



What Is Translation? An Act of Love and Hospitality

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The work of translation is a labor of love. It emerges in the *divestment* of the translator that is concomitant with the *investment* in the alterity, the otherness, of the Other. It strives against the temptation to reduce the Other to the same, to force the original to dance to my tune. In other words, any translation worthy of the name loves the Other as a *subject* whom I invite to abide in my presence. If I take the Text to be the *object* of my intentionality, which I dissect under my microscope and reassemble to suit my needs, then my translation is unjust. I cannot love that which I dissect. The Other must, therefore, be allowed to give itself on its own terms, without any coercion, seduction, or force. Translation requires love.

Love is a necessary condition for translation. Think about it. I love my partner not because she makes me feel a certain way, nor because she looks or acts a certain way that I can chart phenomenologically. No, I love her beyond all others because there is something about her that transcends my perception. Just being in her presence messes with my ability to organize the things around me as objects of my experience. She decenters my subjectivity, causing me to lay down my intentionality at her feet—as one lays down a sword in surrender—so that I may be the object of her gaze, of her intentionality. Before such love, I recognize that I must decrease so that she might increase.

Phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion gets us closer than any to the ethical mode of translation that I am here suggesting with his “erotic reduction.” He writes,

If I want truly to gaze on the other, I attach myself neither to her silhouette, however pleasing it might be, nor to some voluntary or involuntary sign that her bearing might reveal, but to her face; I face up to her (*je l'envisage*). “Facing up” to her does not mean fixing my gaze on her mouth or some other emblematic element but fixing exclusively on her eyes, and directly in their center—this ever black point, for it is in fact a question of a simple hole, the pupil. Even for a gaze aiming objectively, the pupil remains a living refutation of objectivity, an irremediable denial of the object; here, for the first time, in the very midst of the visible, there is nothing to see, except an invisible and untargetable (*invisible*) void.¹

¹Jean-Luc Marion, *Prolegomenon to Charity*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 81.

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What Is Translation? An Act of Conversation and Communication

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Today's young adults live in worlds saturated with words. They are communicating constantly and through multiple media: Facebook, Twitter, texting, Skype, and plain old-fashioned conversation. Often, this is happening while they have other media "on" at the same time: music, YouTube videos, and computers. I serve a community of young adults in a particular context of words: higher education. I am surrounded by students who spend all hours of the day and night consuming, crafting, padding, cutting, manipulating, interpreting, and examining words.

Within this context, what does biblical translation have to offer the faith lives of young adults? And, given the word-worlds of these particular young adults, can biblical words still bring meaning and value? As I asked these questions, I had some initial assumptions based on my work with students. But I also wondered to what extent my assumptions were shaped by my own perspective as a Gen Xer. After all, as a member of Generation X, when I met the task of biblical translation, I was delighted to discover that beneath the layers of religiosity and tradition were word jewels rich with meaning. As these jewels were uncovered, I delighted in exploring these ancient words, much as an archeologist might delight at discovering lost treasure. This is true for many of my peers as well. But I am a Gen Xer. And I work with Millennials. Do they find the same delight? Am I assuming that my delight is theirs?

I knew that I could not sit alone in my office and answer for young adults. So, I took my question and went to the land where I often interact with them: Facebook. I sent a message to a group of undergraduates and recent graduates who would find my question interesting and might have something to say. I asked them, "In what ways is Bible translation important to young adults?"

Soon after sending my message, responses of excitement and thoughtfulness were posted. Nearly every message began with an exclamation of delight for the invitation and the conversation. These young adults found the topic rich and important. Through the messages, a grouping of acquaintances and friends wove themselves into a community of explorers, discovering and articulating together. As each person sent their response, they nearly always addressed others' thoughts

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Only by “facing up” to the alterity of the Text in the act of translation—the Text whose invisibility shines through its visibility—may I truly love the Text on its own terms. Because the intentionality of my gaze is not directed at any part of this Text, it fails to offer the Text as an object of my experience. I love the alterity of the Text (and in biblical translation this alterity goes by another name: the Word) by letting go my intentionality so that the Word may give itself without any manipulation on my part. This constitutes, for Marion, a consciousness that flows against the current. To love the Word, I expose myself to the Word. I take on a cloak of radical passivity and, as if by a prayer, welcome the Word to give itself.

Such love that I am suggesting for (biblical) translation is an act of radical hospitality that expropriates that which is same, known, or dominant to create space for the Other, the unknown or marginalized. This is particularly the case with biblical translation wherein the translator hosts a Word that is radically Other. Thus the translator ought to attune herself to the abode in which the Text dwells: namely, its context. The Text presents itself to us according to the structural and connotative linkages that constitute it and, like a turtle removed from its shell, the Text cannot exist apart from its context. The task of the translator is not then to recreate this original context, as if such a thing were possible; rather, the task of the translator is to provide a space of “correspondence without adequacy,” for a new dwelling place for the Text in which it may retain its alterity. The eminent French philosopher Paul Ricoeur captures this notion of translation with what he labels “linguistic hospitality.” Ricoeur avers, “Linguistic hospitality...is the act of inhabiting the word of the Other paralleled by the act of receiving the word of the Other into one’s own home, one’s own dwelling.”² The translator plays host to an Other who will never be altogether at home in this new context. Nevertheless, she strives to make this new abode, this new context, as accommodating as possible.

Translation is a labor of love, a love that manifests itself in the divestment of the translator in an act of radical hospitality. When we translate the biblical Word into new contexts we create a place in which we invite the Word who is beyond all contextualization, and yet who deigns to inhabit our shabby abodes, to dwell among us. The Word has revealed himself to us as a tent-dweller (ἐσκήνωσεν) and so, with fear and trembling, we welcome the Word with a temerity suffused with love into a new temporary dwelling, a new context. This ought to be the aim of translation. ⊕

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²Paul Ricoeur, *On Translation*, trans. Eileen Brennan (Oxford: Routledge, 2006) xvi.

while adding their own, causing the conversation to build and grow. More than one yearned for a face-to-face conversation where they could gather together and further explore the topic. And already, they are looking for another topic of conversation to begin on Facebook.

So what did I find out? First, I found out that in this particular case, my initial thesis was essentially correct. If my Facebook conversation is representative, it would be fair to say that today's young adults still take delight in discovering nuance and meaning in old words of biblical text. Today's young adults yearn to know more about what lies beneath the surface of the words they encounter in the Bible. They yearn for authenticity from the Bible and the process of studying the Bible. They desire to take their frustrations and disappointments with the Bible seriously. They are comfortable with ambiguities and contradictions. They desire relevance and accessibility. And they come alive when they discover that their desires for social action and change are not separate from the Bible but are connected to the very heart of God.

And yet, I cannot speak for a whole generation. Not all young adults want to consider historical significance in relationship to the Bible. Others are not sure there is anything of deep meaning for them in the Bible. Given these opinions and others, we might get a little uncomfortable as we talk together. Still, I think we must. While I heard amazing and intriguing things as I conversed with young adults via Facebook, I don't think that their answers are the primary point. In fact, I believe that the very act of involving young adults in the conversation is the point. Or maybe better said, being in conversation and relationship with young adults is the point.

Young adults are hungry for deep conversations of significance. And today's young adults, more than any other generation before them, do things in relationship. Therefore, for those of us who keep company with biblical texts, we need also to be keeping company with young adults. And, we need to invite these young adults into broader conversations of biblical translation so that their voices and perspectives impact the outcome. Through conversation and relationship, we discover together and are shaped by one another.

I, too, have been shaped by this exercise. As I began this quest, I did not imagine where it would go. I began the conversation with some young adults in order to hear how they saw things. Yet while I was intending to gather them with me in a conversation and exploration, I never imagined that the act of having the conversation together would be the whole point. More, in true young adult style, we had this conversation without being in the room together—and we had a lot of fun in the process. ⊕

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