

A HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE AS LITERATURE



DAVID NORTON

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Revised and condensed from David Norton's acclaimed *History of the Bible as Literature*, this book tells the story of English literary attitudes to the Bible. At first jeered at and mocked as English writing, then denigrated as having 'all the disadvantages of an old prose translation', the King James Bible somehow became 'unsurpassed in the entire range of literature'. How so startling a change happened and how it affected the making of modern translations such as the Revised Version and the New English Bible is at the heart of this exploration of a vast range of religious, literary and cultural ideas. Translators, writers such as Donne, Milton, Bunyan and the Romantics, reactionary Bishops and radical students all help to show the changes in religious ideas and in standards of language and literature that created our sense of the most important book in English.

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- 4 Coverdale's 1535 Bible
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- 12 Rheims New Testament, 1582
- 13 Bishops' Bible, 1568 folio
- 14 King James Bible, 1611. Title page
- 15 King James Bible, 1611. A page of genealogies
- 16 King James Bible, 1611. A page of text

Preface

My *History of the Bible as Literature* (1993) ran to two volumes and made large demands on the reader's time (and the purchaser's pocket). So the present book cuts down the material to more manageable proportions. It does so mainly by confining the focus to the English Bible, by reducing the number of examples and by omitting the appendices containing sample passages. What has sometimes felt like self-mutilation will be amply rewarded if the reader finds the result pleasing and interesting.

Abbreviations

| | |
|---------|---|
| AV | Authorised Version or King James Bible, 1611 |
| CW | <i>Collected or Complete Works or Writings</i> |
| DNB | <i>Dictionary of National Biography</i> |
| KJB | King James Bible or Authorised Version, 1611 |
| NEB | The New English Bible, 1970 |
| NT | New Testament |
| OED | <i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> |
| OT | Old Testament |
| PB | The Book of Common Prayer |
| Pollard | <i>The Holy Bible</i> (1911 facsimile of 1611 KJB with introduction and illustrative documents) |
| RV | Revised Version, 1885 |

CHAPTER ONE

Creators of English

THE CHALLENGE TO THE TRANSLATORS

To the early reformers, the Bible was a central part of religion hidden from the people in the occult language of the Church, Latin. For the sake of their souls, the people needed the Bible in their own language. So, in the latter part of the fourteenth century, John Wyclif and his followers, the Lollards, translated the Bible from the Latin Vulgate. Then, from 1525 to 1611 came the great period of English Bible translation. Making a fresh start, William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale translated the whole Bible into English from the original Hebrew and Greek. They, with other lesser-known figures, were the pioneers. A succession of translators developed their work into what became the King James Bible (KJB) of 1611. This Bible slowly became *the* Bible of the English-speaking world; more slowly, it became the Bible acclaimed as literature both for the great original literature which it represented and for the quality of its language.

The translators would have been astonished to find their work acclaimed as literature, and many of them would have been horrified. Wyclif, for instance, condemns priests

who preach tricks and lies [japes and gabblings]; for God's word must always be true if it is properly understood . . . And certainly that priest is to be censured who so freely has the Gospel, and leaves the preaching of it and turns to men's fables . . . And God does not ask for divisions or rhymes of him that should preach, but that he should speak of God's Gospel and words to stir men thereby.¹

Similarly, Tyndale reviles the popular literature of his time while condemning the Catholic Church's refusal to let the people read the Bible:

¹ 'De Officio Pastoralis', ch. 21; F.D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted* (London, 1880), p. 438. Here and in some of the other quotations in this chapter the English is modernised, with original words given in square brackets. Spelling is modernised throughout. 'Divisions' signifies rhetorical divisions in sermons, or possibly verse divisions, that is, metrical lines.

that this threatening and forbidding the lay people to read the Scripture is not for the love of your souls . . . is evident and clearer than the sun; inasmuch as they permit and suffer you to read Robin Hood, and Bevis of Hampton, Hercules, Hector and Troilus, with a thousand histories and fables of love and wantonness, and of ribaldry, as filthy as heart can think, to corrupt the minds of youth withal, clean contrary to the doctrine of Christ and his apostles.²

Fundamentally, literature is a lying alternative to the book of truth.

Whatever we now think of the achievement of the translators must be set against an awareness that the creation of literature was no part of their intention. As the reception of the translators' work is followed, we will see that there was a long period in which the thought that they might have created something worthy of literary admiration would have seemed laughable. The much-repeated modern idea that the KJB is a literary masterpiece represents a reversal of literary opinion as striking as any in the whole history of English literature. One of the prime purposes of this book is to trace and account for this reversal.

Wyclif and his followers and, later, Tyndale and Coverdale were all educated as Catholics and did not necessarily set out to be enemies of the Roman Church, but they found themselves in conflict with it on the inseparable issues of the comprehensibility and the source of truth. In essence the Church was committed to a mystery religion of which it was the infallible guardian and interpreter. In this mystery the Bible was but one source of truth. The Church, directly guided by God, had laboriously developed a theological tradition based on interpretation of the Bible and the wisdom of the Fathers and their successors. The Bible alone was not enough – it was too difficult, too easily misunderstood. The Church, with the Bible and so much more, was the source of truth; moreover, the preservation of its secrets in an occult language to which it alone had access confirmed its power.

Naively, the translators might not see their work as challenging the established theology, but to give the people a basis on which to come at their own sense of the truth was to challenge the Church's power and inevitably to split Christendom. That the Church resisted this was not just a case of an institution protecting its power. Truth, power and the possession of Latin seemed inseparable. If the Church had spent centuries building up an inspired knowledge of the truth, with all the coherence that such knowledge must have, the poor uneducated individual, struggling to teach himself from the Bible alone, could not possibly come

² *The Obedience of a Christian Man; Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 161.

to know the truth as the Church knew it. For common men Christianity must remain a mystery religion: the salvation of their souls was at issue.

Forces of opposition, worldly and spiritual, gathered round the act of translation. The Church had grown ignorant, corrupt, hungry for power and money. Truth had to be rediscovered to reform or break its power and to bring about the same issue, salvation. If the Church was no longer credible as the voice of God, there was one possible and one sure place to find it, the inspired heart of the individual, and the Bible. Older translators such as Jerome had worked within the Church, facing scholarly and linguistic challenges only, but now language and the possession of the Bible were a major religious battlefield and the translators were in the front line, facing the enormous challenge of rediscovering the truth and creating a new church. The religious responsibility of translating had never been higher.

For the Church, translation and heresy went hand in hand, but the early heretics were still sons of the Church and could not, even if Tyndale wished to, rid themselves of the belief that the Bible was difficult. They had learnt that there were levels of meaning beyond the literal, they had learnt too that every detail of the text was to be pressed for its sacred meaning. This might all seem a heritage of moribund pedantry but it could not be dismissed. The words they chose would not be the whole truth and might perhaps be no more than the beginnings of truth, but they would certainly be examined minutely: if the scholarly did not dismiss them out of hand, they would examine them for their fidelity to the detail of the text (that is, the Vulgate), and if the unscholarly were to use them as the translators wished, it would be with an equal, though sympathetic, attention. Further, the people Tyndale and Coverdale worked for would have the translation alone as the key to truth: such people could not use it as a way to the genuinely sacred text, Latin, Greek or Hebrew, nor could they use it side by side with other translations as an approximation to the truth; they could not even use it with a gloss, since vernacular commentary on the text had yet to be created. The translation had to be, as nearly as possible, perfect in itself.

The challenge to attain accuracy was, from these points of view, enormous. The translators had available to them no sophisticated theory of how accuracy might be achieved, nor did they spend much time developing such a theory. The simple answer was to be, in the first place, literal. Consequent on these overwhelming pressures and this simple answer were other challenges, the first being to make the translation comprehensible to the people.

Roughly, there are four levels of language available to translators, the literal (wherein the vocabulary, idiom and structure of the original language dominate the new language), the common, the literary and the ecclesiastical. All four can be subdivided and each can merge into the other. Ecclesiastical English had yet to be created, and English, in spite of the achievements we now recognise in the late medieval period, and even in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean times of the KJB translators, had no prestige as a literary language. Given the early translators' hostility to the literary, it is hardly likely they would have used such a register even if it had had some prestige.

Thus the only kind of English acceptable as a first move beyond the literal was common English, and this fitted Tyndale's ideal of making the Bible, at its verbal level, comprehensible to the people. But the common language presents its own challenges. Beyond the fact that it shades into a variety of dialects and may have no established standard, there is the question of its expressive adequacy. When in doubt, older translators had not scrupled to borrow from the original languages, but if the English translators were to do the equivalent and borrow from the Vulgate, they would not only be departing from the common language but also retaining the language of the Roman Church. The linguistic issue was again clouded by the battle of the Reformation. Further, there is the complex matter of prestige. Unless special circumstances such as a reaction against excesses in literary language exist to give prestige to the common language, it is the lowest form of the language. On the other hand the Bible was the highest of books, and there is, usually, a desire to have the prestige of the language match that of the book, that is, a desire to have the feeling evoked by the language match the divine heights of the meaning. Literal translation, with its mysterious dislocations of language and novelties of vocabulary, may perhaps produce some feeling of awe, but a common language version, lacking any such strangeness, demeans. In moving beyond the literal, the early translators had little choice but to abase the Scriptures; if there was a challenge to preserve the prestige of the Bible, it was reserved for their successors.

The early Reformation especially was a time for heroes – heroes on both sides, Sir Thomas More as much as Tyndale. Persecution was inevitable, the martyr's bitter crown likely. Beyond the enormous challenge to definition and accuracy, beyond the challenge to common clarity, there were the challenges of simply finding the courage to work, and then of finding ways of staying alive to prosecute the work and, somehow, to publish it. There were the difficulties of textual scholarship,

of discovering the true original texts, of learning Greek and Hebrew with little or no aid from the scholarship of others, there was the sheer size of the undertaking – and so one could go on. The modern scholar, safely salaried in a university, free to pursue his studies with ready access to an enormous accumulated community of learning, can only stand in awe that the work was achieved at all, and he must guess that the early translators must have possessed a certain simplicity not to be daunted into silence by the weight of the task and the pressures of the time. That simplicity, perhaps, mitigated the challenges sketched here: they had to shut their eyes, deafen their ears and work as best they could. Hasty, instinctive answers to enormous problems must often have had to suffice. In short, the reality of getting the work done, the greatest challenge of all, must have rendered manageable all the other challenges.

The later translators, from William Whittingham and his colleagues at Geneva to the scholars assembled under the auspices of King James, were all, more or less, revisers rather than pioneers. Their work was not attended by the same perilous, solitary urgency that had been Tyndale and Coverdale's lot, and the changing nature of their task may readily be imagined. It will be of central interest to see if they believed themselves able to go beyond questions of scholarly accuracy and theological definition to tackle as artists the question of the English of the Bible.

LITERAL TRANSLATION: ROLLE'S PSALTER AND THE WYCLIF BIBLE

The Bible was translated into the English vernaculars in several ways before the time of Wyclif, including verse paraphrases of parts of the Bible such as the poems associated with the seventh-century monk Caedmon, but the main line of English translations starts with the literal, as exemplified by the Psalter of the hermit of Hampole, Richard Rolle (d. 1349). Rolle regarded the Latin Psalms as the 'perfection of divine writing',³ and clearly loved them as spiritual teaching, perhaps also as literature. In spite of this, in spite also of their obvious poetic aspects, he made no effort to produce a literary translation. Rather, his work is a guide, first to the meaning of the Latin, second, through a commentary, to the meaning of the Psalms. It is not an English equivalent of the Latin, but a literal crib accompanied by a commentary. He describes his intentions thus:

³ Hope Emily Allen, ed., *English Writings of Richard Rolle* (Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 6.

In this work I seek no strange/strong⁴ English, but lightest and commonest and such that is most like unto the Latin, so that they that know not Latin, by the English may come to many Latin words. In the translation I follow the letter as much as I may, and where I find no exact English equivalent, I follow the gist of the text, so that they that shall read it, they need not fear going wrong. (*English Writings*, p. 7)

The first two verses of Psalm 23 show just how closely he ‘followed the letter’:

Dominus regit me et nihil mihi deerit: in loco pascuae ibi me collocavit. Lord governs me and nothing shall me want: in stead of pasture there he me set.

Super aquam refectionis educavit me: animam meam convertit. On the water of reheting [refreshment] forth he me brought: my soul he turned.⁵

The commentary, which follows each verse, makes up the bulk of the work.

Thus the only real precedent for the translators of the Wyclif Bible, a precedent approved by the Church, was a literal interlinear guide to the Latin. Rolle was treating a limited part of the Bible in a limited way, opening the literal meaning of the words to his audience but not returning the reading of the Psalms to a literal level. The presence of the gloss, which was largely a translation of earlier, orthodox works, ensured this. Rather than presenting an English Psalter to the people, he was presenting them with the Latin Psalter as understood by the Church. Further, it was not the largely illiterate masses to whom Rolle was presenting this work, but a small number of literate people who could afford the substantial cost of a manuscript or were in a position to copy it for themselves. Nor, given the same factors of general illiteracy, and the cost and difficulty of producing manuscripts, could the Wyclif Bible be a work for the masses, no matter how much they themselves might want it.

The precise history of the Wyclif Bible is not known. It is a convenient but inaccurate misnomer to speak of ‘the Wyclif Bible’, both because John Wyclif himself (c. 1330–80) probably only had a minor hand in the work itself and because there are two distinct translations involved. ‘The Wyclif Bible’, then, refers to an effort at translation lasting perhaps as long as twenty years from some time in the 1370s. This effort was made by a group of scholars of whom Wyclif was the leading figure if not the chief executant. The two versions of the Wyclif Bible, early and late, represent logical stages in the development of a vernacular Bible.

⁴ The original has ‘strange’; it may have either of these meanings.

⁵ *The Psalter or Psalms of David*, ed. H.R. Bramley (Oxford, 1844), p. 83.

There is no firm evidence of literary awareness in the making of the Wyclif Bible. This is what one would expect both from the rigid distinction the Lollards made between literature and religion, that is, between lies and Truth, and from their situation as the first English translators of the whole Bible. The Wyclif translators began with something very like Rolle's work, an extremely literal version that was primarily a guide to the Latin. Then, in the late version, they moved towards a more readable English rendering, one more obviously capable of standing by itself without reference back to the Latin. The difference between the two stages is visible in the opening verses of Psalm 23. In the early version they read, 'the lord governeth me, and no thing to me shall lack; in the place of leswe [pasture] where he me full set. Over water of fulfilling he nursed me; my soul he converted'.⁶ Like Rolle's version, this is highly literal, dependent on the Latin for word order and some of its vocabulary. Only the absence of the Latin prevents it from being an interlinear gloss. The late version shows revision of vocabulary though it remains heavily dependent on the Latin; more significantly, there is a cautious movement towards a natural English word order: 'the Lord governeth me, and no thing shall fail to me; in the place of pasture there he hath set me. He nursed me on the water of refreshing; he converted my soul'. In spite of the changes, this is still literal.

The late version has a prologue which, in its fifteenth chapter, discusses problems involved in the making of an English translation and pays particular attention to grammatical equivalence.⁷ It begins by arguing the need for vernacular Scriptures and alleges that, 'although covetous clerks . . . despise and stop holy writ as much as they can, yet the common people cry after holy writ to know [kunne] it and keep it with great cost and peril of their life' (*Wycliffite Writings*, p. 67). Thus a desire for the Bible among an educated laity is seen as a desire to understand the basis of the Christian life.

The author describes the purpose of the translation as 'with common charity to save all men in our realm whom God will have saved', and goes on to describe the methods by which the work sought to produce accurate knowledge. Bibles, commentaries and glosses were collected and collated in order to get the best Latin text possible, the text was studied anew, and the older grammarians and divines were consulted on difficult words and sentences to see 'how they might best be understood and

⁶ Quotations from the Wyclif Bible are taken from the Forshall and Madden edition. The Wyclif Bible numbers this Psalm as 22.

⁷ Chapter 15 of the prologue is given in Hudson, *Wycliffite Writings*, pp. 67–72.

translated'. Finally, he tried 'to translate as clearly as he could the meaning, and to have many good and knowledgable [kunnyng] fellows at the correcting of the translation'. Some details of the principles of translation are given: 'the best translating is, out of Latin into English, to translate after the meaning and not only after the words' (p. 68). This closely relates to the difference between the early and the late versions. Hudson comments that 'after the words'

has here a specialised sense: the invariable translation of one Latin word by one English word, neither more nor less, and the adherence in the English version to the exact word order of the Latin original. The debate is not, as a modern critic might suppose, between a close and a free rendering, but between a transposition of Latin into English and a close translation into English word order and vocabulary. (*Wycliffite Writings*, pp. 174–5)

The result of this 'best translating', according to the prologue, is 'that the meaning is as open or opener in English as in Latin, and go not far from the letter; and if the letter may not be followed in the translating, let the meaning ever be whole and open, for the words ought to serve the intention and meaning, or else the words are superfluous or false' (p. 68). The principle that the translation should be as clear as or clearer than the original is at odds with some ideas of faithful translation, for it involves a kind of correction of the original. Nevertheless, the Protestants, or proto-Protestants, preferred to emphasise the comprehensibility of the text and to play down ambiguity and difficulty.

The author's main point, however, is that, providing a truthful and clear rendering of the meaning is not damaged, literal translation is best. Where literalism may damage meaning it may be dispensed with. He develops this by observing that many changes of grammatical constructions are needed for clarity, particularly changes of ablative absolutes, participles and relatives. His guiding principle is that these changes 'will in many places make the meaning open, where to English it after the word would be dark and doubtful'. Not only the words but the grammar must be translated. Fidelity is the key, and the result is a movement away from making English conform to Latin and towards natural English. This enforces on the translator care for the quality of his English: we may say that 'good English' is intended. The author defines 'good' as accurate and clear, but the result may be 'good' in a more literary sense, even though he had no such intentions.

Chapter 15 ends the prologue. The previous fourteen chapters are all aimed at helping the reader's understanding of the Bible by summarising its contents and explaining their significance. Comments on the prin-

ciples of translation are, then, a last word after the basis for understanding the Bible has been established. Both the general tone and the non-literary sense of the Bible can be seen in the description of the OT as consisting of three parts, which are called 'moral commandments, judicials, and ceremonials': 'moral commandments teach to hold and praise and cherish virtues, and to flee and reprove vices . . . Judicials teach judgements and punishments for horrible sins . . . Ceremonials teach symbols and sacraments of the old law that symbolised Christ and his death, and the mysteries of the Holy Church in the law of grace' (ch. 2; Forshall and Madden edn, I: 3). In short, the Bible is teaching, teaching and more teaching. Even when the prologue treats books known to be poetic, it is resolutely unliterary. The Song of Songs forces on translators the questions of whether they will allow any literary sense of the text and whether they are prepared to allow the text to speak for itself and therefore possibly be read as secular love poetry. This is what the prologue says:

The Song of Songs teaches men to set all their heart in the love of God and of their neighbours, and to do all their business to bring men to charity and salvation, by good example, and true preaching, and willing suffering of pain and death, if need be . . . and this book is so subtle to understand, that Jews ordained that no man should study it unless he were of 30 years and had able mind to understand the spiritual secrets of this book; for some of the book seems to sinful men to speak of unclean love of lechery, where it tells his spiritual love and great secrets of Christ and of his Church. (Ch. 11; I: 40, 41)

The prologue, then, is explicitly afraid of any literal, worldly reading of the text, and the insistence on religious reading is carried over into the presentation of the text. The Early Version ensures spiritual and allegorical understanding by interpolating speakers. The beginning of the Song reads:

The Church, of the coming of Christ, speaketh, saying, Kiss he me with the kiss of his mouth. The voice of the Father. For better are thy teats than wine, smelling with best ointments.

The Late Version follows a different route to the same end. Omitting the voice directions, it substitutes lengthy notes. Typical is the gloss on 'thy teats':

that is, the fullness of God's mercy is sweeter to man's soul, than wine most savoury among bodily things is sweet to the taste. In Hebrew it is, *for thy loves are better than wine, etc.*; that is, the love of God is more savoury to a devout soul than any bodily thing to bodily taste.

In these ways the translators make every effort to impose a spiritual reading on the text, and clearly intend that the text should be studied minutely rather than flow as an open piece of literature.

The intentions and implications of the Wyclif Bible are resolutely theological. If, from the perspective of several centuries, a modern critic can see literary value in the relative Englishness and clarity of the Late Version, that is a perspective that has nothing to do either with the translators' intentions or the Lollard readers' attitude to the text.

WILLIAM TYNDALE

Introduction

William Tyndale (?1494–1536) rightly believed himself to be a pioneer. He wrote of his work, 'I had no man to counterfeit [imitate], neither was helped with English of any that had interpreted the same or such like thing in the Scripture beforetime' (1526 NT, p. 15). The Wyclif Bible had been largely suppressed so that he was working almost without English precedent to open the Bible anew to the people. He had to invent his own appropriate English. No subsequent English translators, not even his immediate successor, Myles Coverdale, ever again found themselves in this situation. Tyndale's English became the model for biblical English and he is indeed the father of English biblical translation. From a larger perspective, Sir Thomas More's jibe at the deficiencies of his English vocabulary, that they were such that 'all England list now to go to school with Tyndale to learn English' (*Works*, VIII: 187), has turned out true: more of our English is ultimately learnt from Tyndale than from any other writer of English prose, and many erstwhile illiterates did indeed 'go to school with Tyndale' and his successors.

One such illiterate was William Maldon. His story not only shows the connection between Tyndale's work and reading but movingly illustrates the internecine strength of the conflict over the vernacular Bible. He relates that when he was a young man in the reign of Henry VIII

divers poor men in the town of Chelmsford in the county of Essex where my father dwelt and I born and with him brought up, the said poor men bought the New Testament of Jesus Christ and on Sundays did sit reading in lower end of church, and many would flock about them to hear their reading, then I came among the said readers to hear them reading of that glad and sweet tidings of the gospel, then my father seeing this that I listened unto them every Sunday, then came he and sought me among them, and brought me away from the

hearing of them, and would have me to say the Latin matins with him, the which grieved me very much, and thus did fetch me away divers times, then I see I could not be in rest, then thought I, I will learn to read English, and then I will have the New Testament and read thereon myself, and then had I learned of an English primer as far as patris sapientia and then on Sundays I plied my English primer, the Maytide following I and my father's apprentice, Thomas Jeffary laid our money together, and bought the New Testament in English, and hid it in our bedstraw and so exercised it at convenient times. (Pollard, p. 115)

As a consequence of this reading he argued with his mother about worshipping graven images and was beaten by his father. Believing that he was beaten for Christ's sake, he did not weep. This so enraged his father, who thought him past grace, that he attempted to hang him; William was only rescued by the intervention of his mother and his brother. He concludes, 'I think six days after my neck grieved me with the pulling of the halter'.

Tyndale translated more than half the Bible before he was martyred, the NT, the OT to the end of 2 Chronicles, and Jonah.⁸ This work put his stamp – his far more than anyone else's – on the language we now know from the KJB. For a long time his achievement went unremarked, and indeed could hardly have been expected to receive much recognition until after its familiar descendant, the language of the KJB, had achieved a solid reputation for excellence. Now few who have read in his translations or controversial works would dissent from C.S. Lewis's judgement that he was 'the best prose writer of his age' ('Literary impact', p. 34).

'His influence,' writes Brooke Foss Westcott, 'decided that our Bible should be popular and not literary, speaking in a simple dialect, and that so by its simplicity it should be endowed with permanence. He felt by a happy instinct the potential affinity between Hebrew and English idioms, and enriched our language and thought for ever with the characteristics of the Semitic mind'.⁹ 'Literary' is used here to describe consciously fine writing: thereby the paradox of Tyndale's achievement is well recorded, for it was not literary in that sense and yet it was 'endowed with permanence' and has 'enriched our language and thought'. To be so influential is an outstanding literary achievement, but it does not necessarily follow that Tyndale *deliberately* set out to create English of

⁸ His version of Joshua to 2 Chronicles appeared in the Matthew Bible, 1537. Coverdale's complete Bible had appeared two years earlier, so in these books the two chief pioneers of English Bible translation each independently produced versions.

⁹ *A General View of the History of the English Bible*, 3rd ed., rev. William Aldis Wright (London: Macmillan, 1905), p. 158.

literary quality. The present perception of his achievement, so well demonstrated in David Daniell's *Biography*, has to be set aside for the time being in order to see just what real evidence there is both of his intentions and of his sense of the Bible as literature.

This is not to deny the value of literary appreciation of his translation, but to recognise that a writer may, in spite of himself, achieve something later acclaimed as literature. It is also to restore to something like equivalent value earlier opinions of Tyndale. These different perceptions may well have had as much value in their time as we now feel the modern literary appreciation has. The present study is not a study of achievement but of what people thought they were trying to achieve and of the perception of achievement.

Love for 'the sweet pith within'

To turn to Tyndale's own writings on the Bible and on Bible translation is to see at once that he was a scholar who loved the Bible, and to be confronted with the fact that the language the early English translators use to describe the Bible appears to be full of literary implications. The appearance is usually false. Thomas Bilney (c. 1495–1531), a contemporary of Tyndale's, also a Cambridge man and a martyr, has left an account of his conversion and responses to the Bible which shows the kind of distinction which has so often to be made. His initial response was to the language (this time the language was Erasmus's Latin of 1516): 'but at last I heard speak of Jesus, even then when the New Testament was first set forth by Erasmus; which when I understood to be eloquently done by him, being allured rather by the Latin than by the word of God (for at that time I knew not what it meant), I bought it'. Bilney's original desire to read the Bible, then, was literary: he wished to read it for its style. Literary pleasure was enough so long as he did not know the real meaning of the word of God, but when that real meaning reached him a new pleasure took over: it is described in the same kind of language, but it is clearly not a literary pleasure. Rather, it is a delight in the meaning:

and at the first reading (as I well remember) I chanced upon this sentence of St Paul (O most sweet and comfortable sentence to my soul!) in 1 Tim. 1, 'it is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be embraced, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief and principal.' This one sentence, through God's instruction and inward working, which I did not then perceive, did so exhilarate my heart, being before wounded with the guilt of my

sins, and being almost in despair, that even immediately I seemed unto myself inwardly to feel a marvellous comfort and quietness, insomuch that 'my bruised bones leaped for joy.'

After this the Scripture began to be more pleasant unto me than the honey or the honey-comb. (Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, IV: 635)

The imagery is from the Psalms: 'my bruised bones leaped for joy' is a version of Ps. 51: 8, describing the Psalmist's response to hearing the 'joy and gladness' of God's truth; 'more pleasant unto me than the honey or the honey-comb' is part of the Psalmist's description of 'the statutes of the LORD' (Ps. 19: 10). Traced to their source, the images are not of literary love but of a love for God's truth. Bilney goes on to write that he 'began to taste and savour of this heavenly lesson'. Pleasure in the Scriptures, then, naturally described in terms that seem now to imply literary pleasure, can readily exist as something distinct and much superior, a pleasure in their content or Truth.

Tyndale calls this the pith of the Scriptures, and his love is for the pith. If an identifiable literary love is also present, then it must be searched out with care to avoid confusion with this primary religious love. Of Tyndale's many statements of the true nature of Scripture, the opening of his 'Prologue showing the use of the Scripture' prefixed to Genesis (1530) is the most useful, especially as it anticipates the resounding question in the preface to the KJB, 'is the kingdom of God become words or syllables?' (see below, p. 68):

Though a man had a precious jewel and a rich, yet if he wist not the value thereof nor wherefore it served, he were neither the better nor richer of a straw. Even so though we read the Scripture and babble of it never so much, yet if we know not the use of it, and wherefore it was given, and what is therein to be sought, it profiteth us nothing at all. It is not enough therefore to read and talk of it only, but we must also desire God day and night instantly to open our eyes, and to make us understand and feel wherefore the Scripture was given, that we may apply the medicine of the Scripture, every man to his own sores, unless that we intend to be idle disputers, and brawlers about vain words, ever gnawing upon the bitter bark without and never attaining unto the sweet pith within, and persecuting one another for defending of lewd imaginations and fantasies of our own invention.¹⁰

¹⁰ Tyndale's *OT*, ed. Daniell, p. 7. Though such comment belongs to a different kind of study from the present, this is strong writing, showing Tyndale at his argumentative best. More, Tyndale's arch-critic, recognised a similar strength in another passage, commenting that 'these words walk lo very goodly by the hearer's ear, and they make a man amazed in a manner and somewhat to study and muse' (VIII: 725). This, referring to a passage from Tyndale's *Answer*, p. 49, is the only early example of praise of Tyndale as a writer.

Aptly incorporated in this is an allusion to Paul on the necessity of what we know as 'charity' but which Tyndale, to the disgust of More, translated 'love': 'and though I bestowed all my goods to feed the poor, and though I gave my body even that I burned, and yet had no love, it profiteth me nothing' (1 Cor. 13: 3; Tyndale, 1534). Love is the heart of Tyndale's idea of the Scriptures. They are a precious jewel to those who love them, that is, those who have been given, like Bilney, the gift of understanding and feeling by God. Scripture demands an inner response expressible in the same terms used for literary response, but it is 'the sweet pith within', not 'the bitter bark without' – the divine message, not the words – which is to be felt and loved.

There are two principal aspects to Tyndale's emphasis on the meaning of the Scriptures, feeling and study. He gives definitive priority to feeling, writing repeatedly of the essential purity and brightness of the Scriptures and of how this can only be perceived by those who read or hear them with the true spirit and therefore feel their meaning. This is the simple belief that mitigates the challenges of translation. In his own words, 'if our hearts were taught the appointment made between God and us in Christ's blood when we were baptized, we had the key to open the Scripture and light to see and perceive the true meaning of it, and the Scripture should be easy to understand'.¹¹

If this baptismal precondition is met in the heart, then study is also appropriate, but, just as the feeling is not a literary feeling, so too the study is not literary, and is indeed explicitly opposed to the kind of attention popular literature receives. First he insists that Scripture has 'one simple literal sense' (OT, p. 4), a sense which is nevertheless spiritual, for 'God is a spirit, and all his words are spiritual' (DT, p. 309). This immediately distinguishes Scripture from literature, for literature is carnal (see above, p. 2), as are readings of the Bible that lack the baptismal feeling. He repeatedly encourages the true reader to 'cleave unto the text and plain story and endeavour thyself to search out the meaning of all that is described therein and the true sense of all manner of speakings of the Scripture' (OT, p. 84). Such searching out pays particular attention to what he calls 'the process, order and meaning of the text'. 'Process' means 'argument' or the larger context of a passage, 'order' the immediate context. He is thus insistent on contextual reading and believes firmly that the light places will illuminate the dark. The need for such careful contextual reading as the key to religious truth is, he claims, his

¹¹ *Expositions*, p. 141 (hereafter *Ex*). See also pp. 5–8, 35, 139, 142, and *Doctrinal Treatises* (hereafter *DT*), pp. 313, 343, 417, 471.

prime motive for translation. After objecting to the Church's traditional methods of exposition, he writes:

Which thing only moved me to translate the New Testament. Because I had perceived by experience how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order and meaning of the text: for else whatsoever truth is taught them, these enemies of all truth quench it again. (OT, p. 4)

The end result of this love and careful reading of the Scriptures is learning and comfort, or the application of medicine to the soul. He sums up his sense of the Scriptures and their effect thus:

All the Scripture is either the promises and testament of God in Christ, and stories pertaining thereunto, to strength thy faith; either the law, and stories pertaining thereto, to fear thee from evil doing. There is no story nor gest, seem it never so simple or so vile unto the world, but that thou shalt find therein spirit and life and edifying in the literal sense: for it is God's Scripture, written for thy learning and comfort. (DT, p. 310)

This enforces a sense of religious purpose: nothing in it would have suggested literary quality to Tyndale's contemporaries. Nevertheless, some literary sense of the Bible may be inferred. It seems that 'the world' denigrated some Bible stories as simple and vile, and he is trying to reform these opinions. Such a reformation could have a literary aspect in addition to the theological purpose, but only a tantalizing glimpse of this possibility emerges, for nowhere does Tyndale develop the idea in a recognisably literary way.

Tyndale's emphasis on reading the Scriptures with the proper feeling for them could have led him to present the text alone. There is some suggestion in his earlier writing that he believed that the meaning of the Bible was open enough for the reader with the right spirit 'that if thou wilt go in and read, thou canst not but understand' (p. 27). This is part of the same feeling that led to the Lollards' desire for their translation to be 'as open or opener' than the Latin (above, p. 8). It is natural that Tyndale should wish for this to be so: it removes the need for the controlling interpretative tradition of the Church at the same time as making the open Bible appear incapable of producing erroneous reading. However, this represents more optimism than real belief. A bare text, by leaving the reader's imagination most room to work, would be most liable to secular literary reading (to say nothing of heresy).¹² In fact,

¹² Roger Edgworth, in a sermon of 1541-2, approves of vernacular Scripture 'if we could get it well and truly translated', but doubts who is fit to read it. Everybody believes he understands the Scripture but 'of the hardness of Scripture (in which our new divines find no hardness) riseth all heresies' (*Sermons* (1557), fols. 31b-3a; as given in Mozley, *Coverdale*, pp. 306-7).

the first complete edition of his NT (1526) was such a bare text, but this reflects circumstances beyond his control, not his deliberate intention: in keeping with his insistence on precise contextual reading, and his real recognition that Scripture did offer dark places, he had intended that this edition, like his later translations and editions, should contain explanatory notes. He believed that 'it is not enough to have translated, though it were the whole Scripture into the vulgar and common tongue, except we also brought again the light to understand it by, and expel that dark cloud which the hypocrites have spread over the face of the Scripture to blind the right sense and true meaning thereof' (*Ex*, p. 144). So his aborted first edition (1525) was substantially annotated.

The emphasis on feeling coupled with the emphasis on the pith could also have led Tyndale to conceive of paraphrase as the appropriate way of presenting the Scriptures to the people, but again the concern with studying the meaning led him to reject this option. His objection to 'idle disputers and brawlers about vain words' (above, p. 13) was to the medieval schoolmen who had, he believed, lost all feel for the meaning of Scripture. He maintained the old belief in the detailed significance of the text, and this prevented him from paraphrasing. So, when considering how his work might be improved, he writes:

If I shall perceive either by myself or by information of other that ought be escaped me, or might more plainly be translated, I will shortly after, cause it to be mended. Howbeit in many places me thinketh it better to put a declaration in the margin than to run too far from the text. And in many places, where the text seemeth at the first chop hard to be understood, yet the circumstances before and after, and often reading together, make it plain enough. (NT, 1534, p. 3)

This is his resolution of the problems of translation and presentation of the Truth: to seek for the greatest plainness, to keep close to the original, to gloss where necessary, and to teach his readers how to read the Bible. He is indeed a lover of the Bible, but not of the Bible as literature, and he is ultimately a scholar.

There are perhaps contradictions evident in these attitudes, especially between his insistence on the luminance of the Scriptures for the pure in heart, and his recognition of the difficulties of the Scriptures, between his objection to glossing and his insistence on glossing, and between his objection to non-literal interpretation and his insistence that the literal meaning is spiritual. No more need be made of this than to suggest that it would not be surprising to find a degree of contradictoriness in another area: the conclusion that *his* idea of the Bible is emphatically

non-literary may have to co-exist with the recognition that he brought some literary awareness, to say nothing of his literary talent as it is now perceived, to his work. Yet, as one turns to search for evidence of this awareness a single fact stands out: all of Tyndale's own writing apart from his translations is theological, and the evidence for the attitudes so far described abounds. Direct statements of literary awareness and considerations are, relatively, as rare as husks in well-milled corn. Beyond the stylistic decision of major literary consequence that he would translate as simply and clearly as possible, a decision that was of course made for religious reasons, literary questions hardly mattered to him.

Luther and Erasmus

If Tyndale needed influence for the decision to be simple and clear, it came from Erasmus and Luther, both of whom he greatly admired, and later, in a minor way, from More, whom he did not admire. Martin Luther (1483–1546), 'this christian Hercules, this heroic cleanser of the Augean stable of apostasy',¹³ is of course the towering figure of the Reformation, and he did as much for the German Bible and language as Tyndale did for the English. He seems to have given more thought to the linguistic responsibilities of a translator than Tyndale, and the result is not only an influence but an important contrast.

First, he loved the Scriptures, especially the Psalms, and this love had in it a degree of explicit literary appreciation not found in English writers of the time.¹⁴ His 'Preface to the Psalms' is full of literary as well as religious praise, and he even writes of them as having 'more eloquence than that possessed by Cicero or the greatest of the orators'.¹⁵ This is enough to suggest a very different temper from the English in German ideas of the Bible as literature. Nevertheless, he conceived of the language of the Bible, particularly the OT Hebrew, as simple and lowly, so unliterary in fact that it is capable of giving offence. His conclusion is, 'simple and lowly are these swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them'.¹⁶

Luther aimed at clarity and accuracy, but he had a further aim, to write good German. In general this aim led him away from literal

¹³ Coleridge, essay II of 'The Landing-Place', *Collected Works* 4, *The Friend*, I: 140. This delightful essay contains a fine imaginative rendering of Luther at work as a translator (I: 140–2).

¹⁴ A number of passages from Luther's *Table Talk* suggest literary appreciation. See especially pp. 1–27 (trans. William Hazlitt, new edition (London, 1875)).

¹⁵ *Reformation Writings of Martin Luther*, trans. Bertram Lee Woolf, 2 vols. (London: Lutterworth, 1956), II: 270. ¹⁶ 1523; 1545 revision; *Selected Writings*, IV: 376.

translation, though occasionally in particularly tricky passages he put literalism ahead of naturalness.¹⁷ His idea of good German is the idiomatic German of 'the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace', for his Bible is for them (IV: 181). In this way his idea of his language fits his idea of the Bible's language, simple and lowly both. Even so, he describes himself as working with the care of an artist like Flaubert or Virgil: 'I have constantly tried,' he writes, 'in translating, to produce a pure and clear German, and it has often happened that for two or three or four weeks we have searched and inquired for a single word and sometimes not found it even then' (IV: 180). This language is to be both clear and vigorous, and he takes an artist's pride in his enemy Emser's admission that his 'German is sweet and good' (IV: 176). Lastly, and very importantly, he sees himself as teaching Germans their own language: he was *deliberately* doing what More had sarcastically but rightly suggested Tyndale was doing.

These ideas are similar to Erasmus's ideas of the Bible language and of vernacular translation, which is hardly surprising since Luther's NT depended on Erasmus's work. In *Enchiridion Militis Christiani*, a work that Tyndale translated, Erasmus describes the language of the Bible as humble. It is imaged as manna, and part of Erasmus's interpretation of it as manna is this: 'in that it is small or little in quantity is signified the humility, lowliness or homeliness of the style, under rude words including great mystery'.¹⁸ He also sees the Scripture as 'somewhat hard and some deal rough and sharp' (pp. 44–5), and later writes that 'the wisdom of God stutthereth and lispeth as it were a diligent mother, fashioneth her words according to our infancy and feebleness . . . She stoopeth down and boweth herself to thy humility and lowness' (p. 50).

Erasmus returned to this idea in his *Paraclesis* which prefaces his 1516 edition of his Greek and Latin NT. It adds one important element to his sense of the nature of the Bible by beginning with a desire for eloquence. This eloquence is to be 'far different than Cicero's' and 'certainly much more efficacious, if less ornate';¹⁹ it is to be modelled on the Bible, and Erasmus believes that the Bible, for all its lowness, is the most moving of writing. If he cannot achieve the eloquence he desires, yet the biblical model will be sufficient:

¹⁷ 'On translating: an open letter', *Selected Writings*, IV: 186. The remaining points are all from this letter.

¹⁸ Anne M. O'Donnell, ed., *Enchiridion Militis Christiani. An English Version* (Oxford University Press for EETS, 1981), p. 44.

¹⁹ Erasmus, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper, 1965), p. 93.

if there were any power of song which truly could inspire . . . I would desire that it be at hand for me so that I might convince all of the most wholesome truth of all. However, it is more desirable that Christ Himself, whose business we are about, so guide the strings of our lyre that this song might deeply affect and move the minds of all . . . What we desire is that nothing may stand forth with greater certainty than the truth itself, whose expression is the more powerful the simpler it is. (p. 94)

This, because it takes biblical eloquence as secondbest, is a backhanded acclamation of simplicity as eloquence, especially when set against Luther, but it is significant nonetheless. Whether this or Luther's attitude and example gave Tyndale a sense of literary possibilities in simplicity is impossible to tell, but in Erasmus it precedes his wish that there should be vernacular translations of the Scriptures so that 'even the lowliest woman' may read them and so that the uneducated may enjoy them: 'would that . . . the farmer sing some portion of them at the plough, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveller lighten the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind' (p. 97). Literary and religious enjoyment seem inseparable here, and this passage rang in Tyndale's mind as he formed his resolution to translate the Bible. Though he never writes of the lowness of the Bible, and never advocates literary enjoyment, Foxe reports him as saying to a clerical opponent in the heat of an argument, 'if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost'.²⁰ The echo is obvious, but the deletion, even in a spontaneous remark, of suggestions of pleasure, and the use of 'know' in all probability show the final distance between the two men. If the whole context of Erasmus and Luther's ideas of eloquence and the Bible lived on in Tyndale's mind, then it was as an undercurrent to the main tide of his ideas. Nevertheless, these ideas of simple eloquence in the Bible do anticipate the eventual acclamation of Tyndale's English for plough-boys as great English.

Tyndale, Thomas More and English

There is one passage in which Tyndale seems to give real evidence of a conscious literary sense both of his own work and of the originals from which he worked. It needs to be read in the light of a related passage in which he uses what sounds to modern ears an exceedingly interesting

²⁰ As given by Mozley, *Tyndale*, p. 34. This is from Foxe's first edition. Later editions such as the one I have used turn this passage into reported speech (V: 117).

phrase, 'proper English'. In his 'Epistle to the Reader' at the end of his 1526 NT, he reviews ways in which the work might be improved:

In time to come . . . we will give it his full shape: and put out if ought be added superfluously: and add to if ought be overseen through negligence: and will enforce to bring to compendiousness, that which is now translated at the length, and to give light where it is required, and to seek in certain places more proper English, and with a table to expound the words which are not commonly used, and show how the Scripture useth many words, which are otherwise understood of the common people: and to help with a declaration where one tongue taketh not another. And will endeavour ourselves, as it were to see the it better, and to make it more apt for the weak stomachs. (1526 NT, p. 15)

As a whole this repeats the point that Tyndale is concerned with accuracy and clarity. In detail it defines areas of concern, first to avoid amplification or omission, second with accuracy and clarity of vocabulary, third with different characteristics of different languages. 'Proper English', which at first sight suggests English of good quality, in fact means 'accurate' or 'literal' English. It is one aspect of the problem of 'one tongue taking another'. This use of 'proper English' would already have been apparent had Rolle's passage about translation not been modernised, for the phrase that is given as 'I find no exact English equivalent' reads in the original, 'I fynde na propir Inglys' (above, p. 6). The point is clear in what is effectively Tyndale's first draft of this epistle, the prologue to the unique copy of his 1525 NT. There he beseeches

those that are better seen in the tongues than I, and that have higher gifts of grace to interpret the sense of the Scripture and meaning of the spirit than I . . . if they perceive in any places that I have not attained the very sense of the tongue, or meaning of the Scripture, or have not given the right English word, that they put to their hands to amend it. (Daniell, *Biography*, p. 120)

'Proper English' clearly means 'the right English word', and the only considerations here are sense and meaning.

The key passage must be read in the light of this evidence. It was published two years after the epistle in the preface to *The Obedience of a Christian Man*. Tyndale turns bitterly on those who oppose the vernacular Bible:

Saint Jerome also translated the Bible into his mother tongue: why may not we also? They will say it cannot be translated into our tongue, it is so rude. It is not so rude as they are false liars. For the Greek tongue agreeth more with the English than with the Latin. And the properties of the Hebrew tongue agreeth 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 not but to trans-

late it into the English, word for word; when thou must seek a compass in the Latin, and yet shall have much work to translate it well-favouredly, so that it have the same grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding with it in the Latin, and as it hath in the Hebrew. A thousand parts better may it be translated into the English than into the Latin. (*DT*, pp. 148–9)

This is a defence against the prevailing view that English cannot properly express the Latin meaning because it lacks the features of Latin grammar, and because it is an aesthetically inferior language. Most of Tyndale's reply is to the first point: he concedes the grammatical differences between English and Latin, and the consequent difficulties of translation, but argues that Greek to some extent and Hebrew to a huge extent are grammatically and syntactically compatible with English. The result is that one may frequently be literal without violating the natural structure of English.²¹ His principal point is that English is a good instrument for accurate representation of the originals, especially of the Hebrew. Not only is it a good instrument: on these grounds it is a better instrument than Latin.

Do Tyndale's apparently aesthetic terms, 'well-favouredly', and 'grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding', go beyond an idea of linguistic correspondence and deliberately invoke a literary sense? What would once have seemed the obvious answer, that they do, now becomes doubtful. 'Grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding' consists entirely of words that in Tyndale have theological weight. 'Well-favouredly', preceding them, does however give them some aesthetic weight, since he uses 'well-favoured' with connotations of beauty, as in 'Rachel was beautiful and well-favoured' (Gen. 29: 17).

Tyndale does not quite deal with the question of the perceived aesthetic deficiencies of English. Probably he is thinking of translating well-favouredly as translating into good English, that is, English which follows the normal syntax, grammar and vocabulary of English, as far as there is a sense of what is normal. Tyndale does indeed use the phrase 'good English' on one occasion, in response to an aspect of Sir Thomas More's (1478–1535) criticism of his ideas and work, criticism which includes more discussion of the linguistic responsibilities of a translator of the Bible than is to be found in Tyndale. In all probability, More increased Tyndale's awareness of these responsibilities.

More's chief concern is with heretical tendencies in the translation. Among these is the choice of certain words through which, with some

²¹ One other translator from roughly this period takes the same view, Ambrose Ussher, see below, p. 95. All other comments from the period take a contrary view of the two languages.

justification, he sees Tyndale as attacking the teaching and practice of the Church. Some of these choices More attacks not only because they have heretical tendencies but because they are poor English, and this leads him to suggest some linguistic principles of translation in the later of his two works against Tyndale, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532).

In the earlier work, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), More instances some false translations of words, refers to the difficulties of translation and responds to the argument against English. Discussing Tyndale's use of 'seniors' for 'priests', 'congregation' for 'Church' and 'love' for 'charity', he observes that 'these names in our English tongue neither express the thing that he meant by them, and also there appeareth . . . that he had a mischievous mind in the change' (*Works*, VI: 286). In particular he comments of 'senior' that in English it 'signifieth nothing at all, but is a French word used in English more than half in mockage', that it misrepresents the Latin and in fact in English signifies an alderman. His primary point is that Tyndale will use any word rather than call a priest a priest. Tyndale accepted the linguistic point only: 'of a truth *senior* is no very good English, though senior and junior be used in the universities; but there came no better in my mind at that time. Howbeit, I spied my fault since, long ere Mr More told it me, and have mended it in all the works which I since made, and call it *an elder*' (*Answer*, p. 16). This is clear evidence not only of the theological pressures on translation but of Tyndale's care for 'good English', that is appropriate English usage, and of More's role in bringing out this awareness.²²

In *The Confutation* More develops the linguistic point, arguing that 'Tyndale must in his English translation take his English words as they signify in English, rather than as the words signify in the tongue out of which they were taken in to the English' (VIII: 201; see also VIII: 187). Thus in almost playful mood, he writes, 'though I cannot make him by no mean to write true matter, I would have him yet at the least wise write true English' (VIII: 232). He demonstrates his ideas of true English by discussing the appropriate use of certain words, and points of grammar: More has a clear sense of English as a language with its own proprieties. He is ready not only to correct Tyndale's choice of words but also his

²² 'Elder' seems to modern ears an obvious choice and a real improvement, but this is because it has become a part of standard English through Tyndale's use of it. More did not concede that 'elder' was any improvement in Tyndale's English. He jeers that here Tyndale has 'done a great act, now that he hath at last found out "elder"'. He hath of likelihood ridden many mile to find out that. For that word "elder" is ye wot well so strange and so little known that it is more than marvel how that ever he could find it out' (*Confutation*, p. 182).

grammar and his style. Although he recognises the dangers of translation and the difficulties of keeping 'the same sentence whole' (VI: 315), he believes Tyndale too often follows the word order of his originals to the detriment of both sense and English style (VIII: 236). As an example he proposes an alternative translation of John 1: 1, remarking, 'I say not this to show that I think that Tyndale meant any evil by this, nor I impugn not in this point his translation so greatly, but it may be borne: but I say the other is in English better and more clear' (p. 237).

More, like Tyndale, respects English as a language. The Messenger in *A Dialogue* comments that opponents of vernacular translation 'say further that it is hard to translate the Scripture out of one tongue into another, and specially they say into ours. Which they call a tongue vulgar and barbarous' (VI: 333). More answers that those who will translate 'well and faithfully' can do so from Latin to English: 'for as for that our tongue is called barbarous is but a fantasy. For so is as every learned man knoweth every strange language to other. And if they would call it barren of words, there is no doubt but it is plenteous enough to express our minds in any thing whereof one man hath used to speak with another' (VI: 337). He concedes there may be a loss in the translation, a loss either of meaning or of aesthetic quality, but this loss is no more on translation into English than it is into any other language. Most important here is the assumption that the translator will naturally strive to give his work some aesthetic quality:

Now as touching the difficulty which a translator findeth in expressing well and lively the sentence of his author, which is hard always to do so surely but that he shall sometime minish either of the sentence or of the grace that it beareth in the former tongue, that point hath lain in their light [been known to them] that have translated the Scripture already either out of Greek into Latin or out of Hebrew into any of them both. (VI: 337)

Tyndale's work, it is worth noting, does not appear to have been attacked by his contemporaries on the ground that he diminished the literary qualities of the Scriptures. The possibility is there in More's arguments but the issue was not perceived as a real one at that time. A closely related charge was more pressing, though it surfaced only once at this time. Bishop Cuthbert Tunstal, whose patronage Tyndale had sought in 1523, attempted in 1526 to suppress the NT. He writes in his prohibition of Lutheran 'children of iniquity' who 'have craftily translated the New Testament into our English tongue . . . attempting by their wicked and perverse interpretations to profane the majesty of Scripture, which hitherto had remained undefiled, and craftily to abuse the most holy word

of God and the true sense of the same' (Daniell, *Biography*, p. 190). The charge of falsification was to be the major one, but it is interesting that at this early stage the charge of profaning the majesty of the Scriptures comes first. Essentially it is a complaint that the occult power or holy beauty of the Scriptures has been lost.

This is an important issue in translation. The early translators were necessarily concerned with meaning, but words can be magical as well as meaningful, and their magic may be more important than their meaning, especially when that magic is felt to be their religious essence. An anecdote, normally told to illustrate clerical ignorance, well illustrates this. About the time Tyndale was working, 'a certain boorish English priest' was discovered to be mis-reciting in the Mass, 'quod in ore mumpsimus'. When told that the correct word was 'sumpsimus', 'he replied that he didn't want to change his old "mumpsimus" for some new "sumpsimus"'.²³ Whether or not this proves anything about clerical ignorance, it is true to people's attitudes to the familiar, if incomprehended, sound of their religious formulae. The old priest's adherence to 'mumpsimus' was more than mere conservatism: to have changed 'mumpsimus' to 'sumpsimus' would have been, for him, to undermine the accepted magic of his religious devotion without enlightening him in any real way. A literally-understood religious text, one has to say, is a *sine qua non* neither of religious or moral teaching, nor of religious feeling.

To say this is to make a point not about theology but about the psychology of religion. According to one's theological viewpoint, one may argue that the text interpreted through the accumulated wisdom of the religious consensus is essential to religion, in which case the consensus, as represented by the Church, may well be considered to be the most essential factor. Alternatively one may argue that the directly encountered meaning of the text is fundamental. These opposing ideas are not simply a case of Catholic against Protestant ideas, as all Churches, no matter how important personal reading of the Bible is to them, are based on their own religious consensus, and all have their own interpretations of the text.

At the centre of the charge of profaning the Scripture is the distinction between sacred and profane. In this respect 'majesty' is important. Tunstal, writing in Latin, uses it in the literal Latin sense which became the earliest English sense, 'the greatness and glory of God' (*OED* 1b), or 'the incomprehensible greatness of God' (Wilson, *Christian Dictionary*,

²³ Richard Pace, *De Fructu* (1517), p. 80. Ed. and trans. Frank Manley and Richard S. Sylvester (N.Y.: Ungar for the Renaissance Society of America, 1967), p. 103.

1616). The most revealing English use comes in the KJB's rendering of Psalm 29 which calls its reader to 'worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness' (v. 2), and then builds up a description of 'the voice of the Lord', including this: 'the voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty' (v. 4). This could be read as a description of the Bible, since the Bible is the voice of the Lord. 'Majesty', it seems from the parallelism, connotes power: it is part of 'the beauty of holiness' (a phrase the KJB uses several times). It is the divine word which comes closest to the secular idea of literary beauty. Yet it was not, in the time of the translators, a literary or secular word. It belonged with 'faith' and 'truth'.

More's insistence on a translator's responsibility to his own language must have moved Tyndale towards a more conscious awareness of his use of English, and Tyndale's *Answer* shows signs of this. Further signs can be seen in some of the revisions he made for his later editions, many of which can be accounted for on no other grounds than a care for the quality of his English.²⁴ However, this care is essentially for the clarity and naturalness of the language, something that would *now* be recognised as a literary virtue. To take one example, he accepts More's comments on his rendering of John 1: 1, 'in the beginning was that word, and that word was with God and God was that word', that he should have used 'the', not 'that', and that 'God was that word' is not the appropriate word order for English, even though it is the Greek and Latin order. The result is our familiar rendering, 'in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God: and the word was God'.²⁵

Tyndale did not reply to *The Confutation*, but it seems More's comments on his language were made to good effect. Whether Tyndale would again claim that he spied his faults ere More told him them matters little since many of his revisions show the two men at one on questions of language where theology is not at issue. This leaves a picture of Tyndale as a devout scholar who never considered the Bible as a work of literature but who nevertheless took great care with his

²⁴ A real issue here is Tyndale's use of a variety of renderings for single words, but it raises problems which cannot be solved definitively: does variety show a care for style or a sense that English vocabulary is unfixed, or merely the difficulties of consistency? Tyndale did not always provide variety where it might be thought possible and desirable, and, as Hammond points out, 'he did take care to recreate the original's repetitiveness where it had either semantic or stylistic importance' (*The Making of the English Bible*, p. 36). Mozley makes the case for seeing the variation as a deliberate literary device, (*Tyndale*, pp. 101–3), and Daniell frequently refers to the variation as evidence of literary sensibility.

²⁵ Further examples of Tyndale's revisions can be found in Mozley, pp. 287–9, and Daniell, pp. 330–1. The most substantial example of More as a translator of the Bible comes in *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, where he translates and later paraphrases John 6: 26–71 (11: 21–3, 43–5).

English. His care above all was for accuracy in representing the originals, then for clarity (which might sometimes have to be achieved through glossing since he tried to avoid expanding or contracting the original), lastly for fidelity to his sense of the proprieties of English grammar and vocabulary. There is only one explicit suggestion that he considered matters of style beyond the proprieties, his use of 'well-favouredly': any further sense of his bringing aesthetic considerations to his work must be deduced from literary criticism of his translation carried out with due awareness of the context within which he worked.

No one reading what Tyndale says would be led to a literary sense of the Bible, but as soon as one begins to read him (or, to a lesser extent, More) with an eye and an ear to how he expresses himself, it is obvious that, for all the denigration, English of the early sixteenth century could be a very powerful language. What he says and how he says it, a despised yet powerful language – these are teasing contrasts not to be resolved here. At their heart is the conflict between past and present attitudes. Tyndale was a primary creator of our well-favoured language; moreover, the present century is particularly well-disposed to pithy, rhythmic, unpretentious writing. We see him as a master of common English, but his own time saw him differently. At first his language seemed too far removed from the common, then it seemed too common.

JOHN CHEKE AND THE INKHORN

More desired that Tyndale should 'at the least write true English', and Tyndale was aware that he used 'words which are not commonly used' and 'which are otherwise understood of the common people' (above, p. 20). Sir John Cheke (1514–57), first Regius Professor of Greek at Cambridge, addressed the problem of true common English: 'that, indeed, was Cheke's conceit', writes his biographer, Strype, 'that in writing English none but English words should be used, thinking it a dishonour to our mother tongue to be beholden to other nations for their words and phrases to express our minds. Upon this account, Cheke seemed to dislike the English translation of the Bible, because in it were so many foreign words'.²⁶ Consequently, he translated Matthew and the beginning of Mark, avoiding words of Latin origin (and attempting also to reform spelling). This incomplete and rough work was not published until 1843.²⁷ It can hardly have been of influence in its time, but it helps to show both the difficulties of language facing the early translators, and

²⁶ John Strype, *The Life of the Learned John Cheke, Kt* (London, 1705), p. 213.

²⁷ *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, intro. James Goodwin (London and Cambridge, 1843).

the difficulties of comprehension facing those of their readers who lacked Latin and biblical scholarship. Among his choices of words are 'moonied' for 'lunatic', 'tollers' for 'publicans', 'hundreder' for 'centurion', 'bywords' for 'parables', 'orders' for 'traditions', 'freshman' for 'proselyte', and 'crossed' for 'crucified'. For him, rain does not descend but fall: 'and there fell a great shower, and the rivers came down, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, and it fell not for it was ground-wrought on a rock' (p. 40; Matt. 7: 25).

Throughout the century there was a sharp consciousness of the distinction between vocabulary of Anglo-Saxon origin and vocabulary of Latin origin. The significance of Cheke is that he underlines the difficulties there could be at this time even with what seem to be thoroughly ordinary words of Latin origin. Evidence from other comments on the Bible for this point is scarce because of the Protestant need to believe that the Bible was translatable (to say nothing of the wish to believe that it was easy to understand), and because Cheke's is an extreme position. Yet the point, even if treated with scepticism, is not to be dismissed. It is supported by the now familiar words listed as unfamiliar by Gardiner (see below, p. 35), by Martin and his critics (see p. 45), also by Robert Cawdray's (or Cawdrey) *A Table Alphabetical* and by Thomas Wilson's *A Christian Dictionary*. Cawdray's work, published in 1604 but begun much earlier (fol. A2r) was for 'teaching true writing, and understanding of hard usual English words, borrowed from the Hebrew, Greek, Latin or French' (title). 'Hard usual' is the significant collocation. Cawdray thinks of these words as inkhorn terms (fol. A3r), yet almost all of them are now familiar English. As the title goes on it becomes clear that he thinks of this mild inkhornism as a particular difficulty in religious matters: 'whereby [unskilful persons] may the more easily and better understand many hard English words which they shall hear or read in Scriptures, sermons or elsewhere'. A few years later, Wilson writes that

not any, as yet, have set to their hands to interpret in our mother tongue . . . the chief words of our science, which being very hard and darksome, sound in the ears of our weak scholars as Latin or Greek words, as indeed many of them are derived from these languages: and this I have esteemed as no small let to hinder the profiting in knowledge of Holy Scriptures amongst the vulgar: because, when in their reading or hearing Scriptures they meet with such principal words as carry with them the marrow and pith of our holy religion, they stick at them as at an unknown language. (fol. A6r-v)

The English people of the sixteenth century were learning a new English. However simple the language of the Protestant translators may

now seem (archaisms apart), it had much in it that the people had to learn before they could understand and appreciate it.

Cheke's objection to words of Latin origin was soon to manifest itself as one side of the conflicting attitudes to what were generally decried as inkhorn terms. George Pettie, writing in 1586, sums up the situation:

For the barbarousness of our tongue, I must likewise say that it is much the worse for them and some such curious fellows as they are, who if one chance to derive any word from the Latin, which is insolent to their ears (as perchance they will take that phrase to be), they forthwith make a jest at it and term it an inkhorn term. And though for my part I use those words as little as any, yet I know no reason why I should not use them, and I find it a fault in myself that I do not use them: for it is indeed the ready way to enrich our tongue and make it copious, and it is the way which all tongues have taken to enrich themselves . . . Wherefore I marvel how our English tongue hath cracked it credit that it may not borrow of the Latin as well as other tongues: and if it have broken, it is but of late, for it is not unknown to all men how many words we have fetched from thence within these few years, which if they should be all counted inkpot terms, I know not how we should speak any thing without blacking our mouths with ink.²⁸

By the 1580s English had fetched so many terms from Latin that, for educated readers, Cheke's attitude to the English of Tyndale and Coverdale was thoroughly out of date. Initially, then, it seems that the English of the Bible, in spite of Tyndale's desire to be understood by ploughboys, had a real element of the inkhorn in it. But the pace of borrowing from Latin was so great that the vocabulary of the English Bible quickly came to seem part of a tradition of Anglo-Saxon simplicity, in opposition to the fashionable new English that abounded in Latin neologisms. When Gregory Martin in the Rheims NT deliberately introduced a substantial amount of Latin vocabulary, his work was seen as exhibiting the faults of the inkhorn: all sense of the Protestant Bibles tending that way was lost, even though those Bibles continued to present, as Wilson shows, difficulties of vocabulary to the uneducated.

One early-seventeenth-century writer recognized and commented on this situation. William L'Isle contrasts the Saxon versions of the Scriptures with the Rheims-Douai Bible (a text stuffed 'with such fustian, such inkhorn terms'). The Saxon

hath words for Trinity, Unity, Deity and persons thereof; for Co-equal, Co-eternal, Invisible, Incomprehensible . . . for Catholic and all such foreign words as we are now fain to use, because we have forgot better of our own. I speak not

²⁸ *The Civil Conversation of M. Stephen Guazzo* (London, 1586), unfoliated.

to have them recalled into use, now these are well known, sith I use them and the like myself for the same reason, but to give our tongue her due commendations, to show the wilful and purposed obscurity of those other translators, and to stop the base and beggarly course of borrowing when we need not.²⁹

MYLES COVERDALE

The task of completing and revising Tyndale's work fell to Myles Coverdale (1488–1568), a less scholarly but no less devout man. Not only did he produce the first complete English Bible of the Reformation (1535), but his revisions of his work became the Great Bibles of 1539 etc., and he was involved in the making of the Geneva Bible (1560). His Psalter, as revised for the Great Bible, became the Psalter of the Book of Common Prayer and thus until very recently the familiar version for Anglicans.

This familiar Psalter, like the KJB, has aroused much love and is the basis of Coverdale's reputation for literary achievement, though he also contributed significantly to the English of the prophetic books. For Coverdale, like Tyndale, has his reputation. Lewis expresses it with a memorable image in a paragraph that is particularly interesting as it begins with one of the rare recognitions of the argument being put forward here:

It is not, of course, to be supposed that aesthetic considerations were uppermost in Tyndale's mind when he translated Scripture. The matter was much too serious for that; souls were at stake. The same holds for all translators. Coverdale was probably the one whose choice of a rendering came nearest to being determined by taste. His defects as well as his qualities led to this. Of all the translators he was the least scholarly. Among men like Erasmus, Tyndale, Munster, or the Jesuits at Rheims, he shows like a rowing boat among battleships. This gave him a kind of freedom. Unable to judge between rival interpretations, he may often have been guided, half consciously, to select and combine by taste. Fortunately, his taste was admirable. (pp. 34–5)

Coverdale's defect of scholarship was principally that he knew very little Hebrew, and so, where Tyndale had not pioneered, had to work by choosing among and adapting previous versions, notably in Latin and German. Since he was less able to reproduce the precise verbal detail of the originals and was not tied to the Vulgate, he was arguably freer than Tyndale to adopt what he felt to be the best English way of expressing the meaning, but this freedom may be understood in a different way, as

²⁹ *A Saxon Treatise Concerning the Old and New Testament* (London, 1623), fols. e3r, e3v.

a liberty to pursue the true meaning of the Scriptures, which was his only professed concern in translating them. He writes in the dedicatory epistle in his first Bible 'that I have neither wrested nor altered so much as one word for the maintenance of any manner of sect, but have with a clear conscience purely and faithfully translated this out of five sundry interpreters, having only the manifest truth of the Scripture before mine eyes' (*Remains*, p. 11).

This sets the tone for most of his comments on the Bible and translation: his devotion is to the truth; his zeal is for the people to know the truth. His first Bible also contains a prologue, and to read this with the epistle is to get a sense of a more diplomatic Tyndale, ignoring considerations of literary taste and judgement. Possibly his diffidence prevented him voicing such considerations, for he writes, as Luther never would have written, 'as for the commendation of God's Holy Scripture, I would fain magnify it as it is worthy, but I am far insufficient thereto'. However, the continuation of the paragraph suggests that the praise would have had little of the literary in it:

and therefore I thought it better for me to hold my tongue, than with few words to praise or comment it; exhorting thee, most dear reader, so to love it, so to cleave unto it, and so to follow it in thy daily conversation [conduct], that other men, seeing thy good works and the fruits of the Holy Ghost in thee, may praise the Father of heaven and give his word a good report: for to live after the law of God and to lead a virtuous conversation is the greatest praise that thou canst give unto his doctrine. (p. 15)

Most significant is that he calls the Bible not 'Scripture' or 'writing' but 'doctrine'.

The one linguistic matter he gives consideration to here is variety of vocabulary, an issue he links with the use of a variety of sources because he sees both as relating to truth. In effect, he portrays translation as a hit or miss process: more translations will produce more hits, and a range of synonyms will prevent the truth from being limited by single words. He writes:

sure I am that there cometh more knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures by their sundry translations than by all the glosses of our sophistical doctors. For that one interpreteth something obscurely in one place, the same translateth another, or else he himself, more manifestly by a more plain vocable of the same meaning in another place. Be not thou offended therefore, good reader, though one call a scribe that another calleth a lawyer . . . For if thou be not deceived by men's traditions, thou shalt find no more diversity between these terms than between four pence and a groat. And this manner have I used

in my translation, calling it in some place penance that in another place I call repentance, and that not only because the interpreters have done so before me, but that the adversaries of the truth may see how that we abhor not this word penance, as they untruly report of us. (pp. 19–20)

Tyndale considered the matter of varying vocabulary on linguistic grounds, but Coverdale confines himself to the religious motive of ‘knowledge and understanding’. Further, he is mindful of More’s objections to the tendentiousness of Tyndale’s vocabulary, and wants this variety to reflect a spirit of religious compromise with the Roman Catholic Church.³⁰ Ultimately this is an expression of a translator’s diffidence, and it directs the reader, if not exactly away from, certainly beyond the words.

Coverdale’s exhortations on the proper use of the Bible are full of religious earnestness. Like Erasmus, he wants the Bible to be everyone’s constant occupation, but there is no suggestion of singing or humming or lightening the weary way:

Go to now, most dear reader, and sit thee down at the Lord’s feet and read his words, and . . . take them into thine heart, and let thy talking and communication be of them when thou sittest in thine house, or goest by the way, when thou liest down and when thou riseth up . . . in whom [God] if thou put thy trust, and be an unfeigned [sincere] reader or hearer of his word with thy heart, thou shalt find sweetness therein and spy wondrous things to thy understanding, to the avoiding of all seditious sects, to the abhorring of thy old sinful life, and to the establishing of thy godly conversation. (pp. 16–17)

Later in the same vein he writes of bringing children up ‘in the nurture and information of the Lord’ (p. 21). Coverdale has shorn away the obvious literary implications of Erasmus’s ideas even more absolutely than Tyndale did: no one reading the introductory material to his Bible could even suspect the possibility of a rhetorical or worldly pleasure in the Scriptures: sweetness lies in the religious meaning heard by the heart.

In 1538 Coverdale published a version of the NT made from the Vulgate. The prefatory writings to his two editions of this (a third was published in the same year without his concurrence) reflect interestingly his motives in making such a translation and are the only places where he writes about his principles of translation. The translation was designed to counter the charge ‘that we intend to pervert the Scripture and to condemn the common translation in Latin which customably is

³⁰ Coverdale’s practice is less liberal than his prologue. Mozley (*Coverdale*, p. 106) points out that he followed Tyndale closely in the rendering of contentious ecclesiastical words other than ‘penance’, and so did not really compromise with More’s position.

read in the Church; whereas we purpose the clean contrary' (p. 25). It is thus an attempt at reconciliation, seeking to bring the benefits of the vernacular Bible to the orthodox, particularly to those of the clergy who knew little Latin. It is intended, as was Rolle's Psalter, in large part to be a guide to the Latin. Just as Coverdale is not rigorous in his terminology for such things as repentance, so he is not rigorous in his sense of a sole true text of the Bible, and believes that the Holy Ghost is 'the author of his Scripture as well in the Hebrew, Greek, French, Dutch and in English, as in Latin' (p. 26).

This was a parallel Latin-English Bible and Coverdale describes himself as 'very scrupulous to go from the vocable of the text' (p. 29); that is, he sought to be as literal as possible. He recognised limitations to this literalness because of the differing natures of the languages, so he writes of using 'the honest and just liberty of a grammarian' (p. 28), which means respecting, as Luther, More and Tyndale had done, what he calls 'the phrase of our language' (p. 33). His motive is solely the reader's 'better understanding' (p. 28), and for this reason he writes with a 'tempered' pen: 'because I am loath to swerve from the text, I so temper my pen, that, if thou wilt, thou mayest make plain construction of [the Latin] by the English that standeth on the other side. This is done now for thee that art not exactly learned in the Latin tongue and wouldest fain understand it' (p. 28). His care for 'the pure and very original text' (p. 29) of the version he is translating is such that, if he finds it necessary to expand it for the sake of clarity, he puts the expansions in square brackets, so that the text is 'neither wrested nor perverted' (p. 28). Later the same kind of care was taken with the Great Bible, though the intended annotations were not, in the end, printed.³¹

Whether this brief description of his linguistic principles is applicable to his other translations is uncertain: the nature of this NT perhaps demanded a greater literalness than he felt appropriate for them, and the statement that he tempered his pen does suggest that his inclination was to be less literal. Further, this was his one biblical translation where the conditions which Lewis described do not pertain and he was controlled by a single text in a language he knew well.

This NT, then, gives some suggestion of a linguistic freedom in his other Bibles. If it is set beside his one deliberate attempt at a literary translation of some parts of the Bible, then it appears that he would have translated very differently in all his Bibles had he untempered his pen.

³¹ This care is described in a letter by Coverdale and others to Cromwell in 1538 (*Writings*, pp. 493-4).

This attempt was his *Ghostly Psalms and Spiritual Songs*, made sometime prior to 1539 when it appears in a list of proscribed books. It is an attempt to redirect secular literary pleasure to what Coverdale regards as the only proper object of pleasure, religion. He quotes on the title page Jas. 5: 13, 'if any of you be merry, let him sing Psalms'. He would have it 'that when we are merry, our pastime and pleasure, our joy, mirth and gladness is all of [God]' (pp. 537–8). In his prefatory address he echoes Erasmus:

would God that our minstrels had none other thing to play upon, neither our carters and ploughmen other thing to whistle upon, save Psalms, hymns and such godly songs as David is occupied withal! And if women, sitting at their rocks [distaffs] or spinning at the wheels, had none other songs to pass their time withal than such as Moses' sister, Glehana's wife, Debora, and Mary the mother of Christ have sung before them, they should be better occupied than with 'hey nony nony, hey trolly loly' and such like fantasies. (p. 537)

Thus this book is founded on a sharp distinction between the secular and the religious and does not involve approval of secular literature. He presents 'such songs as edify and corrupt not men's conversation' (p. 538). The right use of singing these is

to comfort a man's heart in God, to make him thankful and to exercise him in his word, to encourage him in the way of godliness and to provoke other men unto the same. By this thou mayest perceive what spiritual edifying cometh of godly Psalms and songs of God's word, and what inconvenience followeth the corrupt ballads of this vain world. (p. 539)

Coverdale seems to have loved such songs. He writes in his preface to the Apocrypha in his first Bible of 'the prayer of Azarias, and the sweet song that he and his two fellows sung in the fire', and notes that he has included such songs in part 'for their sakes also that love such sweet songs of thanksgiving' (Mozley, *Coverdale*, p. 96). Clearly the love is religious in essence.

The contents do nothing to deny the earnest tone of the preface and little to create a merry alternative to secular songs. The Psalms especially are significant because of the reputation of Coverdale's prose Psalms. Here is the opening stanza of Psalm 137:

At the rivers of Babylon
There sat we down right heavily;
Even when we thought upon Sion,
We wept together sorrowfully.
For we were in such heaviness,
That we forgot all our merriness,

And left off all our sport and play:
On the willow trees that were thereby
We hanged up our harps truly,
And mourned sore both night and day. (p. 571)

This is a terrible struggle with rhyme and metre, expanding Coverdale's own rhythmical prose versions to banality. To go back to his first Bible (which he later slightly improved) makes blatant the contrast: 'by the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Sion. As for our harps, we hanged them up upon the trees, that are therein'. This amounts to more than just the observation that Coverdale was a far better prose translator than poet: his prose translation did not meet his ideas of literary form but is far better writing. The paradox is that if Coverdale had tried to translate the Psalms in his Bibles in what he felt to be a literary manner, he would not have created versions capable of arousing any kind of literary affection. If, as we legitimately may, we find literary quality in his work, it is in spite of himself, for not only is there no explicit evidence of literary intentions in it, but there is evidence that he had no respect for literature and was not trying to be, by his own standards, literary.

CHAPTER TWO

From the Great Bible to the Rheims-Douai Bible: arguments about language

OFFICIAL BIBLES

The Bible in English was part of the larger battle, political as much as theological, for the English Reformation. The clergy's political allegiance might be relatively easily diverted from Rome to London, but beliefs were not so readily changed. By no means all the clergy were enthusiasts for the vernacular Bible: if they could not suppress it they could at least attempt to make it more acceptable to themselves, that is, more like the Vulgate. An attempt to do this was made in 1542. Though it came to nothing, it remains of interest because it gives further evidence of just how much the question of English vocabulary was tied up with larger issues. In parliament the archbishop 'asked members individually whether without scandal, error and manifest offence of Christ's faithful they voted to retain the Great Bible in the English speech. The majority resolved that the said Bible could not be retained until first duly purged and examined side by side with the [Latin] Bible commonly read in the English Church'. The work went into committee, and the last one hears of it is a list of Latin words which Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, 'desired for their germane and native meaning and for the majesty of their matter might be retained as far as possible in their own nature or be turned into English speech as closely as possible' (Pollard, p. 117). Clearly Gardiner would have preferred these meaningful and majestic words to remain untouched. As one surveys the list, two things become apparent: many of the words are theologically important, and many are now familiar parts of English vocabulary. Here are some of Gardiner's words in the form he gives them:

Ecclesia, Poenitentia, Contritus, Justitia, Justificare, Idiota, Elementa, Baptizare, Martyr, Adorare, Simplex, Sapientia, Pietas, Presbyter, Sacrificium, Sacramentum, Gloria, Ceremonia, Mysterium, Religio, Communio, Perseverare, Hospitalitas, Charitas, Benedictio, Humilitas, Synagoga, Ejicere,

Distribueretur, Senior, Apocalypsis, Satisfactio, Contentio, Conscientia, Idolum, Prudentia, Apostolus, Societas, Idololatria, Confessio, Imitator, Innumerabilis, Infidelis, Paganus, Virtutes. (Pollard, p. 117)

The limitations of the vocabulary available to Tyndale and Coverdale are strikingly illustrated. Moreover, any time they ventured towards such words they were in danger not only of identifying their work with the Church they opposed, but also of maintaining a religion based on the preservation of divine mystery, hidden from the people and interpreted by the Church. The manner of English translation was a fundamental issue of the Reformation.

Though this attempt to make the English Bible latinate, ecclesiastical and majestic failed, anxiety about the proper use of the Bible persisted. Henry VIII's proclamation of 1541 warns lay readers that they should not 'presume to take upon them any common disputation, argument or exposition of the mysteries therein contained, but that every such lay man should humbly, meekly and reverently read the same for his own instruction, edification and amendment of his life' (Pollard, p. 113). The Great Bibles to which the proclamation applied were the first authorised English Bibles, and they declared themselves 'the Bible appointed to the use of the Churches'. Coverdale's prologues and dedications were replaced by a 'prologue or preface' by Cranmer (1489–1556), 'the most reverend father in God, Thomas Archbishop of Canterbury, Metropolitan and Primate of England'. This exhorts readers, in a somewhat gentler tone, to exactly that kind of reading demanded in the King's proclamation:

How shouldest thou understand if thou wilt not read nor look upon it: take the books into thine hands, read the whole story, and that thou understandest keep it well in memory; that thou understandest not, read it again and again; if thou can neither so come by it, counsel with some other that is better learned. Go to thy curate and preacher, show thyself to be desirous to know and learn. And I doubt not but God seeing thy diligence and readiness, if no man else teach thee, will himself vouchsafe with his Holy Spirit to illuminate thee and to open unto thee that which was locked from thee.

The next major Bible was the Geneva Bible, but the direct successor of the Great Bibles was the Bishops' Bible of 1568. This, the Bible on which the KJB translators were instructed to base their work, was presented to the public as a revision for accuracy of the Great Bible.¹ The

¹ The best study of the text is Gerald Hammond's, and his verdict is unfavourable: 'for the most part the Bishops' Bible is either a lazy and ill-informed collation of what had gone before, or, in its original parts, the work of third-rate scholars and second-rate writers' (*The Making of the English Bible*, p. 143).

translators were instructed to revise where 'it varieth manifestly from the Hebrew or Greek original'. Only in one respect were they to consider English for its own sake: they were to find 'more convenient terms and phrases' for 'all such words as soundeth in the old translation to any offence of lightness or obscenity' (Pollard, p. 126). Given the later evidence of obscene reading of the Bible (see below, pp. 109 ff.), it seems likely that they were to remove possible *doubles entendres*. I doubt if bowdlerisation was contemplated as that would have been inconsistent with literalness. The translators worked separately rather than in committee, and so probably had to interpret the instruction as they saw fit. One of the translators, Richard Cox, Bishop of Ely, wrote that 'I would wish that such usual words as we English people be acquainted with might still remain in their form and sound, so far forth as the Hebrew will well bear; inkhorn terms to be avoided' (Pollard, p. 123). If this is a response to the instruction we may infer that some of the Bishops, like those who had tried for a revision in 1542, wished to Latinise the English, producing thereby some of the traditional grandeur and mystery of biblical language. Many of the Bishops were still close to Roman Catholicism in spirit, but any tendencies they had towards a re-Latinising of the English Bible were to be overshadowed by the Roman Catholic translation.

Cranmer's preface is retained, but preceding it is a preface by the organiser of the work, Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504–75), which shows some subtle changes in attitude to the proper use of the Bible. It takes Christ's words, 'scrutamini scripturas', 'search ye the Scriptures',² for text, and exhorts the private reader to study the Bible: 'let not the volume of this book, by God's own warrant, depart from thee, but occupy thyself therein in the whole journey of this thy worldly pilgrimage to understand thy way how to walk rightly before him all the days of thy life'. This implies both private readers and private ownership, which is probably a testimony to the popular domestic impact of the Geneva Bible. Like Tyndale and Cranmer, Parker believes that 'the only surety to our faith and conscience is to stick to the Scriptures'. However, though he also believes that 'no man, woman, or child, is excluded from this salvation', he is less optimistic about Scripture being rightly understood than his predecessors:

For not so lieth it in charge to the worldly artificer to search, or to any other private man so exquisitely to study, as it lieth to the charge of the public teacher to search in the Scriptures, to be the more able to walk in the house of God

² John 5: 39. Parker habitually quotes the Vulgate and then translates it without reference to the text in the Bishops' Bible itself.

(which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of truth) to the establishing of the true doctrine of the same and to the impugning of the false.

The official Bibles, then, encourage a studiously devout reading of the Bible without hinting at pleasure of any sort. Cranmer is relatively liberal in his belief in the Bible's comprehensibility and so more encouraging towards private study than Parker, who prefers the Bible to be for the clergy, allowing them to teach the people better. Cranmer's readers, it seems, should pore over the very detail of the text, while Parker's lay readers should look to the Church in preference to the Bible.

Parker develops Tyndale's wish to have his work corrected and Coverdale's advocacy of a variety of translations into a new point in the address preceding the Psalms:

Now let the gentle reader have this Christian consideration within himself that, though he findeth the psalms of this translation following not so to sound agreeably to his ears in his wonted words and phrases as he is accustomed with: yet let him not be too much offended with the work, which was wrought for his own commodity and comfort. And if he be learned, let him correct the word or sentence (which may dislike him) with the better, and whether his note riseth either of good will and charity, either of envy and contention not purely, yet his reprehension, if it may turn to the finding out of the truth, shall not be repelled with grief but applauded to in gladness, that Christ may ever have the praise.

The acknowledgement of a customary linguistic form is important, but of special interest is the invitation to think of the English text as unfixed, and the encouragement to the learned reader to adjust it as he thinks fit for 'the finding out of the truth'. This is an effort to destabilise the translation in the search for truth. Most scholarly users of the Bible until, roughly, the middle of the seventeenth century did indeed treat the English text as unfixed and were not much concerned to cite a particular version accurately. For them biblical truth did not lie in any particular form of English words. Unless the scholars were translators or were critics of theological and ecclesiastical tendencies that they disliked, they had little interest in the precise language of the English Bible. Such an attitude has implications for the literary fortunes of the English of the Bible: as long as there is a weak sense of the English of the Bible, it can only be a linguistic influence in the vaguest way and can hardly be appreciated. On the other hand, unscholarly people were becoming closely familiar with the English of the Bible: for them it could be an imitable, admirable standard.

OPPOSING CAMPS

The Geneva Bible

The Bible and Holy Scriptures contained in the Old and New Testament. Translated according to the Hebrew and Greek, and conferred with the best translations in divers languages. With most profitable annotations upon all the hard places, and other things of great importance as may appear in the Epistle to the Reader. Such is the full title of the Geneva Version of the Bible (1560), prepared, probably under the leadership of William Whittingham (c. 1524–79), by the Protestants living there in exile. The title shows the two aims, to provide as good a translation of the Hebrew and Greek texts as possible, and to make clear any difficulties. The frank acknowledgement of ‘hard places’ contrasts strikingly with Tyndale’s idea of ‘one simple literal sense’: there is a clear movement through these Bibles towards recognition of difficulties and attempts at explication.

Although the Geneva Bible did not have the sanction of the Church of England, it became the most popular of the translations which preceded the KJB and was the only Protestant Bible to rival it for a long time after its appearance. One simple reason for this is that Bibles, especially those in private ownership, have a long life. The Roman Catholic Thomas Ward (1652–1708), writing in 1688, attacks the Protestant Bibles using, as well as the KJB, ‘such English translations as are common and well-known in England even to this day, as being yet in many men’s hands: to wit, those Bibles printed in the years 1562, 1577 and 1579’.³ Even the much less popular Bishops’ Bible continued to be used in some churches, according to Bishop William Beveridge, ‘to our days’ (1710). He says that the KJB is so little altered from the Bishops’ Bible that people perceived no difference between the two versions.⁴ But there were more particular reasons for the Geneva Bible’s success: it was produced at a price that allowed for private ownership, and there were its

³ *Errata of the Protestant Bible* (1688; Dublin, 1810), p. 19. He is not exaggerating. Sixteenth-century Geneva Bibles with eighteenth-century inscriptions are quite common. More extraordinary is a 1585 Geneva Bible in the Victoria University of Wellington library that belonged to a Norfolk village family; it contains signatures, comments and records that date from 1696 to 1877. Evidently it was still a valued family possession at the time of emigration to New Zealand. Such Bibles are ample evidence of the longevity of Bibles as books.

Plate 7 shows some handwritten annotations in a 1551 Tyndale NT, and plate 8 is typical of the kind of inscriptions to be found at the beginnings or endings of Bibles, or at some of the major breaks such as the beginning of the NT. These inscriptions, in two different hands, show that this NT continued to be used long after it had been superseded.

⁴ *A Defence of the Book of Psalms*, pp. 13–14.