

fault, we hardly know that it is there, waiting to unfold itself. We place our light under a bushel, instead of setting it on a candlestick to lighten the household of the faith. 'If thou didst know the gift of God . . . thou wouldst have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. . . .' The mystics have known both the gift and the boundless munificence of the Giver, who desires to bestow it even now as lovingly as he desired it by the well in Samaria. If we but knew the gift of God, and had the confidence of St Paul in him 'who is powerful to do superabundantly above all we ask or think, according to the power that operates in us', that is according to the life of grace energizing our whole being if we will but let it do so! If we but knew how to use our supernatural powers, we should also live that mystic union with God, though on a lower plane, that made of a Bernard, a Catherine, a Teresa or a John of the Cross the saints they were, to the glory of God and of the Mystical Body which is the Church.

THE 'DE IMITATIONE'

By

JOHN SEARLE

THE Bible excepted, no other book in Christendom has circulated so widely as 'The Imitation.' It appeared during one of the darkest hours in European history, between the dead or-dying Middle Ages and the alluring dawn of the delusive Renaissance; and as the picturesque Michelet writes: 'L'Imitation de Jèsus Christ, le plus beau livre chrétien après l'Évangile, est sorti, comme lui, du sein de la mort. La mort du monde ancien, la mort du moyen âge, ont porté ces germes de vie.'

The most precious of the early manuscripts is the famous Antwerp Codex written by Thomas himself, with the subscription 'Finitus et completus anno domini MCCCCXLI per manus fratris Thomæ Kempensis in Monte Agnetis prope Zwolles.' Before the war there were still in existence sixty dated manuscripts of the fifteenth century, and about thirty undated ascribed to that century.

Although the evidence is overwhelming in favour of Thomas à Kempis as the author, after his death other claimants to that great honour were put forward, the most notable being Jean Gerson, Chancellor of Paris. This controversy has been continued intermittently to this day, and even so recently as 1936 the Rev. D. G. Barron published a slim volume upholding Gerson's claim. St Francis de Sales, a great admirer of 'The Imitation,' settled the question very satisfactorily by saying that undoubtedly the Holy Spirit must have been the author of such a wonderful book. Yet once again it ought to be said that the evidence weighs heavily, very heavily in favour of Thomas.

The first printed edition was issued by Zainer of Augsburg in 1471, and more than one hundred editions were in circulation before the end of the fifteenth century. Since then it has been estimated that three thousand further editions have appeared. It is impossible to give exact figures as the bibliographers do not agree, but very interesting details are given by Backer, Copinger, Kettlewell, Wheatley and others.

In England alone, up to the year 1900, thirty-three separate translations came out, some of them being very popular; for example, Bishop Challoner's version in 1737 ran into eighteen editions in London, not counting other issues which came out in Dublin and Paris.

Although since 1900 one or two additional renderings have been made, still another version is wanted. It is commonly agreed, though rarely carried into practice, that each generation should have its own translation of a great book. But where is *our* version of 'The Imitation,' and what are the characteristics of the editions in circulation today?

Almost all of them—in a greater or lesser degree—use the idiom of an old-fashioned piety, or an obsolete grammatical form of language, which is or was considered appropriate for books of devotion. 'Thee' and 'thou' for 'you.' 'Thou oughtest' for 'you should,' 'bestow' for 'give,' 'full soon' for 'quickly,' 'vouchsafe' for 'permit' or 'allow,' 'sith' for 'since'—many other examples could be given. Why should this be? One probable reason is that many translators have been learned divines, steeped in conventional Christian diction, to whom such language came quite naturally. By comparing various editions, it is also evident that some writers based their translations upon previous ones and so the old traditions have been carried on. Other translations, while free from the obsolete grammatical forms, are written in the long, undulant, and some would add soporific sentences of the eighteenth century. All this creates an air of unreality, of other-worldliness; and many modern readers, especially if they have no Christian background, feel that 'The Imitation' is not for them.

Such criticism as this does not imply that all these volumes were of little value. On the contrary, some of them were of the greatest value *for their age and generation*. For example, Stanhope's 1696 translation, or loose paraphrase rather, ran into over twenty editions, and even now is in use—an empirical argument perhaps, but surely conclusive. But new translations are wanted, in the common but not necessarily commonplace speech of today, which will appeal to the people of today, the man and woman in the street or train.

The diction of any new translation must be modern, simple and incisive—no literary artifice, no seeking for effect. We may read Sir Thomas Browne's 'Christian Morals,' be charmed with its sonorous music and yet remain quite forgetful of its precepts; for

here the artist stands first, the moralist in the background. This must not be so in 'The Imitation.'

But just at this point a natural question arises: in attempting the ordinary speech of today, how far may the translator go? How colloquial may he be, what latitude will modern usage allow? Judging by a recent and well reviewed publication, 'The Odyssey,' by E. V. Rieu, which expressly claims to be a translation and not a paraphrase, the latitude is very wide; some would say dangerously so. For example: the literal 'My child, what a word has escaped the enclosure of thy teeth' becomes 'Nonsense, my child.' The literal 'devours without atonement' is rendered 'living scot-free.' With the same freedom 'Ah! the shame!' (ὦ πόποι) is changed to 'Damnation take the thing,' and 'she' (Penelope) 'scorns me' becomes 'she gives me the cold shoulder.'

Now, however appropriate this style may be for spirited narrative, evidently there is a danger of its lapsing into cheap vulgarity; and no shadow of that must fall on our great Christian classic. Yet how easy, and in some cases how tempting to indulge in slickness the following will show. In Book 3 Chapter 30 we read: 'Vanum est et inutile, de futuris conturbari . . . quæ forte nunquam evenient,' and this might be correctly translated by the wayside pulpit slogan: 'Why worry, it may never happen.' But what a degradation, and how it would ~~repel~~ the best type of reader. So it appears that a translator must keep to a very narrow and precarious track, between clever slickness on one side and dull conventionality on the other.

But now there is another side (there is always another side) of the question which seems to indicate that simplicity—except perhaps the simplicity of great genius—is not enough. There are some chapters, more especially in Book 4, which touch heights quite beyond the reach of the common speech of today—chapters where Christ is speaking to his followers, or his followers to their Lord. What words can be adequate for passages of such transcendent value?

The Byzantine artists, in trying to invest their subjects with the feeling of what Otto calls the 'Numinous,' developed a special hieratic technique, and depicted the human form elongated, rigid, with dilated eyes, etc. So may it not be that a special diction is required for the greatest chapters of 'The Imitation'? Ecclesiastical Latin once gave the right atmosphere, but can simple twentieth-century English do this? A difficult question. This writer is all for simplicity; but it must be simplicity informed with a glowing sincerity; and where shall that be found?

One more difficulty must be mentioned. Thomas à Kempis wrote for men dedicated to religion, who knew the Scriptures by heart, and readily apprehended every Biblical allusion. Up to, let us say, fifty years ago, a translator could rely upon his readers having at least an outline knowledge of Bible history, and some familiarity

with the Christian vocabulary. But today whole sections of the population are admittedly pagan; and how translate for them such simple words as 'gratia,' 'Trinitati' and 'manna,' to take three words only in Chapter 1 of Book 1?

Finally: in the following attempt to translate three of the easier chapters—one each from Books, 1, 2 and 3, the writer is acutely aware that he cannot fulfil his own demands; but he does honestly hope that someone with the right equipment, and what is equally important with the right spirit, will be moved to attempt this great task in spite of its great difficulties.

NOTE: Going back to the problem of the extent to which a translator may use current colloquial speech; as a sound criterion, the following question should be asked: if Thomas à Kempis were living today and writing for the men and women of today, how would he express himself? This test will be found to justify many passages which at first sight appear far too free.

BOOK 1—CHAPTER 2

Quite naturally we all value education¹ highly—very highly. But education without the awareness of, and reverence for God is useless. The dullest rustic² knowing something of God, would be a finer man than an arrogant materialist who studies the laws of the universe, but remains ignorant of his own divine origin.³ Deep self-knowledge invariably gives a man the poorest opinion of himself—flattery gives *him* no pleasure. If I knew all the facts in an encyclopædia,⁴ but nothing of Divine love, how would that help me with God? He will ask for deeds, not words. Then don't make learning the end of life; it will only lead to much dissension and disappointment. The pedantic scholar wishes to appear and also to be called learned; yet there is so much knowledge of little use, indeed of no use for man's spiritual nature; and what folly to aim at anything lower than our eternal welfare! Pretentious terminology⁵ will not satisfy man's deepest needs, but a well-ordered life brings great tranquillity of mind and a good conscience great trust in God. The greater your enlightenment the more strictly will you be judged, unless such enlightenment has led to a better way of life; so that not pride, but fear should go with any gift you possess. And should you be tempted to regard yourself as well-informed and cultured—think for a moment; there are whole libraries of which you know nothing.⁶ Then try and forget your little learning: admit your ignorance. Why so jealous of your prestige when so many surpass you in scholarship and spiritual insight? If you are anxious to make any real progress, avoid publicity⁷ and prefer to remain unknown.

1 'naturaliter scire desiderat.'

2 'profecto humilis rusticus.'

3 Trans. by Cornelle:

'Un païson stupide, et sans expérience,
Qui perce jusqu'aux cieus sans réfléchir sur soy.'
Qui ne sçait que t'aymer, et n'a que foy,
Vaut mieux qu'un Philosophe enflé de la science,

4 'omnia quæ in mundo sunt.'

5 'multa verba.'

6 'sunt multa plura quæ nescis.'

7 'ama nesciri.'

Indeed, life's greatest and most useful gift is the deep humility born of true self-knowledge. Forget self, think well and highly of others—that is the way of wisdom, even of perfection.

And should you see anyone fall into sin, even gross sin, do not complacently stand yourself on a moral pedestal:⁸ you cannot tell how long it will be before you also fall. All of us are frail, yet think no one frailer than yourself.

BOOK 2—CHAPTER 3

Until you yourself are at peace, you cannot possibly bring it to others; and a peacemaker is of even greater value than a distinguished professor.¹ The irritable and hot tempered distort the most innocent words and actions. Far too readily they believe the worst; but the peaceable will see and point out the best in everything and in everybody.²

The genuinely peaceful suspect no one; but the vain and discontented are troubled incessantly with many suspicions: never at peace themselves, they will not allow others to rest in peace. They're quick enough to say things better left unsaid, but very forgetful of things that ought to be done. With a microscopic eye they examine their neighbour's duties,³ but how blind they are to their own. Let such as these serve as a warning: deal first with yourself; then, and only then, will you be justified in correcting your neighbour. You know very well how to excuse yourself and to put your own conduct in the best light; yet you do not treat others in this way. It would be much better to accuse yourself and excuse others. You wish for toleration?⁴ Then in return be considerate and charitable; for still you are far from that true charity and humility which feel anger and resentment only against self.

It is not a great thing to settle down comfortably with the good-natured—that is not difficult, for we all prefer to live in peace and are happy with those who agree with us. But to live peacefully with the coarse and stubborn, with the unprincipled, with those who oppose us in everything—ah! that is a great thing, an achievement worthy of a man.⁵

Yet some find it possible to be at peace with themselves and with their fellow men also. But many strike discord everywhere: a pest to others,⁶ but a greater pest to themselves. And there are still some who not only live in peace, but are always ready and eager to pacify and reconcile the unfriendly.

Yet when all has been said, in the afflictions of life nothing but the quiet acceptance of suffering will bring us peace; and this is much to be preferred to hard insensibility. Patience in suffering

⁸ 'non deberes te tamen meliorem aestimare.'

¹ 'quam bene doctus.'

³ 'considerat quid alii facere tenentur.'

⁵ 'laudamile nimis virileque factum.'

⁵ 'laudabile nimis virileque factum.'

² 'omnia ad bonum convertit.'

⁴ 'Si portari vis.'

⁶ 'aliis sunt graves.'

wins great peace. The master of himself, the ruler of circumstances, the friend of Christ, and the possessor of immortality—such is that one who endures suffering patiently.

BOOK 3—CHAPTER 24

Beware of curiosity, and keep free from trivial extraneous affairs. What are such things to you? The one, the great concern of your life must be to follow me. *You* are not responsible for this man's character, or the words and actions of that one. *You* will not be asked to reply for others, but a strict account of your own life will be demanded. Why then become entangled and hindered by such matters. Every creature and everything in the great universe¹ is comprehended by me. Every man is an open book to me:² I know him intimately, his thoughts, his wishes, his ambitions. Then entrust yourself entirely to my care, and let the faithless be as worried as they please. Do what they will, they cannot escape the results of their words and actions—it is impossible to evade me.

Never struggle to mix with the influential or wealthy, or take pride in the wide circle of your friends, no, not even in one chosen friend. For all such things fill the heart and mind and shut out my light and influence. If only you were fitly prepared and ready at any moment to experience my Presence, how willingly would I enlighten you and show you my deep mysteries.

Be on your guard. On no account neglect prayer, and in all your doings remember that great preservative—humility.

THE TRUE BASIS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

DISCUSSION

THE exigencies of the Press prevent the collation of the various reactions to Père Nicholas's article, as we must go to press before readers have seen the second part of the article. But the discussion is already opened on a fundamental level by the following letter. Some will have thought that the original article went too far. Fr James thinks that it has not gone far enough. He may be thought to have stated the case in its extreme form; and those who disagree will be given an opportunity of replying in a subsequent issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT—*Editor*.

To the Editor, LIFE OF THE SPIRIT:

Dear Sir,

The article by Fr Nicholas in the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT raises so much that has been for so long of absorbing interest to me, that I cannot refrain from writing to you about it. You must pardon what may seem insolence on the part of a typical secular priest in

¹ 'quæ sub sole fiunt.

² 'scio qualiter cum unoquoque sit.'