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CHAPTER 1

The early eighteenth century and the KJB

'All the disadvantages of an old prose translation'

The superior language

> Yet how beautiful do the holy writings appear, under all the disadvantages of an old prose translation? So beautiful that, with a charming and elegant simplicity, they ravish and transport the learned reader, so intelligible that the most unlearned are capable of understanding the greater part of them. (P. 30)

So exclaims in 1731 the very minor poet and critic, John Husbands (1706–32). He seems to be saying that the KJB, in spite of being rather bad by his standards, is, after all, very good. This curious combination of praise and dispraise is one of a line of such remarks that reflects conflicting forces among the literati of Augustan England. Before exhibiting these remarks, some of the forces need to be sketched.

The phrase 'an old prose translation' suggests the three main negative elements. The disadvantage of being a translation needs no comment – everybody believed that translation must necessarily be inferior to the original, especially if that original was divinely inspired – but we are accustomed to admiring prose and do not think of the language of a hundred years ago or less as particularly old. We certainly do not think it worse than present-day English: quite the reverse (see below, p. 434). The world of Dickens and George Eliot may be very different from ours, but their language is not. In contrast, the eighteenth century was vividly aware that the English it used for literature (to look no further) was very different from – and, most thought, far better than – that of pre-Restoration literature: 'the language of the present times is so clean and chaste, and so very different from our ancestors, that should they return hither they would want an interpreter to converse with us'.[1] Rewritings of the

[1] Blackmore, *Essays*, p. 99.

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best old authors such as Chaucer and Shakespeare abounded. Dryden, prefacing his adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida* (1679), had this to say of Shakespeare's language:

> it must be allowed to the present age that the tongue in general is so much refined since Shakespeare's time that many of his words and more of his phrases are scarce intelligible. And of those which we understand, some are ungrammatical, others coarse, and his whole style is so pestered with figurative expressions that it is as affected as it is obscure.[2]

This is criticism as much of the time as of its greatest author. Comments such as this are not, so far, to be found on the KJB's language, but they represent what must have been in people's minds when they dismissed it as old. In the dedicatory epistle to the same play, Dryden anticipates much that will be characteristic of the early eighteenth century. He believes English is still barbarous. Like Palmer nearly three centuries earlier (see volume 1, pp. 63–4), he complains of its sound, for 'we are full of monosyllables, and those clogged with consonants, and our pronunciation is effeminate, all which are enemies to a sounding language' (p. 223). But the weaknesses are more than just aesthetic. It lacks a standard, so he translated his own English into Latin, 'a more stable language', in order to judge its quality (p. 222). Indeed, one must have a perfect knowledge of Greek, Latin, Old German, French and Italian, and of the most faultless English authors, if one is to judge English style. Though Old German is mentioned, pre-Renaissance forms of English are not: the emphasis is squarely on classical and romance languages. Only a few people looked to the native roots of the language, roots so strong in the KJB; most looked to the very different Latin. The ardent classicist Anthony Blackwall is as explicit as anyone. He looks forward to 'the dawn of a Reformation' when 'men of elevated spirit shall arise to drive out the barbarous Goths and Vandals' through recourse to the classics, in which 'there are unexhausted stores of noble sense and suitable expression . . . By supplies drawn from them, gentlemen of happy talents and industry may . . . fill up the defects and smooth the roughness of their mother tongues' (*An Introduction*, pp. 4–5).

Dryden wanted 'a perfect grammar' of the language as the foundation for 'an exact standard of writing and of speaking' (p. 225). The eighteenth century did its best. Dictionaries helped standardise meaning, spelling and, consequently, pronunciation; grammars, modelled on Latin grammar, not on observation of English in use, fixed themselves on the tongue like marriage, for better or

[2] *The Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols., ed. Alan Roper and Vinton A. Dearing (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1961 etc.), XIII: 225.

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worse. What is more, the century believed it was doing well. Leonard Welsted (1688–1742) illustrates this with all the enthusiasm so characteristic of minor critics. Though others might disagree, he believes that 'the English language does at this day [1724] possess all the advantages and excellencies, which are very many, that its nature will admit of, whether they consist in softness and majesty of sound, or in the force and choice of words, or in variety and beauty of construction'.[3] Sound, vocabulary and grammar, if that is what the last phrase means, are all as perfect as can be. Further, the language has only recently reached this aesthetic excellence: 'it is not, unless I mistake, much more than a century since England first recovered out of something like barbarism with respect to its state of letters and politeness . . . we have laid aside all our harsh antique words and retained only those of good sound and energy; the most beautiful polish is at length given to our tongue, and its Teutonic rust quite worn away'.[4] Again the prejudice against the native element in the language is rampant. The very term 'Augustan' expresses both the prejudice and the contentment that so quickly took over from Dryden's reservations. Initially it was used for the writers of Charles II's reign (1660–85), but Welsted and others used it as it is still used, for their own time, the time of Pope and Addison, with extension back to Dryden. It suggests a self-satisfied comparison with the time of Virgil, Horace and Ovid. In such a situation, the KJB was doubly disadvantaged. Not only was it old, but its linguistic roots were, in vocabulary, largely Teutonic, and, in form, often Hebraic.

The nearest we can get to detail of how this sense of the Augustan perfection of English affected reading of the KJB comes from a Roman Catholic source. An Irish priest, Cornelius Nary (1660–1738), made a new translation of the NT from the Vulgate, ('diligently compared' with the Greek and other translations (Dublin, 1719)). He claims in the title that he is working 'for the better understanding of the literal sense', yet his preface points not to revision of Gregory Martin's scholarship but of his language, which 'is so old, the words in many places so obsolete, the orthography so bad, and the translation so very literal, that in a number of places it is unintelligible, and all over so grating to the ears of such as are accustomed to speak, in a manner, another language, that most people will not be at the pains of reading [it]' (fol. A2 v). Except that people did read it, much of this could apply to the KJB, and the comment is notable for combining aesthetic and practical objections, as well as looking to a

[3] 'A Dissertation Concerning the Perfection of the English Language, the State of Poetry, etc.' (1724); in Elledge, I: 320–48; p. 324.

[4] Pp. 321–2. 'Politeness' was much used in this century; as an adjective it corresponds to our 'cultivated', and is often used interchangeably with 'polished'.

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standard in the objection to the spelling. Nary's work was unsuccessful, but deserves to be remembered as the first English prose version of a Testament to be made with open care for the aesthetic quality of its English: the Bible was to be 'in a style and dress less obscure and somewhat more engaging than it has been' (fol. B2 v). The one commendatory letter again bespeaks the Augustans in praising Nary for 'reconciling a literal translation with the purity of the English tongue'. 'Purity' here means anything but the historic purity of the native strain in the language.

The disadvantage of prose reflects the fact that interest in literary aspects of the Bible at this time concentrated on the poetic parts. Wither had already argued that prose was a poor substitute for verse translation (see volume I, p. 279), and now the much-pilloried John Dennis (1657–1734) thought along similar lines, arguing this way in his most representative work, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704):

> it is ridiculous to imagine that there can be a more proper way to express some parts and duties of a religion which we believe to be divinely inspired than the very way in which they were at first delivered. Now the most important part of the Old Testament [the prophecies] was delivered not only in a poetical style, but in poetical numbers ... because they who wrote them believed that the figurative passionate style and the poetical numbers ... were requisite to enforce them upon the minds of men. (Pp. 139, 140)

The divine precedent demands that a proper (here probably meaning 'appropriate' rather than 'accurate') translation be in verse. Consequently, when Dennis cites a biblical passage for its literary quality he uses his own verse paraphrase, but when he cites the Bible for its meaning alone he uses the KJB. 'Poetry', he argues, 'is the natural language of religion, and ... religion at first produced it as a cause produces its effect' (p. 131). Prose is a later and lesser invention, 'by no means proper' for religion (p. 132). Referring to the ancient Greeks, he explains that 'the wonders of religion naturally threw them upon great passions, and great passions naturally threw them upon harmony and figurative language, as they must of necessity do any poet' (p. 132). Turning to Christianity, he elaborates: 'because if the ideas which these subjects afford are expressed with passion equal to their greatness, that which expresses them is poetry; for that which makes poetry to be what it is is only because it has more passion than any other way of writing' (p. 139). The quality of poetry lies in its power to move the passions, and the passions are most moved by religious subjects given appropriate poetic expression. In other hands this could be an argument that divorced the idea of poetry from the technical idea of 'poetic

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numbers', but Dennis has no doubt that verse form is essential to expressive power.

Dennis wanted to restore modern poetry to its true role by returning it to religion (Milton's example was of major importance). Others disagreed. Inheriting the Puritan distrust of art, they thought poetry irredeemable and shrank from any suggestion that the Bible might be literary. Isaac Watts (1674–1748), best remembered for hymns such as 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross', closely echoes Dennis, but offers this reminder of the opposite view:

> This profanation and debasement of so divine an art has tempted some weaker Christians to imagine that poetry and vice are naturally akin, or at least that verse is fit only to recommend trifles and entertain our looser hours, but it is too light and trivial a method to treat anything that is serious and sacred. They submit, indeed, to use it in divine psalmody, but they love the driest translation of the Psalm best. They will venture to sing a dull hymn or two at church in tunes of equal dullness, but still they persuade themselves and their children that the beauties of poesy are vain and dangerous. All that arises a degree above Mr Sternhold is too airy for worship, and hardly escapes the sentence of 'unclean and abominable'.[5]

Among those willing to admire literature and to think of the Bible as poetry, some began, as we shall see, to think along lines more conducive to admiration of the KJB. These lines owe a real debt to the most powerful new force in critical thought in this time, Longinus' treatise *Peri Hupsous*.

Longinus and Boileau

Peri Hupsous was translated into English as *Of the height of eloquence* by John Hall in 1652, then, from the French of Boileau, as *Of the loftiness or elegancy of speech* by J. Pulteney in 1680. In 1698, also from the French, came an anonymous translation entitled *An essay upon sublime*. These changes encapsulate an important shift in literary attitudes. In a general way, 'eloquence' and 'sublime' evoke the same thing, a sense of what is best in writing, but they have a basic difference. 'Eloquence' points towards all the rhetorical devices of a piece of writing and indicates a technical judgement of literature: its main purpose is persuasion, and there had of course been many arguments mounted that the Bible fulfilled this purpose in spite of its apparent lack of eloquence. Such arguments tried to shift the basis for judgement from technical qualities to effectiveness. With the advent of 'sublime' as a key word for literary quality this

[5] Preface to *Horae Lyricae* (1709); in Elledge, I: 148–63; p. 150. The whole preface is of interest but contains nothing that cannot be found elsewhere.

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shift in basis became widely accepted. Not only did effectiveness become a primary criterion for quality, but a new kind of effectiveness came to be admired, not the power to persuade but the power to move, particularly to move to heights of emotion.

Pulteney's intermediate title, *Of the Loftiness or Elegancy of Speech*, shows the change taking place. 'Loftiness' and 'elegancy' are coupled uneasily, the new idea struggling to take over from the old (as indeed it continued to struggle: interest in eloquence did not disappear). Moreover, true to the predominantly technical nature of Longinus' work, the emphasis remains on language. But underlying Longinus' technical discussion is a sharp critical sense of the effect of language, so he defines sublimity as a quality which pleases, rather than persuades, all men at all times. It uplifts souls, filling them 'with a proud exaltation and a sense of vaunting joy' (ch. 7, p. 107), or, in Hall's phrase, 'a transport of joy and wonder'.[6] This is the aspect of his work that meant so much to the eighteenth century, even if it was at odds with Augustan ideas of a polished, regulated, neo-classical perfection. If sublimity of effect was a criterion for aesthetic quality, then any writing – indeed, any object – which produced this effect could be admired whether or not its style appeared admirable. This was of great importance for literary estimation of the Bible in translation, if not always as a cause of that estimation, then certainly helping to legitimise it and to make it fashionable.

There is a second crucial element for biblical appreciation in Longinus' idea of the sublime, its religious dimension. He identifies the two prime sources of the sublime as 'the ability to form grand conceptions' and 'the stimulus of powerful and inspired emotion' (ch. 8, p. 108); the latter Hall calls 'fierce and transporting passion' (p. XII), while both Pulteney and Smith understand this as the pathetic, 'by which is meant that enthusiasm and natural vehemency which touches and affects us' (Pulteney, p. 24). Longinus pushes both these sources towards divinity. Sublimity is not just 'the echo of a noble mind' (ch. 9, p. 109); it 'carries one up to where one is close to the majestic mind of God' (ch. 36, p. 147). Pulteney puts this most interestingly: it has in it 'something supernatural and divine, two qualities which almost equal us to the gods themselves' (pp. 134–5). Hall, who is weak at this point, elsewhere pushes it furthest. In his dedication he writes that the sublime 'must therefore have somewhat I cannot tell how divine in it',[7] and, now translating, he proclaims

[6] P. XI. For ease of reference I have used Dorsch's translation, and then selected among Hall, Pulteney and Smith, whose version predominated after 1739.

[7] Fol. B3 v. He goes on to explain that such works must possess outstanding knowledge of man, sciences, history and nature, but yet that all these things are trivial without the

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that 'there is nothing nearer divine inspiration' (p. xiv; similarly the modern version, ch. 8, p. 109). Sublimity bespeaks divinity. So too does the Bible. It was difficult, following Longinus, not to think of the Bible as sublime, especially as he himself, in a famous passage, had taken one of his examples of sublimity from the Bible.[8] After a Homeric example of passages 'which represent the divine nature as it really is, pure, majestic and undefiled', Longinus observes: 'so too the lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary person, having formed a high conception of the power of the Divine Being, gave expression to it when at the very beginning of his laws he wrote: "God said" – what? "Let there be light, and there was light; let there be land, and there was land"' (ch. 9, p. 111). If an honoured pagan could find sublimity in the Scripture, how much more might the Christian find? Longinus' most important translator, one of the founding fathers of French literary criticism, Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636–1711), spelt out the point: 'Longinus himself, in the midst of the shades of paganism, did not fail to recognise the divinity that there is in these words of Scripture' (III: 443). For a facile repetition wherein the single instance of Longinus has become an all-embracing plural, there is this by the controversialist Charles Leslie (1650–1722) – it is of added interest as it is also an example of the phrase we will be following: 'the heathen orators have admired the sublime of the style of the Scriptures. No writing in the world comes near it, even with all the disadvantage of our translation, which, being obliged to be literal, must lose much of the beauty of it.'[9]

Boileau seized on Longinus' remark. Misrepresenting what Longinus says but true to the underlying tendency of his work, Boileau argues that Longinus does not mean by 'sublime' what orators call the sublime style, but the extraordinary and marvellous which elevates and ravishes:

> The sublime style always seeks great language, but the sublime can be found in a single thought, in a single figure, in a single turn of phrase. A thing can be in the sublime style and yet not be sublime, that is, may have nothing extraordinary or

inexpressible something: 'there must be somewhat *ethereal*, somewhat above man, much of a soul separate, that must animate all this and breathe into it a fire to make it both warm and shine' (fol. B4 r–v). Hall's running title reflects this emphasis: it is 'of height' rather than 'of eloquence'.

[8] Since it is so rare for a Greek author to cite the Bible, the authenticity of this passage is often questioned. However, it was accepted as genuine by most people in the eighteenth century (Smith, who takes the passage as an occasion for a discourse on biblical simplicity and sublimity, reports some dispute (pp. 128ff.)). The most recent translation of Longinus, that of James A. Arieti and John M. Crossett (New York and Toronto: the Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), summarises the discussion, p. 57.

[9] *The Truth of Christianity Demonstrated* (London, 1711), p. 153.

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> astonishing in it. For example, 'the sovereign disposer of nature in one word created light': that is in the sublime style, yet it is not sublime because there is nothing particularly marvellous in it . . . But, 'God said, Let there be light, and there was light': this extraordinary turn of expression which marks so well creation's obedience to the creator is truly sublime and has something divine in it. (III: 442)

Opposition to these claims led Boileau to elaborate them in his posthumous tenth reflection on some passages of Longinus (1713). Much of this contains familiar arguments for the literary power of the Bible, but what is particularly important is his insistence that there is no opposition between simplicity and sublimity (III: 409). Simple language can create, can even enhance, sublimity. So 'God said, Let there be light, and there was light' 'is not only sublime, but all the more sublime because, the words being very simple and taken from ordinary language, they make us understand wonderfully, and better than all the finest words, that it is no more difficult for God to make light, heaven and earth than for a master to say to a servant, "bring me my cloak"' (III: 412). The point is well made. If the Bible is all the more sublime for not trying to match the grandeur of its content with grandeur of style, then the language of ploughboys may be the very means for conveying its sublimity, that is, its power to elevate the soul. But, just as few English critics were able to match Boileau's nice perception of the relationship between expression and meaning, so none of them, except in the most general terms, was able to bring out the potential for appreciation of the Tyndalian tradition of translation.

The growth of a commonplace

The tension between Longinian or pseudo-Longinian ideas and the time's hostility to the old, the prosaic and the translation helped to produce observations such as that by Husbands. By the time he wrote, it had become a commonplace to appreciate the KJB with reservations. Mostly what was praised could be found in any version; the reservations applied particularly to the form of the KJB, but only because that was now the generally used version. This note was first sounded by the much-admired essayist, defender of the ancients against the moderns and patron of Swift, Sir William Temple (1628–99). It follows a discussion in his essay 'Of poetry' (1690) that usefully develops the tussle between Longinian ideas and the age's sense of decorum. The essence of true poetry is

> that elevation of genius which can never be produced by any art or study, by pains or by industry, which cannot be taught by precepts or examples, and therefore is agreed by all to be the pure and free gift of heaven or of nature, and to be a fire kindled out of some hidden spark of the very first conception. (P. 179)

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So it is the power to move rather than technical ability that distinguishes a true poet:

> Whoever does not affect and move the same present passions in you that he represents in others, and at other times raise images about you, as a conjurer is said to do spirits, transport you to the places and to the persons he describes, cannot be judged to be a poet, though his measures are never so just, his feet never so smooth, or his sounds never so sweet. (P. 183)

This is not to dismiss technical merit but to put it in its proper place. At this time, especially in France, there was a good deal of discussion of rules for good writing: they are the period's opposite pole from unbridled admiration of sublimity. Temple will have little to do with them – 'there is something in the genius of poetry too libertine to be confined to so many rules' (p. 182) – yet he still holds that the elevation of genius must be accompanied by a severe artfulness.[10] Poetry, like a child, 'must be nourished with care, clothed with exactness and elegance, educated with industry, instructed with art, improved by application, corrected with severity, and accomplished with labour and with time before it arrives at any great perfection or growth' (p. 179). Here speaks the neo-classicism of the time, and it is this voice that produces the reservations.

Having turned his back on giving rules for poetry, Temple gives a history of it, dealing first with its antiquity. Biblical poetry merits discussion not as being superior to the classics but as an example of how poetry is older than prose in many nations. Job is discussed as the most ancient book of the Bible and allowed to be an 'admirable and truly inspired poem'. But its origin is not Jewish, so he turns to the most ancient Hebrew poem, Deborah's song (Judges 5). Here he launches the commonplace, remarking that he never read this 'without observing in it as true and noble strains of poetry and picture as in any other language whatsoever, in spite of all disadvantages from translations into so different tongues and common prose' (p. 185). An obviously genuine Longinian response to literary power is tempered by dislike of the translations. Implicitly, some poetic quality is independent of poetic form. Temple does not develop this; rather, it lies in his work like a grain of mustard seed accidentally sown.

The next occurrence of this kind of remark comes ten years later from the

[10] To some it seemed that here he contradicted himself. Gildon, normally an admirer of Temple, argues just this, though a careful reading of the passage shows that two different ideas of 'rules' are involved (*Complete Art*, I: 117–19): Gildon sees no difference between artfulness and rules, whereas Temple rejects the implication that there is a correct way to manage each kind of writing.

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much-maligned minor poet, Queen Anne's physician, Sir Richard Blackmore (1658?–1729), in the preface to his *Paraphrase on the Book of Job* (1700). Though the following paragraph makes the point twice, it is worth giving in full because it suggests several important connections:

> The language in which this book is written is Hebrew, and considering the obscurity of the style or manner of expression in the eastern parts of the world, their eloquence as well as their customs and habits being very different from ours, 'tis very strange that a literal translation of this book, as it is now found in the Bible, especially considering how long since it was written, how little the language is at present known, and how much the idiom of it is lost, should not be found more harsh, and be less capable of being understood than it is. I am confident that if several of the Greek poets should be verbally translated, they would appear more obscure, if not altogether unintelligible. As if in a literal translation the book of Job written in an eastern language does so much affect us and raises in our minds such an admiration of its beauty and majesty, what a wonderful and inimitable kind of eloquence must be supposed in the original when we cannot translate verbatim a good poet from one modern language into another, though it be that of our nearest neighbours, without a great diminution of its excellence. (Pp. xlii–xliii)

To begin with, it is typical that the remark should accompany praise of the originals. This is hardly surprising, but the way the effectiveness of the translation is used to bolster a sense of their perfection is. That the Bible seems to survive translation, even in a poor old medium, better than any other writings is used as a new argument for the old point that the Bible is superior to the classics. Now, one of the most important literary debates of this time, in France as well as England, concerned the relative merits of classical and contemporary literature – the ancients versus the moderns. One might well expect the conviction of the Bible's literary superiority, with this new and commonly repeated argument supporting it, to have widened that debate into a three-sided contest, but it did not. Temple had found it convenient to use the Bible in the time's other great debate, on the issue of laws for poetry, but it is typical of the time that he found no place for the Bible in the discussion when he defended the classics in 'An essay upon the ancient and modern learning'. Opinion on the relative merits of the Bible and the classics, rather than being a part of 'the battle of the books', was a counter-current to it. The majority of those who voiced an opinion gave the palm to the Scriptures, but, as in the past, this was usually for religious rather than literary reasons. The Bible was edging its way into literary discussions, but only in a few works did it claim the spotlight.

Blackmore's passage points to a second new way of thinking in his

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