

TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION

MONSIGNOR KNOX has put us under a new debt by publishing these notes¹ which have already appeared in the pages of *The Tablet*. Those who read them there will remember how they are marked by that wide erudition and careful thought which we expect of him. As for those who have not seen them, perhaps it is as well to repeat the warning of the author's preface, namely, that some purchasers of the book may be in for a disappointment: 'the over-worked parish priest who must needs compose his Sunday sermon in a few minutes snatched from the confessional . . . a harassed curate, desperately turning over the pages of this book at ten minutes to eleven in the hope of extracting a pulpit message from it'. These notes are not meant for them; they, he says, are quite well catered for by the numerous devotional commentaries that already exist. Here he wishes to concentrate on the well-known difficulties of the Sunday epistles and gospels. He dreams optimistically of a Catholic family arguing hotly across the luncheon table about the meaning of the epistle and gospel they have heard from the pulpit that morning, and eventually deciding to 'see what Knox has to say about it'. But I am afraid even they will have mental indigestion when they come across a fine passage like this: 'And now the supreme Light reveals itself in a Radiance which is, yet is not, other than itself, instead of being refracted *polumeros*, as in a spectrum. The spokesman of the new revelation is himself *character tes hupostaseos* of God; the off-print, so to speak, of the Original'. (pp. 33, 34).

But, at any rate, they will have some fun to help cure their indigestion, for the notes are well seasoned with that wit so characteristic of the author's writings. It is as refreshing as it is rare to find this quality in a Scripture commentary, though happily it is not absent from the Scriptures themselves. One cannot fail to be reminded of the amiable sarcasm of the Gospels by such a typical remark as: 'God's Christmas kindness was to be the exemplary cause of that kindness we show to one another at Christmas, and occasionally during the rest of the year' (p. 30). I hope no one will be shocked at Monsignor Knox's lightness of touch in these notes; for, as in his translation of the New Testament, so here in the examples and allusions he uses to illustrate the text, he succeeds marvellously in making the sacred writers talk to us in the speech of

¹ *The Epistles and Gospels for Sundays and Holidays*, translated with notes by the Right Reverend R. A. Knox, M.A. (Burns Oates; 10s. 6d.)

today; and that is the task which he set out to perform.

What is particularly invigorating, even when the conclusions reached are unacceptable, is the freshness of approach towards the difficulties of interpretation. Here, as the author so often admits, he boldly forsakes the path trodden by his predecessors. To tell the truth, it must be admitted that 'the commentators', as he prudently calls them without precisely specifying which, come in for some rough handling in the course of the notes. They dodge obvious difficulties, they interpret pedantically and laboriously, they want the text to mean what they mean, they give nonsensical explanations. Père Lagrange is often brought in and dismissed with a smack, like a naughty schoolboy who has given a foolish answer. Monsignor Knox's favourite seems to be Dean Alford, described in these pages as 'typical of an older Protestantism', a stranger to most of us, little remembered today except for his work on the textual criticism of the Greek Testament in the middle of the last century. But for the whole tribe of commentators (I am sure he intends to exclude the patristic commentators) he appears to have little patience: 'H. V. Morton does me more good than a dozen commentators' (p. 48). In official quarters this might be regarded as *male sonans* in the light of the rules laid down by *Providentissimus Deus*. If Catholic commentators are found pedantic and unadventurous in their interpretations, the history of the past fifty years of Catholic biblical scholarship ought to be borne in mind.

Coming to the question of the interpretations given in these notes, full of interest as they are, I must confess to finding them at times fanciful and subjective. The frequent use of such expressions as 'I have an obstinate feeling', 'I feel in my bones', 'My instinct tells me', 'A private inspiration tells me', does not encourage us to look for objective interpretation; and the author's *penchant* for allegorising makes me wonder whether that is the reason he cannot hit it off with Père Lagrange. To take one example of what seems to me fanciful, and even fantastic, there is his explanation of the miracle at Cana, even if it is backed up by the authority of Westcott. According to Monsignor Knox, our Lord did not change into wine the water in the six water pots, almost as though 'providing the equivalent of more than fifty dozen bottles' might seem to be rather overdoing it. What really happened, we are told, was that after the servants had gone *six* times to the well for water to fill the water pots, our Lord sent them back a *seventh* time; and on this occasion it was not water but wine that they drew up in their buckets. Only on this interpretation, it is maintained, does *antite* receive its true meaning of drawing water up from a well; only thus

is the 'now draw' of the text justified; and, of course, the seventh visit to the well conveniently provides us with the mystic number seven.

But St John says nothing about a well, nor is *antleo* restricted in meaning to the notion of drawing water from a well. The common water-supply at Cana, as at Nazareth and many other villages in Palestine, is the village spring. There is not a Jacob's Well everywhere. And by what process of reasoning are we to arrive at the conclusion that the servants went six times only to the spring (or to the well, if you prefer it) in order to get water enough to fill up six great vessels, each holding about twenty gallons on St John's own computation? From a vessel holding such an amount, if importance be attached to the use of the word *antleo*, water or wine could be *drawn* as truly as from a deep well, unless imagination is made to provide us with a picture of gigantic two-handled and narrow-necked *amphorae* made of earthenware. But you cannot carve vessels like that out of stone, and St John tells us that the six jars were made of stone: probably circular stone tubs such as one can still find in Palestinian courtyards. In those days, as in these, there was no municipal water-supply laid on in Cana, with lead pipes and taps all complete; it is to be supposed that a household would require some such provision as the Gospel mentions for its daily needs. And I wonder how far Monsignor Knox is right in thinking that the six water jars at Cana were to serve only for the ceremonial washings, as he seems to do by the interpolation of the word 'ceremonial' into the text of the evangelist.

This raises the question once more about whether his version of the New Testament ought to be called a translation or an interpretation. But surely the answer is that every translation is an interpretation; as Fr Luke Walker, the late professor of exegesis at Blackfriars, used to say, every insertion of a full-stop or a comma is an interpretation of the sacred text, decisions to write 'he' or 'He', 'spirit' or 'Spirit'. The real problem for every translator is to determine for himself the limits of his interpretation. Now Monsignor Knox began by giving us a very lucid exposition of the principles he had laid down for himself in the *Clergy Review* of February 1940. His was to be a new translation, not merely in the sense of being another numerically different from the others, but specifically different from existing official translations. 'There is no official translation of the Bible known to me', he wrote, 'which does not abandon, from the start, the dream of preserving its native idiom, which does not resign itself, from the start, to being a word-for-word translation'. Here he included Protestant as well as Catholic translations.

It was not his intention to make those acts of abandonment and resignation, and how well he has succeeded in fulfilling his intention is proved by the admirable results of his labour. We may take it that he adopted the principles set out in the words of Mr Belloc with which his article opens: 'Transmute boldly: render the sense by the corresponding sense without troubling over the verbal difficulties in your way. Where such rendering of sense by corresponding sense involves considerable amplification, do not hesitate to amplify for fear of being verbose'.

But it must be admitted, and Monsignor Knox is the first to admit it, that these are revolutionary principles as far as concerns biblical translations for official use. St Jerome, the Church's great authority in biblical matters, deals with this very point in his letter to Pamachius (Epist. LVII). There he writes to defend himself against the charge of having made nonsense in his translation from the Greek of a letter of Epiphanius to John the Bishop of Jerusalem. He declares that his rule of translation is to render sense for sense and not word for word, *except* when dealing with the sacred Scriptures. 'Ego enim non solum fateor, sed libera voce profiteor, me in interpretatione Graecorum, *absque Scripturis sanctis, ubi et verborum ordo mysterium est, non verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu.*' Here it may be remarked that Monsignor Knox leaves the reader with the impression that St Jerome is wholly responsible for the Latin translation of the Vulgate New Testament: 'St Jerome has managed to shirk the difficulty' (271); 'Clearly St Jerome wrote' (257); 'why does St Jerome give us' (226), etc. The fact is, of course, that he did no more than revise the existing Latin text in common use among the faithful, and it is questionable whether he even did that in the Acts and the Epistles. It is certain that he undertook a revision of the Gospel text at the request of Pope Damasus, but this revision he made with a very light touch as he says in his introductory letter to the Pope. 'Quae ne multum a lectionis Latinae consuetudine discreparent, ita calamo temperavimus, ut his tantum quae sensum videbantur mutare correctis, reliqua manere pateremur ut fuerant'. In other words, so that he might not shock the faithful, only in really serious matters did he introduce alterations of the existing text; small mistakes and inexactitudes of translation he left uncorrected, so that the reading to which the people had become accustomed by use might remain unchanged. And this was probably the reason why he never undertook a new translation of the New Testament, despite the hard things he had to say about the current translations. This cannot fail to remind us of the objections raised to Monsignor Knox's translation

in some of the letters to the Catholic press; evidently the faithful of the twentieth century are the brethren of the faithful of the fourth.

But to return to St Jerome's principles of translation in dealing with the Scriptures; clearly he approached the task with the wholesome awe of one handling mysteries, a fear lest he might pervert the divine character of the sacred text. Hence, out of a hesitation to commit the original words to a meaning of his own which might lessen or destroy the meaning of the author, he was quite prepared to sacrifice literary considerations. That the Douay translators adopted the same principle is evident to all; they knew how to write good English when they wanted, but they were content to leave us a phrase like 'the spirituals of wickedness in the celestials'. This does not seem altogether ridiculous when we recall that footnote of theirs on John II, 4, recorded by Monsignor Knox in his article: 'Because this speech is subject to divers senses, we keep the words of our text, lest by turning it into any English phrase we might straiten the Holy Ghost's intention to some certain sense either not intended, or not only intended, and so take away the choice and indifferency from the reader, whereof (in Holy Scripture specially) all translators must beware'. Whether we agree with this or not, we cannot help admiring the broad liberality of its sentiment of respect for the rights of the faithful.

Monsignor Knox agrees with it so far as to use his best endeavours to find an equivocal word or phrasing in order to translate texts that are patient of different literal senses; so he tells us, but some will object that he does not always keep his rule. To choose one example: the word *musterion* occurs twenty-seven times in the Greek New Testament. On every occasion except six the Vulgate renders the Greek by the Latin transliteration *mysterium*; six times we read *sacramentum*. The Knox version gives us eleven different renderings which sometimes vary greatly in sense; thus we have *secret* (10), *mystery* (6), *revelation* (3), *revealed*, *mysterious converse*, *hidden purpose*, *secret revealed*, *conspiracy*, *meaning*, *secret design*, *mystic* once each, and never *sacrament*. I am not going to say that Monsignor Knox has interpreted falsely on any of these occasions, and certainly, here as elsewhere, his rendering has given us a readable version which conveys a plain meaning to the heedful listener. But it goes to prove the contention that this is an interpretation rather than a translation, a sort of English Targum in fact—a point which seems to be conceded by the author when he writes in these notes: 'Ought not a translation to give some hint of what the sense is, instead of leaving the very obscure phrase of the original quite uninterpreted? I cannot find that any translator has made

the attempt' (p. 246).

Having said all this, honesty compels me to admit that I have never missed an opportunity of using the Knox translation when reading from the pulpit, and I am very grateful to him for it.

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O B I T E R

A CATHOLIC VIEW of the Ecumenical movement is provided by Father Ian Hislop, O.P., in *Dieu Vivant* (No. 9). He insists that the Catholic attitude to Protestant irenical activities must spring from 'fundamental theological considerations'. Arguments from history, national culture, political theory and so on are useless, and may be positively harmful, unless they are related to the basic question to which the theologian must seek an answer: what is the will of Christ for his people? The motives which have inspired many Protestant reunion movements—the need for unity in face of a growing paganism, embarrassment caused by denominational rivalries in the foreign mission-field, the desire for a common social action—may be noble in themselves, but they are inadequate as expressions of the full content of our Lord's prayer for unity. An immediate need is 'the expounding of Catholic doctrine in such a way, and with the use of such terminology, that Protestants may understand what it means'.

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SPINAL INJURIES, it seems, have strange effects. F. Hansen-Löwe, writing in *Wort und Wahrheit* (No. 8), quotes the view that Kierkegaard's fall as a child is the Cleopatra's nose of existentialism:

According to the subtle researches of Magnusson, Kierkegaard's 'prick of the flesh' is nothing other than a slight maladjustment of the spine due to a fall from a tree in his childhood. This fall was to determine Kierkegaard's destiny, both in its inner and exterior aspects.

In *La Vie Intellectuelle* (October), Père D. Dubarle, O.P., a professor of the Institut Catholique of Paris, considers the impact of the material on the spiritual at what is perhaps a higher level in an authoritative article on 'The biological sciences and Christian dogma'. After a lucid summary of modern evolutionary hypotheses, Père Dubarle concludes that

a clear return to the balance established by the theology of St Thomas between, on the one hand, primary causality and the system of secondary causes, and, on the other, between nature and