

A HISTORY
OF THE
ENGLISH BIBLE AS
LITERATURE

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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 gabbings]; 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 [kunnynge] 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 Inglysh' (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-