psalms' would do, since it is not very likely that anyone would expect me to discuss how the Hebrew is to be rendered in, say, Swahili. But 'translating' can easily suggest limiting our concern to that of finding the most adequate English language for the rendering of the Hebrew words and phrases. The OED, however, lists a second use of the verb, equivalent to 'to make English',¹² that is 'to naturalize', to bring about that process by which something which is evidently not English becomes English.

It was Wheeler Robinson who claimed¹³ - and many an Old Testament lecturer and writer has quoted him - that to understand the Old Testament involves becoming a 'resident alien' - a *gēr*¹⁴ - the foreigner living within the community, under its protection, and enjoying certain rights. Only thus, he maintained, and many of us would agree, can we enter more fully into so different a cultural and religious heritage. It is, I believe, also possible to reverse that precept, and to say that we can never fully

understand the biblical text unless that text has itself become a 'resident alien', a *gēr* in our own culture. This is no pretence that it is what it evidently is not, but the recognition that literature, if it is the real thing, cannot stay restricted in time and space. It belongs to mankind. It must be given the 'freedom of the Borough', the right of citizenship with us. In a multi-cultural society, we may the more readily appreciate this.

I have often used the story of the Frenchman who, on becoming a naturalized Englishman, was asked how it felt, and was able to say 'Now I won the battle of Waterloo'.¹⁵ A process of indigenization of that kind is proper to true translation. It was not idly that the result of the translation of Shakespeare into German was the claim of Germans that he is 'unser Shakespeare'.¹⁶ Nor is it idly that for many within the English-speaking world - and fascinatingly, even more so within the American-speaking world - the English Bible, in its Authorized or King James's Version, has become 'our Bible', with the consciousness of its alien language and alien culture lost within words which have become so familiar - or which used to be so familiar - that it is not always easy to detect what is English in some stricter sense and what is direct translation, particularly from the Hebrew, so naturalized as to be part of our familiar speech. The rich resources of earlier English and the particular styles and idioms and rhythms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries made that possible, but to comment on that belongs rather to the specialist in English than to myself.¹⁷ And it must be recognized that it is not only the English Bible that has had this kind of effect. The Bible of Luther came to occupy a comparable position.¹⁸

Our subject has, therefore, a twofold aspect: how can we adequately put the Psalms into English? How can we appreciate the Psalms as English? At each point, the test lies in the degree to which it is possible for these ancient, oriental, alien poems to make an impact upon the ears and minds of readers and hearers today. This applies most evidently to those for whom the originals are inaccessible, and those for whom the complexities of both biblical scholarship and the study of ancient near eastern history and culture are remote. It applies, however, to all modern readers, since the gap in time and space is immense, even if we lay claim to knowing something of the language and thought. Often the test of our understanding lies in our ability to translate, and to do so for the non-Hebraist. When, some years ago, I was translating works of German Old Testament scholarship, I was able to benefit from the fact that my father, who read my typescripts, knew no word of German: he would not let me get away with less than real English. The test lies in making the psalms available; the validity of what is done appears in the effect.

II

The success of the Authorized Version and the affection and honour in which it is held, do not rest merely in the level of competence of the translators, nor in the fact that they lived at a time with which our own is often adversely contrasted, ours being adjudged, as Rose Macaulay put it, 'a different and less beautiful linguistic age'.¹⁹ It is rather that the English Bible became so much a part of life that it was accepted as belonging; and part of that derived from the place which it occupied within the religious life of the time, the centrality in which it was held by liturgy and homily. The problem for the modern translator is not that the English language is no longer good enough: that I cannot believe when I read some of the notable literary works of our time, both prose and poetry, English and American. It is in part the loss of use, so that liturgies are constructed in which the Bible is a minor element; and sermons are preached which may not even have the formal contact with a text; and reading the Bible is an odd occupation which is liked by those who like that sort of thing. There is, I believe, much of modern English Bible translation which is good, both as translation and as literature. Sometimes its failure lies in the greater degree of uncertainty about meanings which has come with the greater range of information available to us about the ancient languages and the ancient cultures.²⁰ And that is a clock which we cannot put back.

Too much knowledge as a barrier? Not really, but there are problems here. The point is vividly expressed in a conversation in T F Powys's novel *Mr Weston's Good Wine*²¹ to which I go back again and again. Mr Weston is speaking to the simple, loving, Luke Bird:

'...would you object to my reciting a short chapter?'

'I should like nothing better', said Luke Bird.

Mr Weston stood up and repeated in a very fine manner the One hundred and fourth psalm.

'You are sure you don't think too poorly of that?' he asked Luke when he sat down again.

'No', replied Luke, 'I like it all very much indeed.'

'I only meant that one as a picture', said Mr Weston, 'but had I the proofs in my hands now I would certainly, when I think how much has been said against my writings, alter the last verse.'

'I know what you would say', said Luke, smiling; 'you would say, "Let the critics be consumed out of the earth."'

I have a soft spot for critics: I am one myself. But I can

approve that sentiment because all of us who engage in biblical scholarship, no matter how good our intentions, are in danger of getting in the way of the text. Detailed scrutiny, analysis, weighing of alternatives, consideration of the wider issues of interpretation - all these are essential elements in the progress towards more understanding and better appreciation. But they can easily intervene rather than support; they can distract from what is being read or heard, rather than illuminate. And nowhere is this more evident than in the poetry of the Psalms, and in the wide range of other poetry in the Old Testament.

III

The problems of translation are difficult enough in any part of the biblical text: even where the meaning of words and the general purport is clear, Englishing is a delicate matter. But poetry is the more easily destroyed by translation because it is itself so odd and strange a form of literature. I use those terms deliberately, and I use them partly because I know that I am not a poet. I do not even write verse; certainly not poetry. To one who stands outside that magic circle, the very process of writing poetry is a mystery; and poetry, like love and religion and other of the great central elements in human experience, is not made the easier by virtue of its being impossible to define in any way which will completely satisfy. Poetry is a fact of human life, and I strongly suspect that it is as universal as religion, with which indeed it has close affinities.²²

A very large part of the Old Testament is in poetry. By ancient convention, only the Psalms, Job and Proverbs, together with some short passages elsewhere, are arranged in manuscripts in a particular poetic form. Modern printed editions of the Hebrew text and modern translations set out large sections of the prophetic writings as poetry, though there are differences of opinion about specific texts and problems of distinguishing with complete certainty between poetry and rhythmic or rhetorical prose. The problems of translating the Psalms, and of translating other evidently poetic passages, are inevitably different from those of translating, say, the narratives in the books of Samuel.

The particular structure of poetry makes its meaning more allusive, and it is frequently to be observed that a line of Hebrew verse arranges the words and suggests the sense in a manner quite different from that of prose. One way in which a heightened effect is produced is by the breaking within a line of a phrase used as a single unit in prose. The servant of Abraham thanked

God who had led him by the 'true road', the road which led to the successful accomplishment of his mission in finding a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24.48). Psalm 86.11 turns this to:

Show me, Yahweh, your road,
I will walk in your truth.

A prose writer would say simply: Show me the true road by which I should go.²³ The example is a simple one, but it provides an illustration of a difficulty which can occur in more complex forms. The poet states more vividly, but also less precisely, what could be said in a prose sentence; but there would be loss of effect, loss of impact, by the substitution of prose paraphrase. The whole catalogue of descriptive lines in Psalm 136 could, in fact, be transformed into a narrative outline of Israel's creation, exodus and conquest traditions. But in translating, the attempt has to be made to preserve that poetic impact.

The choice is not that of finding the word or phrase which renders the original precisely; it is the rendering which will most readily evoke the imagery of that original. But that term 'original' begs the question. And here there is a difference between translating the Psalms and translating other religious poetry from the same cultural area. The Psalms are not the most ancient religious poetry known to us: there are Egyptian and Sumerian and Akkadian poems which can be documented much earlier.²⁴ The Canaanite poetry of Ras Shamra-Ugarit,²⁵ not psalmody but with many analogies to the Psalms, survives in texts belonging to a period of four hundred years before David, to whom eventually pious tradition would attribute all the Psalms. All this poetry has its problems of transmission and interpretation. But the poetry of the Psalms, like the other poetry of the Old Testament, is different in that it incorporates not only something of what lies behind it, in those mists of early religion from which Israel emerges, but also centuries of use, through the biblical period and on into the post-biblical period when the text came finally to be fixed.²⁶ The imagery itself has been subject to use and re-use. An earlier form may sometimes be seen alongside one that is evidently later: Psalm 29 opens:

Give to the Lord, O you sons of the gods...

and this may be compared with a theologically more delicate form in Psalm 96.7:

Give to the Lord, O you families of the nations....

Catching the images is not then simply a matter of setting them in some postulated original context:²⁷ it is grasping something of their effect on readers and hearers through the centuries of

their use. The polytheistic image 'sons of the gods', replaced by 'families of the nations', itself may conceal a level of re-interpretation, since other evidence shows these divine beings as members of the heavenly court, subservient to the supreme God and understood as guardians or representatives of particular nations.²⁸ While it cannot be said that we should work from any text other than the Hebrew,²⁹ we cannot ignore either the alternative textual traditions, the differing manuscripts of Qumran, the ancient translations, or the richness of the long sequence of Jewish and Christian interpretation in which we stand. The exploration of origins is but one part of the illumination of the text.

IV

Coleridge was surely right when he said that 'Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood'³⁰ - a sentiment that we may appreciate in the reading of poetry and in the discovery that its initial impact may be only the beginning of a growing appreciation of what it has to say to us. There are at least two things which follow in relation to the translation of the Psalms. One is the need to recognize that a too lucid translation, that is to say one which makes the English more precise, more explicit, than the Hebrew, may fail to convey the overtones of poetry which can only be detected on repeated reading and hearing. The other is the caution that we must not confuse our own inadequacy of knowledge of the ancient language with the imprecision of the imagery. There will inevitably be cases where we do not fully understand the meaning of the text;³¹ and some where this lack of understanding derives from problems of textual transmission. There will be cases where we do not appreciate the imagery, and where we may be tempted to remove or to smooth over in translation what appear to us to be inconsistencies.

The opening of Ps. 19 may illustrate:

The heavens are recounting the glory of God,
even the works of his hands the firmament relates.
One day to another utters speech,
one night to another declares knowledge (of him).
Without actual speech, without actual words,
without their voices being heard.
Through the whole earth their measuring line has gone out,
To the very limit of the world their words.

Some commentators would want to do two things to that passage. They would want to bracket or remove the verse which runs

'Without speech, without words, without their voices being heard', explaining it as a gloss designed to tell the reader that he must not be literal-minded and suppose that the heavens actually speak, or that day and night have voices.³² We may observe that this supposed 'glossator' surprisingly put his comment into a poetic line which fits neatly into the context: no ham-fisted editors here! But we may also wonder whether anyone would really be so pedestrian as to fail to understand the poetic overtones of the opening lines.³³ There are some questions which only the learned are foolish enough to ask.³⁴ The commentators are also unhappy about the word translated 'their measuring line'; it introduces an unexpected image, and it stands in parallel with 'their words'; a very small emendation would give a repetition of the word 'their voices' which occurs in the preceding line, and many would prefer the emended text to satisfy both sense and parallelism.³⁵ This may be right; or other ways may be found by which 'measuring line' disappears and a more immediately intelligible sense can be supplied.³⁶ But can we be sure? The poem goes on to speak of the sun, to describe its daily course through the heavens, to emphasise that nothing is hidden from its heat. These lines imply, though they do not state, that the sun is a symbol of the divine ordering of the world. Is it possible that the 'measuring line' points forward to that theme, suggestive of the divine control, the activity, as it were, of the divine architect? I do not know the answer to that question, and I do not rule out a relatively simple emendation. But I would want to keep the possibilities open unless or until some firm decision can be made on the basis of evidence surer than that of apparent inconsistency in the imagery.

Inconsistent metaphor - inconsistent, that is, as we see it - is often emended out of existence in modern translations. A number of modern versions sin in this respect. Note the transferred images of Psalm 95.7:

He is our God,
 we the people of his pasture,
 the sheep in his protection (literally 'of his hand')

Elsewhere, in Psalm 79.13 and 100.2, we find the normal images: we his people, the sheep of his pasture. Some would remove the mixed metaphor and emasculate the imagery.³⁷ Psalm 92.10:

You have raised up my horn like a wild ox
 I am anointed with fresh oil

demands for its understanding the appreciation that the horn is a symbol of royal power, and anointing points to kingship. The New English Bible, emending the text slightly, offers:

I lift my head high, like a wild ox tossing its horn.
 The Alternative Services Book is closer with:

You have lifted up my head
 like the horns of the wild oxen.

Both miss the royal overtone. Today's English Version³⁸ has:

You have made me as strong as a wild bull;
 you have blessed me with happiness.

Here virtually all the imagery is lost, and the pedestrian reference to happiness lowers the tone.³⁹ What should we attempt?

You have raised up my royal power,
 like the horns of the wild ox
 I am anointed with fresh oil.

The problem is one of balance. Bertil Albrektson, writing on the Swedish Old Testament translation project, comments: 'The fact that the Old Testament is rooted in an ancient oriental environment must not be glossed over; the task is to produce a linguistic and not a cultural transfer. The cultural distance should be respected; at the same time the duty towards the reader is to arrive at an intelligible rendering.'⁴⁰

V

Robert Frost is often quoted as saying that 'poetry is that which is lost in translation';⁴¹ he was making an extreme statement of an evident truth. Much poetry has in fact been successfully translated - as witness Michael Hamburger's translation of poetry.⁴² But another aspect of that comment is true, and relevant to the problems of translating from one language to another. To transform poetry into fully explained statement is to imply that a poet could just as well have written in prose. It is like asking an artist to tell you what a picture means, or a musician to explain his composition. He may prefer to say 'Look!' or 'Listen!'. There is a point at which 'translate' comes near to 'explain', and that in its turn dangerously near to 'explain away'.

To translate involves some degree of choice, a choice which a commentator can explain in his notes; it involves a risk of narrowing the possible meanings and depriving the reader of the richness of the original.

Psalm 95 opens with an invocation to raise a shout of welcome to God: he is described as 'the rock of our salvation'. That is

the literal and conventional rendering. But what does 'rock' suggest as an image? - mountain, security, shelter, stability, immovability, assurance; 'salvation' suggests deliverance, victory, freedom. (Peter Levi has 'mountain of our freedom':⁴³ but what does that mean?) Should we opt for a word which suggests a military metaphor, which can be understood too narrowly? or keep to 'salvation' which has so many theological overtones, and is too easily confined to the non-material: Would 'assured victor' narrow the sense too much? Is it too prosaic?

Or, in a later verse of that same psalm, what should we do with the mention of Meribah and Massah, place-names of the wilderness tradition, where their meanings of 'contention' and 'testing' are elucidated in story. Must we, like T.S. Eliot for the 'Waste Land' provide a collection of notes, inviting the reader to turn to these stories with which he is assumed to be familiar? Or should we attempt, as in some modern translations, a rendering into English: 'at the Quarrel', 'on the day of the Test'⁴⁴, using capital letters to indicate that there is a precise allusion, but by the removal of the place-names making it even more difficult to discover to what the allusion refers? In this instance, we may recognize that the reader who is unable to fix the allusion may pick up the sense from the context:

where your fathers challenged me,
tested me even when they had seen my work.

There is no ready resolution of such questions. In part the answer must depend on the willingness of the reader to explore; and to some extent to accept that to enjoy poetry and for it to speak, it is not essential to draw out every detail. We do not need, in Psalm 22.12, to be reminded that the 'bulls of Bashan' are from a territory to the east of Jordan, formerly the kingdom of Og, and then a second footnote to recall that Og was the king who had an iron bedstead (Deut. 3.11). Nor do we need specific identification of all the nations of Psalm 83 which

have conspired with a single purpose
forming an alliance against you:
the clans of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
Moab and the Hagarites,
Geba and Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia and the rulers of Tyre (83.6f.)

- still less to suppose that a single historic event brought that particular concatenation together. Sonority is a vital element in the poetic impact; and it is well to remember that the biblical text belongs to the spoken rather than the merely written context. Martin Buber lays stress on this in the prefaces to his Bible

translation:⁴⁵ the text is for reading aloud, for hearing. As a written text, it still stands close to speech, preserving in its rhetoric the strengths of the spoken word.⁴⁶

VI

If our main endeavour is to let the text speak, we must beware of confining it within the straitjackets of our own conventions. All too often, that has been a failure, partial no doubt but a failure nevertheless, of psalm translation. It is a failure readily observable when psalms are paraphrased into hymns, and then easily become the vehicle for particular theological statements or polemics. Luther's famous *Ein' feste burg* is one such, but then it is more like a sermon - and not necessarily the worse for that - which begins from the first line of Psalm 46 and then takes off:

A safe stronghold our God is still,
A trusty shield and weapon
He'll help us clear from all the ill
That hath us now o'ertaken.

A great hymn, but not really close to the psalm which inspired its opening.

The metrical psalms are too rigid a form, though they served to make the psalms singable without musical complexities to defeat the unwary. Thus the same psalm:

God is our refuge and our strength,
In straits a present aid;
Therefore although the earth remove,
We will not be afraid.⁴⁷

If the sometimes tortuous lines, with their word order dictated by rigid metre and rhyme, evoke a smile, they nevertheless cling as close as they may to the original: though surprisingly that version of Psalm 46 lacks its most distinctive element, the refrain:

The lord of hosts is with us,
a high tower for us the God of Jacob.

Isaac Watts, as that firm Dissenter Bernard Manning pointed out in a paper I heard him read in 1937,⁴⁸ transformed the limitations of those metrical psalms, with a surer poetic sense. Where the metrical version of Psalm 20 has:

In chariots some put confidence,
Some horses trust upon;

But we remember will the name
Of our Lord God alone.

For Watts this becomes:

Some trust in horses train'd for war,
And some of chariots make their boasts;
Our surest expectations are,
From Thee, the Lord of heaven'ly hosts.⁴⁹

Inevitably, to make the poetic rhythm even, there are infills and duplications, though sometimes a subtlety of handling which puts into verse what scholarly commentary might do more ponderously. In a version of Psalm 19, Watts puts together into the verse two elements of the psalm which stand side by side, the theme of the world and the sun as expressive of divine order (vv. 1-6), and that of the law, expressive of God's order for man (vv. 7-11). So he begins:

The heavens declare thy glory, Lord,
In every star thy wisdom shines;
But when our eyes behold thy word,
We read thy name in fairer lines.

The rolling sun, the changing light,
And nights and days thy power confess;
But the blest volume thou hast writ
Reveals thy justice and thy grace.⁵⁰

He thus invites us to read the two parts of the psalm together.

VII

It is not my intention, nor would it be within my competence, to review the rich contribution that the Psalms have made to hymnody, whether by paraphrase or metrical version or by the proliferation of allusion.⁵¹ These comments are to provide a background to strictures on the limitation which is so commonly imposed on the use of the Psalms by the conventions of public worship in many of the churches, typified in the method of the 'Anglican chant'. And the strictures themselves are not by any means to suggest a lack of appreciation of both the wording of the older renderings, Coverdale in particular, or of their modern counterparts, often very successful, in the new version of the Psalms for worship in the *Alternative Services Book*. We cannot, I believe, stay with the older form, since at many points it is defective from a too limited understanding of the text; nor should we expect to stay too long with the newer form, since any translation is capable of improvement.⁵² Nor am I without a love

for the richness of sound from a good choir singing the Psalms; nor of the success with which even a musically not very competent congregation will often cope with the intricacies of a pointing system designed to fit every line into one pattern. I enjoy both the hearing and the singing.

But the limitations imposed are harsh. When the translators of the new liturgical version inform us that they have had to supply extra words in order to balance out the lines,⁵³ they admit to the deficiencies of so rigid a system. When they are forced - though this they do not state - to fit lines which manifestly contain three sense units into two-unit forms, they lose an essential quality of the poetry. Psalm 72.5 runs:

May he live and be given of the gold of Sheba
May prayer be made for him continually
All the day long may he be blessed.

The *Alternative Services Book* expands the opening line to 'Long may he live' so as to give a little more balance between

Long may he live and be given of the gold of Sheba

and

May prayer be made for him continually and men bless him
every day.

The triple rhythm is lost.

Hebrew poetry consists of groupings of various forms, with the interweaving of differing units quickening and slowing the rhythm;

He sent signs and wonders
into the midst of Egypt
upon Pharaoh and all his servants
He smote many nations
he slew mighty kings
Sihon king of the Amorites
Og king of Bashan
even all the kings of Canaan
He gave their land as heritage
heritage to Israel his people (Ps. 135.9-12)

There are complex groupings in which in a four-unit section the first and last echo each other, and the two contained within them equally provide a parallel.

Then the waters would have swept us away
the torrent passed right over us
then right over us there passed
the overweening waters (Ps.124.4f)

- a pattern lost in the *Alternative Services Book* version which reduces the four elements to three and then makes a two-fold unit by setting the first over against the remaining two. Force such poetry as this into an alien rigid structure and the quality is lost.

The method of the Gelineau/Grail psalter⁵⁴ and the similar one of the Jerusalem Bible *Psalms for Reading and Recitation*⁵⁵ sometimes goes further by endeavouring to produce what is a near-equivalent in modern style of a metrical psalm. It may help a congregation to sing a psalm; but it risks murdering the poetry.

VIII

What has gone wrong is the imposition, common to much, though not all, Christian worship, of a particular convention on the use of the Bible. Even where the Old Testament is most regularly used, convention has it that psalms, largely or entirely, belong only to be sung, in one form or another; sometimes, where music is lacking or on weekdays, to be read, but often then antiphonally, so as to guarantee an artificial break-up of the sense, sometimes with a ludicrously long pause at the division point in a verse and enjambement from one verse to the next. We read the poetry of the prophets and the poetry of Job and Proverbs, alongside the prose of narrative; we may even read as lessons psalms not recognized as such because they occur outside the psalter, the Song of Hannah (1 Sam.2) or that of Jonah in the belly of the fish (Jonah 2), or that of Hezekiah on recovery from illness (Isa.38). But the poetry of the Psalms is too rarely read. And in the struggle to sing we easily have insufficient attention available for the poetry.

Of course, this is exaggerated, but deliberately so. For the Englishing of the Psalms is not simply a matter of whether we have managed to get the best poetic version we can produce so that the imagery in its wealth can come over to us; it is also a matter of hearing and receiving, and of reading and ingesting, a poetry which is incomparable in its breadth and depth. We do not chant Milton and Hopkins and Eliot; we read them and listen to them read.⁵⁶ Mr Weston, you will recall, did not sing Psalm 104, he 'recited' it.

And it is here that we come full circle, to the second aspect of 'Englishing the Psalms'. It is one thing to get translations which will let them speak; it is another to let them become part of our culture, to English them so that they are fully naturalized with us, as we may hope they may be naturalized wherever

poetry and religion go hand in hand. In part, like all translation, this is also a test of our own language and culture. For translation, as all of us know who have attempted it, is an arduous test of our own language, of our command of it; but also of the language itself, as to whether it is competent for such a task. To English the Psalms involves the stretching of the English language, and that is where the poets come in for they are the great language-stretchers.⁵⁷ To English the Psalms is also a test of our own culture, already the product of so much enrichment from elsewhere and still in process of enrichment. We may deplore the slovenliness and the slipshod use of words, and what we blame on the Americans, seeing often only the poorer quality of their exports and overlooking their highly diversified and richly incorporative culture. But our English language and our English culture are what they are not by reason of some imagined insularity - the sea has always been more a communication line than a barrier - but by reason of the enriching of our life from so many and diverse sources. It may be still further enriched and this best-loved compendium of poetry has yet more to give.

A perceptive comment by J.B. Priestley recalls his discovery of the Dutch artist Vermeer.

'I discovered...that a painting of something, anything - a brick wall, the corner of a room - could fill me with a strange joy, which might haunt me for days, if only because the artist had begun to shape and colour my own vision of things. I think I came to understand then... that we shall do well not to look from things to pictures but from pictures to things;...that we who are not painters should not narrowly check their vision with ours but should allow their vision to shape and colour ours!'⁵⁸

That too is what a poet does; that too is what the poetry of the Psalms does. If we can English it so that its essential quality is preserved, then, ancient and remote and alien as it is, it will invite us to look from poetry to life, and so to see life itself more clearly.

And recalling Martin Buber's reminder that the Bible is for hearing, and a translation must speak, I end with my own attempt⁵⁹ at the full text of two psalms referred to in the course of this lecture.

* * * * *

PSALM 46

- (1) God for us shelter and refuge,
 help in adversities surely found.
- (2) We shall not fear when earth shakes,
 mountains move amid the seas.
- (3) Its waters rage, they seethe,
 the mountains quake at his majesty.
 (Yahweh of hosts is with us,
 a high tower for us the God of Jacob.)
- (4) There is a river whose streams gladden the city of God,
 holiest dwelling of the Most High.
- (5) God is within her, she shall not move,
 God will help her as day dawns.
- (6) Nations rage, kingdoms move,
 He utters his thunder, earth sways.
 Yahweh of hosts is with us,
 a high tower for us the God of Jacob.
- (8) Come see the deeds of Yahweh,
 who makes devastations in the earth.
- (9) Ending wars to the limits of the earth,
 the bow he breaks, shatters the spear,
 chariots he burns with fire.
- (10) Quiet now, know that I am God,
 exalted among the nations,
 exalted in the earth.
- (11) Yahweh of hosts is with us,
 a high tower for us the God of Jacob.

PSALM 95

- (1) Let us acclaim Yahweh,
 shout to the rock of our salvation.
- (2) Present ourselves before him with praise,
 With songs shout to him.
- (3) Supreme God is Yahweh,
 Supreme king over all gods.
- (4) Within his control the deep places of the earth,
 the peaks of the mountains his.
- (5) His the sea which he himself made,
 the dry land which his hands shaped.

- (6) Come: let us prostrate ourselves and bow,
 kneel in the presence of Yahweh our maker.
- (7) He is our God,
 we the people of his pasture,
 we the sheep under his control.

Today, if only you would listen to his voice:

- (8) 'Do not harden your hearts as at Meribah,
 as at the day of Massah in the wilderness.
- (9) Where your fathers challenged me,
 tested me even when they had seen my work.
- (10) For forty years I abhorred that community.
 I said: 'They are a people totally astray,
 they do not acknowledge my ways.'
- (11) I swore in my anger:
 'They shall not enter my rest.'

NOTES

1. R.A. Knox, *On Englishing the Bible* (London, 1949).
2. Faith Press, Leighton Buzzard, 1978.
3. Cf. H.A. Williams, *Tensions: necessary conflicts in life and love* (London, 1976), p.101.
4. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (London, 1954).
5. *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 'A Memorable Fancy: "The ancient tradition..." 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite'.
6. OED Vol.3 (1897), 180: *Bible Prologue XV*
7. Cf. Richard Rolle, the fourteenth-century mystic, who says of his own translation of the Psalter: 'In the translation, I follow the letter as much as I may' (quoted and translated from Janet M. Bately, 'The Literary Prose of King Alfred's Reign: Translation or Transformation?' (Inaugural Lecture, 1980), printed at King's College, London, p.14. Cf. *English Writings of Richard Rolle*, ed. H.E. Allen (Oxford, 1931), p.7: Prologue to the English Psalter).
8. Cf. H.F.D. Sparks, *On Translations of the Bible* (Ethel M. Wood Lecture, 1972, Athlone Press, London, 1973), p.12: his comments on the Revised Version show approval of its value as a crib, but it may be doubted if this quality really makes it a translation in the proper sense.
9. H.W. Fowler, *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (Oxford, 1926 and corrected editions), p.139, with cross references to 'Revivals', p.503; 'Saxonism', pp.514f. (Revised ed. 1968, pp.157,524,537).
10. Fowler, p.142 (159).
11. *The Treasury of David* (London, 1870-86): comment on Ps. 62.1: 'If we Englished the word by our word "verily"...'.
12. OED loc. cit. 'to make English, anglicize'.
13. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1946), 281f.
14. For the *gēr*, cf. eg Exod. 12.48f.; 20.10; Lev. 19.10.
15. The story was told years ago by Professor Norman W. Porteous of Edinburgh who showed its effectiveness in explaining for example how various tribal groups, which had not experienced the Exodus, could claim that tradition as their own.
16. The phrase 'unser Shakespeare' is perhaps not an actual quotation, but an impression based on the view, particularly of J.G. Herder and of the 'Sturm und Drang' period in German literature in the late eighteenth century, that Shakespeare had virtually acquired German nationality.
17. Cf. eg C.S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorised Version* (Ethel M. Wood Lecture, 1950. Athlone Press, London). Reprinted in *Selected Literary Essays*, ed. W. Hooper (Cambridge University Press, 1969), 126-45.
18. See H. Volz in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, Vol. 3. *The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S.L. Greenslade (1963), esp. p.103: 'Luther's Bible was a literary event of the first magnitude, for it is the first work of art in German prose.'
19. *Letters to a Friend. 1950-52*, ed. C. Babington Smith ((1961) Fontana, 1968), pp.348f.
20. B. Albrektson, 'The Swedish Old Testament Translation Project: Principles and Problems', *The Bible Translator*, 29 (1978), 101-13, see p.105, and also J. Barr, 'After Five Years: A Retrospect on Two Major Translations of the Bible', *Heythrop Journal*, 15 (1974), 381-405, see p.383.
21. London, 1927: in chapter 34.
22. Cf. Gerald Priestland in *The Listener* (10 December 1981): 'If I were asked to say in one word why Christianity has attracted me, I would answer "poetry". I mean the conviction that the words of the Christian story hold more meaning than can ever be found in the dictionary; that they are thrusting, straining, dancing to break through to something beyond saying. I cannot translate them into a pamphlet for you, but they give me enormous hope.'
23. Cf. also Ps. 25.5, and E.Z. Melamed, 'Break-Up of Stereotype Phrases as an Artistic Device in Biblical Poetry', in *Studies in the Bible*, ed. C. Rabin (Scripta Hierosolymitana, 8, 1961), p.147.
24. For selected texts, see *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J.B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. (Princeton, 1969), Section V: 'Hymns and Prayers', 365-401, 573-86.
25. For Ras Shamra parallels, cf. J.H. Patten, *Canaanite Parallels in the Book of Psalms* (Baltimore, 1944); L.R. Fisher, ed., *Ras Shamra Parallels I-II* (Analecta Orientalia, 49, 50, 1972, 1975, Rome); O. Loretz, *Die Psalmen Teil II* (Alten Orient und Altes Testament, 207/2, Kevelaer and Neukirchen-Vluyn): this deals with Pss. 90-150; Part I is to appear later.
26. Another aspect of this problem is that of authorship. The psalms are not simply 'anonymous' (in the way this term is used, for example, in the *Oxford Book of English Verse* (ed. A. Quiller-Couch, 1900) and the *New Oxford Book of English Verse* (ed. Helen Gardner, 1972), where 'anonymous' poems can be given at least approximate chronological contexts). They embody use and modification and reapplication; they are built considerably on traditional themes and stereotyped phrases. Their poetic quality belongs within such a context.
27. Cf. Sparks, op.cit. (n.8), p.18.
28. Different aspects of this area of thought may be seen in, for example, Ps. 82, Job 1-2, Dan. 10.
29. The problems of this are evident (cf Sparks, op.cit. (n.8), pp.19f.), but no viable alternative exists so far as the basic text is concerned. Cf. also my 'Original Text and Canonical Text', *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 32 (1977), 166-73.
30. Quoted by P.J. Cavanagh, *The Listener* (23 June 1977). The full sentence reads: 'Where no criticism is pretended to, and the Mind in its simplicity gives itself up to a Poem as to a work of nature, Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.' It is from Notebook 21, as given in *The Inquiring Spirit*, ed. K. Coburn (London, 1951), Section 122, p.156. (My thanks to Mr J. Woolford of King's College for this information.)
31. Cf. E. Ullendorff, 'Is Biblical Hebrew a Language?' *Bulletin of the*

32. eg C.A. and E.G. Briggs, *The Psalms* (International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh, 1906/7), I, 162f.
33. LXX renders: 'There are no dialects or languages in which their voices are not heard' which may be regarded as an interpretative paraphrase (cf. G.B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London, 1980), p.119).
34. Caird, loc.cit.
35. The text has *qawwām*; an emendation to *qōlām* ('their voices') requires only the addition of one letter.
36. *qw* 'measuring line' is the clearly attested meaning in numerous passages (eg 2 Kings 21.13; Zech. 1.16). A meaning 'call' for *qw* has been proposed; J. Barth, *Etymologische Studien* (Leipzig, 1893), pp.29ff.; M. Dahood, *Psalms I* (Anchor Bible, New York, 1966), pp.121f. H.-J. Kraus, *Psalmen* (Biblicher Kommentar, 15, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1960), I, 153, 155 compares the problematic use of *qw* in Isa. 28.10, 13 as expressing an inarticulate sound. The sense 'chord, musical note, notation' has been suggested with comparison of Ecclus. 44.5; IQH 1. 28-29 (the Qumran Hodayat text); IQS 10.9 (the Qumran Rule); cf. NEB 'music' in Ps. 19. LXX renders as 'sound'. G.R. Driver (*JTS*, 13 (1962), 372) thinks of 'rhythm', seeing a reference to rhythmic and metrical speech, ie poetic form. But other occurrences in the Qumran texts (eight are listed in all) support the meaning 'cord, measure', and a meaning 'poetry' or 'music' appears less probable.
37. So, for example, New English Bible and *Alternative Services Book 1980* (see also n.53). The latter has been unnecessarily revised from the original sample translation in D.L. Frost and A.A. Macintosh, *Twenty-five Psalms from A Modern Liturgical Psalter* (Church Information Office, London, 1973).
38. Today's English Version (Good News Bible), London, 1976.
39. cf. the comments on this verse by B. Albrektson, op.cit. (n.20), p.112f.
40. op.cit., p.113.
41. Also quoted as 'what gets lost in translation' (so review by Robert Nye of Michael Hamburger's translation of the poems of Paul Celan (Carcanet Press, 1981) in *The Times* 12 February 1981).
42. For example, that of Paul Celan (see n.41) and J.C.F. Hölderlin (London 1966).
43. Peter Levi, *The Psalms* (Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1976).
44. So Levi, op.cit. The use of the capitalized 'Test' seems as unfortunate as its proposed use in a version of the Lord's Prayer: 'Do not bring us to the test', which is said to have evoked much amusement, if not dismay, in cricketing circles. *Twenty-five Psalms* (see n.37) has 'Dispute' and 'Testing': see the translators' valuable comment to the passage on p.37. See also Melamed, op.cit. (see n.23), p.123.
45. M. Buber, 'Zu einer neuen Verdeutschung der Schrift', Beilage zum ersten Band. *Die fünf Bücher der Weisung* (Heidelberg, 1954), p.8: 'The translator must experience the written nature of the Scripture largely as the recording of its spoken quality; that spoken quality, the genuine reality of the Bible, comes to life ever anew when the ear hears the word in its biblical quality and the mouth speaks it in that quality.' (My translation).
46. Cf. Y. Gitay, *Prophecy and Persuasion* (Bonn, 1981). For some comments on modern translations of the psalms, see Robert Murray, 'Presenting the Psalter Today', *Heythrop Journal*, 19 (1978), 171-78.
47. From the *Scottish Psalter*, 1650.
48. B.L. Manning, *The Hymns of Wesley and Watts* (Epworth, London, 1942), 78-105.
49. Manning, op.cit., p.82.
50. Quoted from *An Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D.D.*... ed. J. Rippon (London, 1802), No.99.
51. Cf. eg J. Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, rev. ed. (London (1907), 1915): 'Psalms, English', pp.916-32.
52. Cf. John Habgood, Bishop of Durham, letter to the Times, dated 24 November 1980, in response to the review of the *Alternative Services Book 1980* by Marghanita Laski (Times, 20 November 1980).
53. Preface to *The Psalms. A New Translation for worship* (Church Information Office: Collins, London, 1977), p.15. Cf. also the notes to this translation in *The Alternative Services Book 1980. A Commentary by the Liturgical Commission* (Church Information Office, 1980), 151-61.
54. *The Psalms. A New Translation* (Fontana, London, 1963),
55. Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1969.
56. This, of course, is not a comment on the setting of poems to music which forms so rich a part of musical composition and which, in its best instances, enhances the poetry by the insights of the composer. But no composer would then expect to provide all-purpose settings for numerous poems; and most often, with a poem of several regular stanzas, setting and accompaniment are not uniform for each stanza.
57. This is where the value may be seen in translations of the Psalms by poets. Peter Levi's translation (see n.43) often achieves such a contribution. Cf. also the collection of psalm renderings, linked to the first drafts of the New English Bible, but not completed because of the poet's death, by Frank Kendon, *Thirty-six Psalms* (Cambridge, 1963), including Pss. 1-34 and 40-41.
- The resources of language are well-illustrated by the Old English rendering of Ps. 16.5 (quoted by Janet Bately (see n.7), p.14)
- 'Geriht, Drihten, mine stoeppas on thine wegass,
thæt ic ne aslide thæor thæor ic stæppan scyle'.
(*'Make straight (Direct), Lord, my steps on thy ways, so that I do not slip where I must step'*).
- The particular quality of such poetry makes possible an equivalent in some degree to the often elaborate sound echoes of the Hebrew text.
58. J.B. Priestley, *Delight* (London (1949), 1951), pp.162f.
59. These versions represent texts revised from several earlier drafts. One version of Psalm 46 was published in *The Kingsman*, 6, (1963/64), 13-20, see p.19, in a review article on *The Revised Psalter* (1963); cf. also

'The Revision and Use of the Psalms', *English Church Music*, 1965 (Royal School of Church Music, Croydon), 13-18. Some other comments on translation appear in an article written jointly with my colleague Michael A. Knibb, 'Translating the Psalms', *The Bible Translator*, 17 (1966), 1-11.

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