

TRIALS OF A TRANSLATOR * by Ronald Knox

I have spent the last nine years, when not otherwise employed, in translating the Holy Bible from beginning to end. I could have made rather better time if it had not been for the necessity of replying, sometimes in print, but far more often in private correspondence, to the criticisms and queries of the public.

You see, it is no ordinary task. If you translate, say the Summa of St. Thomas, you expect to be cross-examined by people who understand philosophy and by people who understand Latin; but by no one else. If you translate the Bible, you are liable to be cross-examined by anybody; because everybody thinks he knows already what the Bible means. And the form which these questions take is a very interesting one; nearly always it is, "Why did you alter such and such a passage?" Why did I alter it? When you say you are going to translate the Bible, why do people assume that you do not mean to do anything of the kind. They think you mean to revise the existing translation, with parts of which we are all familiar; changing a word here and a word there, like a compositor correcting proofs with a pair of tweezers. The more you plagiarize from the work of previous interpreters, the better your public will be pleased.

On the contrary in all translation, you must find out what the original means; you must try to express in your own language what the other man was trying to express in his. Nor can you do this by a merely literal rendering. If you are translating a French author, and come across the phrase, *il se noya*, your first instinct is to translate it literally, "he drowned himself." But then you have to reflect that *se noyer* in French need not mean to drown oneself; it may mean simply to get drowned. Was it accident or suicide? You must find out from the context; if that is impossible, you must hedge; "he met his death by drowning" will leave it doubtful whether it was suicide or not.

Nor is it enough to find out what the man said, you must find out why he said it; you must reproduce, not only the sense, but the emphasis of his words. To take a very simple instance, which is constantly recurring, the Hebrew has one word that does duty for *and* and *but*; and wherever the translator comes across that word in the Old Testament he must decide between them, sometimes at the risk of making nonsense of a whole paragraph. And finally, if your original has any pretensions to literary merit, you want to preserve its idiom, which (commonly at least) you cannot do by a literal translation. "*Etre ou ne pas etre, c'est bien la la question*" is not Shakespeare's "To be or not to be ..."

There are special difficulties about finding out the exact meaning of any word in the New Testament. It was written, or at any rate it has come down to us, in Greek; and in a kind of Greek which had become debased through being used as the common language of the civilized world, very much as Latin was in the Middle Ages. You can never be quite sure, therefore, how much of its native force a given word has kept; just as you cannot be sure whether the word *almus* in a Latin hymn is meant to convey its root sense of "nourishing," or is a merely insipid epithet meaning "kindly."

Worse than that; most of the New Testament authors knew Greek as a foreign language, and when you are talking a foreign language you do not express your meaning exactly as a native would. To take an extreme instance, an Irishman talking English does not use the words *Yes* and *No*, like an Englishman; he says, "I did," or "It is not," because the language of his forefathers had no words for "Yes" and "No." How are we to be certain, then, that our author picked out the exact word to express what he meant, writing as he was in a foreign medium? Take, for example, St. Mark's account of our Lord's agony in Gethsemani. "He began to fear and to be heavy," so our Bible translates it, but you will scarcely find two interpreters who are agreed on the proper rendering of either verb. How much fear, how much astonishment, is implied by the one; how much hesitation, how much repining, by the other? And yet it is surely a matter of importance that we should know exactly what our Lord did feel in Gethsemani! Or take that well-known phrase in the Last Gospel, "the light shines in darkness, *et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt*." Does that mean that the darkness could not understand it? Or that the darkness could not smother it? Constantly you feel that the tool which came to your author's hand was not the exact tool he wanted.

But there is a further source of confusion. The New Testament writings come down to us from a time when the vocabulary of the Christian faith was in the making. Words like grace, faith, salvation and so on, have, for us, exact theological meaning. Then they were used with less precision; they were not yet technical terms. Consequently, the translator is always having to ask himself, "Should this word in this particular passage be interpreted strictly, in its defined theological sense? Or is it still being used in a loose, popular way?"

We translate "Hail, thou that are full of grace," and in the next chapter "Jesus grew in favor with God and man"; but the word grace is the same as the word favor in the original. We translate "My faithful witness, Antipas," but ought we, perhaps, to translate "My faithful martyr"? By the time the Apocalypse was written, it may be that the term had already an official connotation.

Sin was the word used by the Jews to mean any breach of the law, culpable or not; and they were apt to describe their Gentile neighbors as "sinners," meaning no more than that they were Gentiles. "The Son of Man shall be handed over to sinners" means, almost certainly, "The Son of Man shall be handed over to Gentile folk, the Romans." When our Lord ate "with publicans and sinners," were they people of notoriously evil life? Or were they merely Gentiles? "Tend the church of God, in which the holy Spirit has made you bishops" - should it be "bishops"? Or should it be just "overseers"? Constantly this comes up: Am I making the language of the New Testament too vague? Or am I making it too stereotyped? Am I reading too much into it, or too little?

All this the translator must take into account if he is going to do justice to an individual phrase or sentence. But his duty does not end there; he must follow the thought of his original, and make it intelligible to the reader, bringing out the emphatic word or words in each sentence, indicating its logical connection with what goes before and after. He must make the whole paragraph hang together and convey a message. That duty was apt to be overlooked by the older translators, if only for this reason - that the Bible was printed in verses; and, by a trick of our natures, if a page of print is broken up for the eye, we do not expect it to convey any coherent impression to the mind. Any verse in the Bible was a "text," you preached from it, you quoted it in theological arguments; you did not look to see what the setting of it was, or how it fitted in. We are so used to this piece-meal way of approaching the Bible that hundreds of priests, well enough grounded in Latin, read the epistle for Christmas Eve without noticing that there is no main verb in it.

I don't say that it is easy to bring out the general sense of a Biblical passage. Sometimes, for example, in the Prophets, you have to give up, and admit that these passages may have been intelligible to the people they were written for, but certainly aren't to us. But in St. Paul's epistles, for example, or in the Book of Job, it is quite clear that there is a thread of argument running all through, though it is very far indeed from lying on the surface. To present your material so that this thread of argument becomes apparent is no easy matter; but you have got to do it if the Bible is to be read as a book, and not merely studied as a lesson.

I said it was the translator's business, in the third place, to preserve the idiom of his original. That means, not that he must copy it, which would be easy enough; he must transpose it into the idiom of his own language.

A hundred turns of phrase confront you as you read the Old Testament which make you sit back in your chair and ask yourself, "What would an Englishman have said?" When I say "an Englishman," I do not mean a modern Englishman. The Old Testament record is of events that happened a very long time ago, under primitive conditions; to strike a modern note in rendering it is to make fun of it.

The new Catholic version of Genesis which has appeared in the U.S. contains one such lapse into the vernacular. When Eleazar, Abraham's steward, has gone to Mesopotamia to find a wife for Isaac, this version represents him as "waiting to learn whether or not the Lord had made his trip successful." Now, I am not objecting to that as an American way of talking. My objection is that an American would not speak of the Mormons as having had a successful trip to Salt Lake City in A.D.1850. A successful trip suggests shifting your cigar from one side of your

mouth to the other as you alight from your airplane in San Francisco. It does not suggest trekking over many miles of desert on a camel.

You cannot do justice to antiquity without taking refuge in rather old-fashioned English. A Biblical phrase like "O King, live for ever!" has got to be changed; nobody ever talked like that in English. But you must not change it into "I hope that your Majesty's life may be spared indefinitely." You must get back to the language of a period when palace etiquette was more formal, "Long life to the King's majesty!" - something like that.

This is not meant to be a complete list of the difficulties which beset, as I see it, the path of the conscientious translator. Believe me, I have only indicated a handful of them. I have only attempted a partial answer to the question which naturally suggests itself to the uninitiated: "What, nine years to translate the Bible! Fancy taking as long as that!"

*Condensed from *On Englishing The Bible*, Ronald Knox, 1949, Burns & Oates