

Attend to Translation

Years ago I translated a couple of books from French to English, and a few articles and poems from German to English. These were modest endeavors, undertaken in my callow youth, but some of the important learning moments in my life of attending to language. What I learned as a translator was this.

Language is culture. Every language has a host of cultural assumptions imbedded in its structure, syntax, and vocabulary: about the relationship of the physical to the spiritual world, about the nature of time, about causality, about courtesy, about basic political and social order. Translation involves one in matters much more complex than finding word equivalencies. There are no exact equivalents.

To translate is to originate. Though his or her accountabilities are different from those of a poet writing in a native language, the translator no less than the original poet imagines and invents the text. Its musicality, its resonance, its allusiveness, its readability, its affective ap-

peal — all rely on the craft of the translator as much as that of the author.

A translator has to deal with competing responsibilities — to the author, to the audience, to the traditions from which the text is being exported and into which the text is being imported, and, in many cases, to previous translators of the same work — and with competing values when accessibility competes with fidelity to the original culture; when the aesthetic value of the idiomatic competes with the obligation to be accurate.

This is not news to the many in universities and seminaries who have been involved in translation at a much more complex and consequential level as biblical translators. The boldness and humility called for in that work are edifying to contemplate. The history of the Bible in English is a history of controversy, theological warfare, wrestling with responsibility and freedom, with the nature of the Word, and with the power of the word. At the latest count, the Old and the New Testaments have, either entirely or in substantial selections, been translated into 2,010 different languages. And the vast weight of commentary and interpretation bears, literally, on every word, sentence, verse, chapter, and book of both Testaments. In certain traditions in Judaism, it bears on every individual letter. Especially coming from Hebrew and Greek into English, the variables are so multiple as to defy any simplistic ideas of how God speaks in sacred texts. It must feel like tampering. It is tampering.

And it is necessary work, not only for those specially called to translate Scripture or other significant texts, but for any of us who hope to speak a word of truth or healing that challenges the dominant discourse of the culture. The business of translation — to make what is inaccessible available, to alter the terms of argument for the sake of being understood, to step inside others' conceptual frameworks and systems of reference and meet them there — belongs to all of us. Those who care for the word carry the word into new contexts and adapt it to new situations.

As I mentioned in the opening chapter, 80 percent of the information stored in the world's computers is in English. English has achieved a dominant place in global discourses that is unprecedented, even at the height of the British Empire. And Americans, insulated on two sides by oceans and on a third perhaps by a historical attitude of entitlement, are largely monolingual. This makes our use of language outside our own local and national contexts a serious diplomatic issue.

In her book *The Need for Words*, Patsy Rodenburg observes, "The attachments each of us has as a nation to words and their rhythms can turn speaking into a territorial issue with very restricted boundaries." And, discussing the highly charged regional differences among speakers of the same language in South Africa, Northern Ireland, Belgium, Canada, and the "free" states of the for-

mer Soviet Union, she warns, "Both languages and dialects drive us apart. . . . Make no mistake about it: language, choice of words, and particularly accent can trace contentious lines of battle. Hate and nationalism need words just as much as conciliation and diplomacy do."¹ At international conferences, arrangements for devices and personnel can be an intricately costly business, ridden with diplomatic potholes because to speak one of the dominant languages is privilege, but to accommodate the presence of those whose languages are spoken only by small populations is costly. Henry James once spoke of the predicament of those who speak "small" or minor languages as "a complex fate" — a phrase that in Jamesian dialect suggests something sorrowful indeed. At least it is important to recognize how the burden of accommodation rests somewhat unfairly on them.

Rodenburg gives a more homely example of the kinds of misunderstanding that need to be addressed intentionally and charitably in recalling her own childhood in England, being visited by Dutch relatives: "I would listen with keen curiosity as misunderstandings were aggravated simply by opposing attitudes to words. The Dutch aunts and uncles never seemed to know 'how to behave' according to us. The English side of the family was shocked, for instance, by the blunt and 'rude' replies of

1. Patsy Rodenburg, *The Need for Words* (New York: Theatre Art Books, 1993), pp. 82-84.

the Dutch. . . . The Dutch just were not interested in politeness for its own sake."² Conversely, she comments also on the bemusement of non-English acquaintances at the British habit of indirection, words used as "delaying tactics," and charm and irony used to deflect sometimes needed confrontation.

The layers of language difference that separate us extend from whole categories of experience indigenous to one language culture and not another, to nuances that distinguish a local dialect from that spoken in the next valley. In light of those differences and the delicate business of establishing common investment in peace and community across the globe, it behooves those of us who care about words to care not only for our native language but also for what I will call the "biodiversity" of the earth's languages.

I asked a linguist friend who has worked on helping to preserve the language of a nearly extinct tribal people in northern California how she would answer the question she must encounter: Why should we care if an isolated and little-spoken tongue dies off? In response, she also used the metaphor of biodiversity, and she went on to explain that every language offers unique ways of understanding the world that are lost to us all when it goes. Even if only a few vestigial contacts remain between a dying language and the larger language cultures around it, the possibility of

2. Rodenburg, *The Need for Words*, p. 83.

cross-pollination remains, and the vision that may be a corrective to what is seen through and framed by another linguistic lens.

Most of us aren't likely to learn Inuit or Navajo or the dialects of New Guinea. But I do believe that a part of our responsibility as stewards of the word is to make some sustained effort to step outside of our own linguistic comfort zone and really learn another language — not only for purposes of comporting ourselves respectably abroad, but much more importantly, to stay in contact with the complicating alternatives to our own linguistic window on the world and, by doing so, to cultivate the humility required to use words generously and well.

George Steiner, who is himself conversant with at least fifteen languages, makes the simple claim that "The polyglot is a freer man" (or woman, I would add).³ Study of languages and of the structures of language as a whole branch of philosophy lie at the heart of liberal education — the learning designed to free us from dangerous parochialism.

I don't know when parochialism and insularity have been more dangerous than they are now. Given the global crises that make transnational cooperation more imperative than ever, any of us who can find our way into alternative cultural points of view need to do so and to modify an entrenched imperial discourse of paternalism and

3. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, reprint edition, 1991), p. 57.

control by modeling authentic multicultural awareness. Many of our ambassadors cannot speak the languages of the countries to which they are sent. This should embarrass us. It should also motivate us to be ambassadors where we can, and to consider carefully what is gained in translation, not only into English, but in the effort it takes to move out of English into another environment of thought and feeling.

One of the exercises I do in poetry courses that has proven exhilarating every time is to hand out and read aloud poems in French, German, and Spanish. Only those who don't know the language in question may participate in discussion of the poem. The object is to consider how much may be understood without specific understanding of the denotative content of the words on the page — how much of our understanding may come from sound values, musicality, rhythm, and structure. Somehow students pick up the gentle melancholy and mood of reverie in these lines from Appolinaire: "Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine,/et nos amours, faut-il qu'il m'en souviennne,/la joie venait toujours après la peine./Vienne la nuit, sonne l'heure/les jours s'en vont, je demeure."⁴ Or the sense of something dwindling toward loss in Rilke's "Herbsttag":

4. Guillaume Appolinaire, "Sous le pont Mirabeau," in *Alcools* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1997).

Wer jetzt kein Haus hat, baut sich keines mehr.
Wer jetzt allein ist, wird es lange bleiben,
Wird wachen, lesen, lange Briefe schreiben,
Und wird in den Alleen hin und her unruhig
wandern,
Wenn die Blätter treiben.⁵

Simply to hear the sounds of another language can be a salutary reminder of the limitations of our own. That we separate events into subjects and objects with a verb in between; that we partition time with both simple and perfect tenses; that we still, transformational grammar notwithstanding, commonly think in terms of eight parts of speech but fudge the categories with participles and gerunds; that we have prepositions like "of" that do the work of several but evade easy definition — all signify peculiar ways in which we have adapted the sensations and impressions that run along our nerves and hum in our brains to an architecture that resembles something grand and Gothic, not altogether practical, but offering commodious space for habitation. Still, there are connections that can be made in Russian that English speakers cannot altogether fathom, and metaphors available in Basque and Finnish and Japanese to which we have no immediate access.

5. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Herbsttag," in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, ed. and trans. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

We do, however, have mediated access to them if we are willing to be taught. Even to learn a few phrases of another language is to receive a gift and open a door of diplomacy and, more importantly, of mutual goodwill. Such efforts are the more urgent as this country becomes increasingly multilingual and as the global community stands in ever more urgent need of mutual understanding. As John McWhorter reminds us, "For a vast proportion of Americans now and surely for a good long time beyond, English will be a language they had to work to learn and never spoke perfectly, or a language that they grew up with in school but did not use in the home with their closest intimates during their formative years."⁶ In Santa Barbara, where I have spent the last twelve years, about 42 percent of the local population speak Spanish as a first language. In Los Angeles County, public school district teachers are trying to accommodate upwards of fifty-five different language groups. This is a problem and a challenge, but also an invigorating opportunity to open up a cultural awareness that has been deeply affected — not to say afflicted — by isolationism and unhealthy delusions of hegemony.

American monolingualism continues a historical attitude of imperialism and privilege that is increasingly

6. John McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing: The Degradation of Language and Music and Why We Should, Like, Care* (New York: Gotham, reprint edition, 2004), p. 234.

dangerous in a world where the deep differences between large populations involved in mutual distrust and fear of large-scale violence threaten all our peace. If we are to be peacemakers, we need to cross language barriers wherever we can — and if we can't personally make that journey, we need to support vigorously efforts to build a critical mass of people who can do so through education, travel, and incentives for adults working in cross-cultural environments. Curiously, such efforts are often quite controversial. That all students in California — a state where well over a third of the population is native Spanish speakers — learn basic Spanish is controversial. Many of them are (and arguably "should" be) bilingual. But the question seems slow to follow: Why shouldn't native English speakers also be bilingual? Insistence on an official language has its rationale, partly economic, since the mere business of posting dual-language road signs, as any resident of Quebec will attest, creates a significant dent in the provincial budget. But single-language policy helps to maintain class segregation and forfeits the richness of intercultural contact to which we give a good deal of lip service.

Engagement in learning foreign languages also serves to make the logic of our own language world and many of our imbedded assumptions more visible. We are brought to terms with our own terms in a new way. And we become aware of an important dimension of vocation, which is to learn ways to bridge the gaps that keep

us separate and suspicious — to “mind the gap,” if you will!

Learning a language also sensitizes us to the various filters through which history and culture come to us. That English is not God’s native language is an important piece of news that a few people haven’t quite registered yet. The church would do well to deliver that news in any number of ways — for instance, by sharing space with congregations who speak other languages, or by introducing hymns and some programming that serve both to remind us of the larger ecclesial body and to acculturate us to the environment in which many of our brothers and sisters worship. Occasional bilingual readings in congregations where some portion of the people come from a different language group are another simple possibility, if only for the sake of raising mutual awareness.

In congregations where English is the only language, regular focus on the differences among English translations of Scripture can offer lively opportunities to reflect on the complex way that the biblical story comes to us — filtered through multiple translations, each of which carries its own theological emphasis, many of which were undertaken and completed (like Tyndale’s) in highly politically charged environments where not only theological issues but issues of state authority were at stake. For those who haven’t yet seen it, I recommend David Daniell’s *The Bible in English* — for a detailed, copious,

but very readable chronicle of that history.⁷ I also can’t recommend highly enough George Steiner’s “Preface to the Hebrew Bible” for its insightful account of the legacy those successive translations constitute.⁸

The history of the Bible in English offers a fascinating study of how highly politicized, fraught with special interest, and riddled with ambiguities is the business of translation, and how consequential. Of course the Bible is a special case, but it offers translation issues that concern us all — even those who don’t routinely read it. The mere fact that there are over seventy-five translations still available in English invites comparison and some reflection on what difference the differences make. Certainly the difference between “Thou shalt not kill” and “Thou shalt not commit murder,” over which the translating team of the NRSV evidently had quite spirited discussion, offers an obvious case in point, pertinent in significant ways to the current political issues that divide us most sharply. Clearly, translating teams dealing with sacred texts bear heavy responsibilities.

But the equally obvious fact remains that the Spirit works in and through every one of those translations — the flawed, the inaccurate, the unpoetic. Chana Bloch, a fine translator and poet who co-translated a beautiful

7. David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

8. George Steiner, “A Preface to the Hebrew Bible,” in *No Passion Spent* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

and lively new translation of the Song of Songs in 1998,⁹ pointed out to me both infelicities and inaccuracies in the King James Version with which I grew up and which I still revere for its dignity and standard-setting English lines. I read those with a different sense of their value now, not exactly diminished but modified. What such comparisons and revaluations continue to teach me is that there is grace in variation, grace in the process, that efforts to find ways faithfully to render the sacred story will be blessed. Each time a translator picks up the ancient texts, God puts God's word and self once again in human hands and submits to our care. That, in itself, is worth a good deal of reflection: while we see through a glass darkly, we receive all that we can know through the filters of human discourse, and yet the one who is living Truth manages to keep offering and maintaining relationship with us. Words are instrumental and essential to the relationship, but malleable, inherently ambiguous, mere images and shadows of divine things.

Does this mean that precision doesn't matter? No. Does it mean that we need not be concerned about flaws and imprecisions in the translations we read, insofar as we are able to recognize them? Certainly not. Indeed, those who have the training to make those discernments offer an invaluable service to the rest of us who never

9. Chana and Ariel Bloch, trans., *The Song of Songs* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

darkened the door of a Hebrew class. Some translations diminish the light of the Word. Some are luminous with original energy. Which translations of Scripture we use as worshiping communities and as individuals make a difference in how we define and develop our relationships with God and each other. To the extent of our literacy, we are responsible for choosing the text that keeps us most mindful of God's mystery and sovereignty, and keeps our hearts most open to the mysterious whisperings of the Spirit as they reach us through these heavily edited, much mediated texts.

Though Scripture is a special case, it can serve to keep us attentive to and aware of how wisdom may come from many places if we are willing to work at the linguistic boundaries where veils need respectfully to be lifted — or where sometimes walls must fall. Cynthia Ozick, a translator and a poet, makes this observation about the work of faithful translation: "When we read a poem in translation, we want to feel we are reading the poem itself. We do not want to feel suspicious or unsure. We want to hand ourselves over to the given-ness of the poem, and to rest in the authority of its being."¹⁰

So, she suggests, it is at those boundaries that something emerges which is neither wholly original nor wholly derivative, but the fruit of a rich partnership that

10. Cynthia Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, reprint edition, 1991), p. 200.

involves both the translator and those who read the work in translation in a certain creative tension. That creative tension invites every reader to enter into the business of translation as a third partner, taking the measure of differences and distances where possible.

We are all called into partnerships of this kind. We are called to be translators not only from one spoken language to another when we are able, but, perhaps more realistically for most of us, from one realm of discourse to another. Imagine a world where social scientists and literary scholars could converse together in mutual comprehension! Those of us in the professions have, I think, a serious obligation to make our work accessible and helpful to those outside them, and to enlarge discussions of professional issues in ways that enable wider reflection.

Think, for instance, of the specialized terms and processes involved in understanding the stem-cell debate. To make its complexities sufficiently understood for the public to be meaningfully involved in policymaking is not only a matter of biological education, but also a matter of attending to the character of the conversation that needs to be had. That is a translation project. Similarly, the vocabulary of economics needed to follow (and perhaps challenge) the activities of the World Bank or the World Trade Organization is basic equipment for serious participation in political process and change. Not that such understanding can be purveyed by means of a vocabulary list, but the most technical terms do have defi-

nitions that are capable of being rendered comprehensibly, and the more dangerous nontechnical terms like "healthy economy" and "privatization" and "growth" demand the ongoing examination due to any highly manipulable or euphemistic terms. So I hope in our various venues we can all bring our attention faithfully to the business of finding ways to define and articulate the concepts and processes that matter to us all. I hope we honor the simple question "What does that mean?" whenever it comes up, and encourage everyone in our communities of work and worship to ask it early and often.

Having urged accessibility, let me speak from the other side of my mouth for just a moment about the value of formality in speech. The beauty of a good translation of the Bible or of Tolstoy or of Rilke is indisputably a gift to the reader. So also it is a gift, rather against the American grain, to maintain — or perhaps at this stage, reintroduce — a respect for formal language. It might sound elitist to suggest such a thing, though John McWhorter, who fully affirms the value of "black English" and other forms of nonstandard speech that arise authentically from the needs and invention of living communities responding to their own expressive needs, maintains that formal or "high" language is by no means restricted to literate societies. "It requires no schoolrooms or textbooks. It is a general feature of being hu-

man."¹¹ To the extent that Americanization involves flattening or homogenizing social discourse to the lowest common denominator of formality, we sustain a loss of distinctions that have helped to maintain respect for elders, the stages of intimacy, the dignity of ritual occasions, and the beauty of oratory of the kind we remember from Martin Luther King Jr. Indeed, African-American churches are one of the places where such respect for the clarity and vitality of oratory is still widely practiced.

Of course, the issue of formal speech is fraught with class issues that demand particular sensitivity of those who work in the church. The historical class-based differences among American denominations are hard to talk about, but the influence of those distinctions lingers in the language that is used about worship and in worship, and has important implications for both evangelism and ecumenism. I cannot undertake here a detailed analysis of the complexities of denominational discourse, though it deserves at least a chapter in its own right. I simply suggest that among the practices that separate us, sometimes painfully, are the particular uses of words in worship. Arguments for and against liturgical formality are not to be trivialized.

The preservation of formal speech — a kind of liturgical sensibility extended into a wider realm — is related to the translation issues I've been citing because to craft a

formal address engages one in so similar a process of rethinking the finding of adequate equivalencies, concentrating on the relative value of alternative ways of putting things. This engagement with words and meanings for the sake of calling one another into a richer, more tolerant, and more inclusive community can be, in itself, a discipline that sharpens the mind and opens the heart.

I remember being amused one time at a student's comment after several successive days devoted to Mary Oliver's poems. He asked, "Does she ever write about anything but death and transformation?" I had to think a minute. Then I realized the answer was "What else is there?" As a dear friend of mine once put it, "There are really only three great themes: freedom, power, and love." Prophecy is about the relationship among those three. Poetry finds ways to articulate that relationship. Translation gives us shared access to the prophecies and the poetry we need. And love is the energy that fuels the whole enterprise of wrestling with words and meanings.

11. McWhorter, *Doing Our Own Thing*, p. 37.