

## ***The Literary Impact of The Authorised Version***

**C. S. Lewis**

**The Ethel M. Wood Lecture  
delivered before the University of London  
on 20 March 1950.**

[p.3]

No translation can preserve the qualities of its original unchanged. On the other hand, except where lyrical poetry is in question, the literary effect of any good translation must be more indebted to the original than to anything else. This is especially true of narrative and of moral instruction. Where the originals are Hebrew it holds in an unusual degree even for lyrical poetry because the parallelism of the form is a translatable quality. There is therefore no possibility of considering the literary impact of the Authorised Version apart from that of the Bible in general. Except in a few passages where the translation is bad, the Authorised Version owes to the original its matter, its images, and its figures. Our aesthetic experience in reading any of the great Old Testament stories or, say, the liberation of St. Peter and the shipwreck of St. Paul, depends only to a small extent on the translator. That is why I hope I may be excused for prefacing what I have to say about the literary fortunes of our English Bible by some remarks on the literary fortunes of the Bible before it became English. What is common, even from the literary point of view, to the originals and all the versions is after all far more important than what is peculiar. And by carrying the story a little further back we have more chance to be cured of our dangerous though natural assumption that a book which has always been praised has always been read in the same way or valued for the same reasons. Virgil's Homer was very different from Chapman's, Chapman's from Pope's, Pope's from Andrew Lang's, and Andrew Lang's from Mr. Rieu's.

[p.4]

There is a certain sense in which 'the Bible as literature' does not exist. It is a collection of books so widely different in period, kind, language, and aesthetic value, that no common criticism can be passed on them. In uniting these heterogeneous texts the Church was not guided by literary principles, and the literary critic might regard their inclusion between the same boards as a theological and historical accident irrelevant to his own branch of study. But when we turn from the originals to any version made by one man, or at least bearing the stamp of one age, a certain appearance of unity creeps in. The Septuagint, the Vulgate, Luther's Bible, or the Authorised Version, can each perhaps be regarded as a book. And in the minds of those who used these translations the impression, if you will the illusion, of unity was increased by the unity of the liturgical context in which they were heard, and also by the doctrine of Inspiration. A belief in strictly verbal inspiration will indeed make all Scripture a book by a single Author. Hence Donne

in his Seventy-Ninth Sermon rather comically passes favourable judgement on the style of the Omnipotent, assuring us that ‘the Holy Ghost is an eloquent author, a vehement and an abundant author, but yet not luxuriant’.

The Bible thus considered, for good or ill, as a single book, has been read for almost every purpose more diligently than for literary pleasure. Yet certain *testimonia* to it even on that score can be collected from earlier ages.

The oldest literary appreciation that I know is also the most modern in tone. When Longinus<sup>1</sup> praises the author of Genesis—in his language, ‘the lawgiver of the Jews’—for sublimity of conception, he seems to express a literary experience very like our own. Genesis is placed beside Homer and in some respects preferred to him. The Bible is being ranked among the classics on purely secular grounds. But it would be difficult to cite strict parallels from the ages that follow.

The learned M. de Bruyne in his *Études d’esthétique médiévale*

[p.5]

ale (1946) has collected a mass of evidence about the literary appreciation of Scripture in the Middle Ages. Praise is not lacking; but we certainly find ourselves in an alien world. On the threshold of that period we meet St. Augustine’s curious statement that the Bible uses *humillimum genus loquendi*.<sup>2</sup> If this referred to style in the narrower sense, if the Psalms and Prophets seemed to him to use ‘the lowest language’ it would be almost inexplicable. Almost, but not quite; the great, roaring machine of Latin rhetoric can, at times, deafen the human ear to all other literature. But from the context I suppose that St. Augustine is referring to something rather different—to that apparent naivety or simplicity of the literal sense which offended him until he had been taught that it was merely the outer shell, concealing the *sacramentorum altitudo*.<sup>3</sup> This distinction between the literal or historical sense and the allegorical senses—however these are classified by different doctors—is a fundamental factor in all medieval reading of the Bible. It is no doubt true, and must be insisted on, that no superstructure of allegories was allowed to abrogate the truth of the literal sense. Hugo of St. Victor urges upon his pupils the necessity of mastering the literal sense first. ‘I think’, he writes, you will never be perfectly subtle in the Allegory unless you are first grounded in the History.’<sup>4</sup> Yet this very passage reveals how inevitably the medieval exegesis belittled what we should regard as the actual literary quality of the text. It is clear that Hugo expects his pupils to hurry through the historical sense too quickly and perfunctorily. *Noli contemnere minima haec*<sup>5</sup> he adds, ‘Despise not these small things’. If you had despised the alphabet you would not now be able to read. An appreciation for which the story of Joseph and his brethren or David and Goliath was merely the

---

<sup>1</sup> *De Sublim.*, IX.

<sup>2</sup> *Conf.*, VI. v.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Eruditionis Didascalicae*, VI. iii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

alphabet, a necessary preliminary to higher and more delightful studies, may have been keen, but it was very unlike our own. Hence we are not sur-

[p.6]

prised to find him saying that the Scriptures are like a honeycomb. They appear dry on the outside *per simplicitatem sermonis* but are *dulcedine plena* within.<sup>6</sup> Notice how the *simplicitas sermonis* echoes St. Augustine's *humillimum genus loquendi*. Again, the Scripture may be compared to a lyre. The spiritual senses are like the strings: the historical sense is like the wood which does not sound itself but keeps the strings together.<sup>7</sup>

I do not wish in any way to deride the doctrine of multiple senses. Our own age, steeped in the symbolism of dreams and in the allegorical or semi-allegorical work of writers like Kafka and Mr. Rex Warner, will not look down on that doctrine with superiority. We may anticipate a revival of the allegorical sense in Biblical criticism. But it will probably be dangerous, and in the Middle Ages I think it was dangerous, to appreciation of the Historical Books as plain heroic narrative.

St. Thomas Aquinas throws a little more light on the references which we have already met to the 'lowness' or 'simplicity' of the Bible. He explains why Scripture expresses divine truths not merely through corporeal images but even through images of vile bodies rather than noble.<sup>8</sup> This is done, he says, to liberate the mind from error, to reduce the danger of any confusion between the symbol and the reality. It is an answer worthy of a profound theologian. At the same time, the passage in which it occurs reveals attitudes most hostile to aesthetic appreciation of the sacred text. It would seem, he says, that Scripture ought not to use metaphors. For what is proper to the lowest kind of learning (*infimae doctrinae*) does not seem suitable to the queen of the sciences. But metaphor is proper to poetry, and poetry is the lowest of all forms of learning—*est infima inter omnes doctrinas*. The answer, so far as it concerns us here, is that poetry and Scripture use metaphor for quite different reasons; poetry for delight and Scripture *propter necessitatem et utilitatem*.<sup>9</sup> Where a nineteenth century critic might have said that Scripture was itself the highest poetry,

[p.7]

St. Thomas says rather that the highest and the lowest *doctrinae* have, paradoxically, one point in common, but of course for different reasons.

From other medieval writers, notably Ulric of Strasbourg, de Bruyne has collected passages which seem, but perhaps not without illusion, to come nearer to the modern point of view. In

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, IV. i.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, V. ii.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theol. Quaest. I, Art. IX.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

general, however, I do not think we shall go too far if we say that medieval appreciation of the Bible is divided from modern by a very wide gulf.

If the medieval approach is alien, that of the Renaissance seems to me sometimes repellent. We reach the age of Ciceronianism, of Humanism, of that deadly classical dignity which so obscured and distorted (along with many other things) the classics themselves. It was an age in which Scaliger could tax Homer with vulgarity and complain that Andromache's lament over Hector smacked of an ill-bred woman—*plebeiam mulierculam*.<sup>10</sup> Where an aesthetic like this prevailed the simple grandeur of *Kings* and *Judges* and the Gospels had little chance of being valued at its true worth. Hence Vida thought that the story of the Passion could be improved by the tinsel of his *Christiad*. In a sense, of course, it is only a literary counterpart to the religious paintings of the time: there too vast Vitruvian halls rise as the background to 'deep, abstracted, holy scenes'. I leave to others a problem I have failed to solve—why this offends in words so much more than it does in paint—and pursue our immediate subject, by tracing the effect of this movement even on so great a man as Sir Thomas More. In his late treatise *On the Passion* he ventures to put words into the mouth of Our Lord. The thing had been done before. In the *Imitation* it had been so done as to satisfy not only piety but our sense of the Dominical style. But More takes the words in Gethsemane, 'This is your hour and the power of darkness', and seems to think they can be strengthened by expansion into the following:

[p.8]

Thys is the shorte whyle that is graunted yee, and the libertie geuen unto darknesse, that nowe ye maye in the night, which till this howre ye coule neuer be suffered to bryng to passe in the daye, like monstuous rauenyng fowles, lyke skryche owles and hegges, lyke backes, howlettes, nighte crows, and byrdes of the hellye lake, goe aboute with your billes, your tallentes, your teeth, and your shyrl shryching outerageouslye, but all in vayne thus in the darke to flee uppon me.<sup>11</sup>

I ought to warn you that I am quoting a translation, that of More's granddaughter. But if anyone looks at the Latin and likes it much better than the English, I shall be surprised. I am not, of course, suggesting for one moment any spiritual flaw. The question is about More's taste. Indeed, the more we reverence him as a man, the more striking the example becomes. Even a man so steeped as he in the spirit of the Dominical utterances could be, by Humanistic rhetoric, so deafened to the majesty of their style.

With the first Protestant translators we get some signs of a changed approach. I would wish to take every precaution against exaggerating it. The history of the English Bible from Tyndale to the Authorised Version should never for long be separated from that European, and by no means exclusively Protestant, movement of which it made part. No one can write that history without skipping to and fro across national and religious boundaries at every moment. He will have to go

---

<sup>10</sup> *Poet.*, V. iii.

<sup>11</sup> *Works* (London, 1557), p. 1397.

from the Soncino Hebrew Bible (1488) to Reuchlin's Hebrew Grammar (1506), then to Alcalá for Cardinal Ximenes' great Polyglot (1514) and north for Erasmus' New Testament in the same year, and then to Luther for the German New Testament in 1522, and pick up Hebrew again with Munster's Grammar in 1525, and see Luther worked over by Zwinglius and others for the Zurich Bible of 1529, and glance at the two French versions Of '34 and '35, and by no means neglect the new Latin translations of Pagninus ('28) and Munster ('34-'35) That is the sort of background against which Tyndale, Cover-

[p.9]

dale, Geneva, and Rheims must be set. For when we come to compare the versions we shall find that only a very small percentage of variants are made for stylistic or even doctrinal reasons. When men depart from their predecessors it is usually because they claim to be better Hebraists or better Grecians. The international advance of philology carries them on, and those who are divided by the bitterest theological hatreds gladly learn from one another. Tyndale accepts corrections from More: Rheims learns from Geneva: phrases travel through Rheims on their way from Geneva to Authorised. Willy-nilly all Christendom collaborates. The English Bible is the English branch of a European tree.

Yet in spite of this there is something new about Tyndale; for good or ill a great simplification of approach. 'Scripture', he writes, 'speaketh after the most grossest manner. Be diligent therefore that thou be not deceived with curiousness.'<sup>12</sup> In the words 'grossest manner' we recognize an echo of Augustine's *humillimum* genus and Hugo of St. Victor's *simplicitas sermonis*. That rusticity or meanness which we find it so hard to discern in the Bible is still apparent to Tyndale. The novelty is the rejection of the allegorical senses. That rejection he shares with most of the Reformers and even, as regards parts of the Bible, with a Humanistic Papist like Colet; and it is no part of my business to decide whether it marked an advance or a retrogression in theology. What is interesting is not Tyndale's negation of the allegories but his positive attitude towards the literal sense. He loves it for its 'grossness'. 'God is a Spirit', he writes, 'and all his words are spiritual. His literal sense is spiritual.'<sup>13</sup> That is very characteristic of Tyndale's outlook. For him, just as God's literal sense is spiritual, so all life is religion: cleaning shoes, washing dishes, our humblest natural functions, are all 'good works'.<sup>14</sup> The life

[p.10]

of religion, technically so called, wins no 'higher room in heaven... than a whore of the stews (if she repent)'.<sup>15</sup> This would certainly seem to be an attitude more favourable to the literary appreciation of much Scripture than any we have yet encountered. On the other hand Mr. Gavin Bone, whose loss we still deplore at Oxford, has said roundly that Tyndale 'hated literature'.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Parable of the Wicked Mammon, in Doctrinal Treatises*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge, 1848), p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Obedience of a Christian Man* (Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 309).

<sup>14</sup> *Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (Walter, *op. cit.*, pp. 100, 102).

<sup>15</sup> *Pathway* (Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 21).

This is based on his fierce condemnation of medieval romance<sup>16</sup>; a trait which is Humanistic as well as Puritanical. But I do not think he did hate literature. Where he speaks of his own work as a translator he sounds like a man with a sense of style; as when he says that Hebrew and Greek go well into English whereas ‘thou must seek a compass in the Latin, and yet shall have much work to translate it well-favouredly, so that it hath the same grace and sweetness.’<sup>17</sup> More important still is the evidence of his own original works.

I wish I had time to digress on those works. Tyndale’s fame as an English writer has been most unjustly overshadowed both by the greater fame of More and by his own reputation as a translator. He seems to me the best prose writer of his age. He is inferior to More in what may be called the elbow-room of the mind and (of course) in humour. In every other respect he surpasses him; in economy, in lucidity, and above all in rhythmical vitality. He reaches at times a piercing quality which is quite outside More’s range: ‘as a man feeleth God in himself, so is he to his neighbour’<sup>18</sup>—‘I am thou thyself, and thou art I myself, and can be no nearer of kin’<sup>19</sup>—‘be glad, and laugh from the low bottom of his heart’<sup>20</sup>—‘that he might see love, and love again’<sup>21</sup>—‘Who taught the eagles to spy out their prey? Even so the children of God spy out their Father’.<sup>22</sup> Though it is not strictly relevant, may I be excused, since the fact seems to be insufficiently known, for saying that Tyndale’s

[p.11]

social ethics are almost identical with those of More?—quite equally medieval and equally opposed to what some call the New Economics. The points on which these two brave and holy men agreed may have been few; but perhaps they were sufficient, if they had been accepted, to have altered the course of our history for the better.

It is not, of course, to be supposed that aesthetic considerations were uppermost in Tyndale’s mind when he translated Scripture. The matter was much too serious for that; souls were at stake. The same holds for all the translators. Coverdale was probably the one whose choice of a rendering came nearest to being determined by taste. His defects as well as his qualities led to this. Of all the translators he was the least scholarly. Among men like Erasmus, Tyndale, Munster, or the Jesuits at Rheims he shows like a rowing boat among battleships. This gave him a kind of freedom. Unable to judge between rival interpretations, he may often have been guided, half consciously, to select and combine by taste. Fortunately his taste was admirable.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Obedience* (Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 161).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 148, 149.

<sup>18</sup> *Wicked Mammon* (Walter, *op. cit.*, p. 58).

<sup>19</sup> *Obedience*, p. 296.

<sup>20</sup> *Pathway*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Obedience*, p. 136.

<sup>22</sup> *Answer to More*, ed. H. Walter (Cambridge, 1850), p. 490.

The history of the Authorised Version has been told so often that I will not attempt to re-tell it, and its beauties praised so lavishly that I will not praise them. Instead, I will proceed at once to its influence as an English book. I shall attempt to define that influence, for I think there has been misunderstanding about it and even a little exaggeration.

Let us begin by distinguishing the various senses in which one book can be said to influence the author of another book.

(1) A book may be, in the familiar language of research, a source. Lydgate mentions the loves of Mars and Venus. The immediate source might be some book like Boccaccio's *De Genealogia*, the ultimate source is Homer. It would, I think, be quite good English to say that Lydgate was here influenced by Homer. But that is not the most useful way of employing the word in literary history, nor is it generally so employed. If

[p.12]

anyone wishes to call a Source an Influence, let him do so; but let him recognize a Source as a very special kind of Influence. Most of us, I expect, would prefer to distinguish Source from Influence altogether. A Source gives us things to write about; an Influence prompts us to write in a certain way. Homer is a Source to Lydgate, but Homer was an Influence on Arnold when he wrote *Sohrab and Rustum*. Firdausi's *Shah Nameh* was Arnold's Source, but not an Influence on that poem. Malory was both a Source and an Influence in Tennyson's *Morte Darthur*; elsewhere in the *Idylls* a Source but perhaps hardly an Influence.

If these terms are accepted, we can distinguish the Bible as a Source for English Literature from the Bible as a literary Influence. That it is a Source of immense importance is obvious. For several centuries its persons, scenes, and doctrines were familiar to every Englishman. They are constantly used for illustration and allusion. But, of course, when the Bible is a Source, there is usually nothing to show whether the Authorised Version is being used or not. The Bible is one Source for Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel*, but his spelling of Achitophel's name is not derived from the Authorised. We may indeed assume that most authors, and all unlearned authors, after the sixteenth century derived their Biblical knowledge from that version. But this does not seem to be a fact of any importance. The persons and stories would be the same in whatever text they were known. On my view the huge mass of Biblical material in our literature has no place in an account of the Influence of the Authorised Version considered as an English book.

(2) It would, I suppose, be possible, to say that we are influenced by a book whenever we quote it; but probably no literary historian would wish to use the word influence in that way. It would seem to me reasonable to say, for example, that my own habit of immoderate quotation showed the Influence of Hazlitt, but not the Influence of the authors I quote; or that

[p.13]

Burton's habit of immoderate quotation might be influenced by Montaigne, not by the authors he quotes. Frequent quotation is itself a literary characteristic; if the authors whom we rifle were not themselves fond of quotation, then, in the very act of quoting, we proclaim our freedom from their influence. It is almost the difference between borrowing a man's clothes for a particular occasion and imitating his style of dress. If English literature is full of Biblical quotation, I would not describe this as the influence of the Authorised Version, any more than I would call Virgilians all those who quote Virgil. I am not saying that to do otherwise would be necessarily an improper use of language: I only think mine useful for the purpose in hand.

(3) So far I have been speaking of what may be called flagrant quotation—quotation isolated and proclaimed by typographical devices. But besides this, there is of course the embedded quotation—sentences or phrases from the Authorised Version artfully worked into an author's own language so that an ignorant reader might not recognize them. Our literature is full of this, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; in Trollope, Swinburne, and Kipling it becomes a positive nuisance; one contemporary American professor is very seriously infected. To this process the word Influence might much more naturally be applied. Yet even this does not seem to me to be Influence in the deepest sense, and I would prefer not to call it Influence at all. I will try to explain why.

Let us begin by laying side by side with it two other phenomena of the same sort: the ubiquitous embedded quotations from Homer in Plato's prose, or from Shakespeare in English prose. The scraps of Homer slip very artfully in and out of the orchestration of a Platonic period. But of course they are all marked out from their surroundings by their metre and their dialect. No one would maintain that Plato's own style grows out of, or was learned from, Homer's. And indeed the

[p.14]

Homeric bits would not be doing their work unless they were felt to be different from the Attic prose that surrounds them. They are used either for solemnity or facetiously—and the facetious is only the solemn stood on its head. The very response they demand depends on our feeling them as aliens. There would be no point in them unless we did. Far from showing that Plato's style has assimilated Homer's, they show the irreducible difference between them. And are not the embedded Shakespearian quotations in English the same? Of course, not every hack who speaks of a man more sinned against than sinning, or a consummation devoutly to be wished, knows that he is quoting Shakespeare. He may think (significantly) that he is quoting the Bible. He may even think he is using a proverb. But he knows quite well, and he expects his readers to know, that he is borrowing from somewhere. He counts on recognition. He is decorating his style. He wants the phrase to stand out from his own composition as gold lace stands out from a coat. The whole pleasure, such as it is, depends on the fact that the embedded quotation is different—in other words that his own style is not influenced by Shakespeare.



I believe that our embedded quotations from the Authorised Version are nearly always in exactly this position. They are nearly always either solemn or facetious. Only because the surrounding prose is different—in other words, only in so far as our English is not influenced by the Authorised Version—do they achieve the effect the authors intended.

(4) Here at last we reach what I would describe as Influence in the full and strict sense—the influence of the Authorised Version on vocabulary. I do not think we are being (in this sense) influenced by Shakespeare when we speak of a consummation devoutly to be wished. But I do think we are influenced by him (though the phonetic history is complicated) whenever we use *weird* as an adjective. We do so with no sense of quotation: the word has been really assimilated, has gone

[p.15]

into the blood-stream of our language. In the same way we are being influenced by Van Helmont (and perhaps by Paracelsus) whenever we use the word *gas*. In the same way we are being influenced by the Authorised Version and its predecessors whenever we use the words *beautiful*, *long-suffering*, *peacemaker* or *scapegoat*. Tyndale is our ultimate creditor for all these. But even here I must plead for a distinction. Henry Bradley rightly mentioned *damsel*, *raiment*, *travail*, and *quick* in the sense ‘alive’, as words saved by the Authorised Version for archaic and poetical use. But only for such use. They are not in the blood-stream. As for *loving-kindness* and *tender mercies*, they are so generally confined either to religious contexts or to mockery (which for our special purpose tells the same tale) that I almost classify them as very short embedded quotations.

(5) Finally, we come to literary influence in the fullest sense, the sense it bears when we say that *Paradise Lost* is influenced by Homer and Virgil, or nineteenth century journalism by Macaulay or modern English poetry by Mr. Eliot. You will perhaps remember that I have defined Influence, in this sense, as that which prompts a man to write in a certain way. But even within this definition further distinctions break out. The influence may show itself in architectonics. That is the most obvious, though by no means the only, manner in which Virgil influences Milton. The whole plan of his epic is Virgilian. Very few English writers have undergone an influence of that sort from any book of the Bible. Tupper’s *Proverbial Philosophy* and the *Book of Mormon* are perhaps instances. Some would add Blake’s *Prophetic Books*. Again, Influence may show itself in the use of language—in the rhythm, the imagery, or (using that word in its narrowest sense) the style.

The influence of the rhythms of the Authorised Version seems to me to be very hard to detect. Its rhythms are in fact extremely various, and some of them are unavoidable in the English language. I am not at all sure that a resemblance in

[p.16]

rhythm, unless supported by some other resemblance, is usually recognizable. If I say ‘At the regatta Madge avoided the river and the crowd’ would this, without warning, remind you of ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth’? Even if it did, is the common rhythm, thus separated from community of thought and temper, a matter of any importance? I believe that wherever an English writer seems to us to recall the scriptural rhythms, he is always recalling other associations as well. The influence of rhythm, isolated from imagery and style, is perhaps an abstraction.

In imagery I suppose the influence to be very great, though I must frankly confess that I have not been able to invent a method of checking it. If English writers in elevated contexts tend to speak of corn and wine rather than of beef and beer and butter, of chariots rather than chargers, of rain rather than sunshine as a characteristic blessing, of sheep more often than cows and of the sword more often than either the pike or the gun, if bread rather than mutton or potatoes is their lofty synonym for food, if stone is more poetical than brick, trumpets than bugles and purple and fine linen loftier than satin and velvet, I suspect that this is due to the Bible, but I have no rigorous proof. Nor, in this sphere, would it be easy to distinguish the Biblical influence from that generally Mediterranean and ancient influence which comes from the classics as well as the Bible. But I believe the Biblical influence is here very great.

But in our style, in the actual build of our sentences, I think the influence has possibly been less than we suppose. The perfect example of an influence in this field is that exercised on our prose by Dryden and his contemporaries (Tillotson and the like). You remember that he went all through the *Essay on Dramatic Poesy* and altered every sentence that ended with a preposition. This is, I say, a perfect example of Influence. No one can pretend that this curious taboo was inherent in the genius of the language and would have developed even without

[p.17]

the action of Dryden and his fellow Gallicists. On the contrary, it is so alien from the language that it has never penetrated into the conversation of even the worst prigs, and serves no purpose but to increase those little bunches of unemphatic monosyllables that English was already prone to. On the other hand, it has so established itself in our formal style that thousands obey it unconsciously. It is, very precisely, a thing that prompts us to write in a certain way: even I, who detest it for a frenchified schoolroom superstition, often feel it plucking at my elbow. I doubt whether the Authorised Version has achieved any comparable dominance over our style. Indeed, what astonishes me here is the failure of some of its most familiar germs to get into our language at all. *It came to pass, answered and said, lo*—have these ever been used by any English writer without full consciousness that he was quoting? If we look into those authors who are usually said to be influenced by the style of the Authorised Version, we shall find that such influence is indeed present but that it is hardly dominant. I will consider Ruskin and Bunyan.

In Ruskin embedded quotation and imagery from the Bible are made great use of, but Homer and Spenser are used not very much less, Dante not infrequently. And all these are used consciously. What Ruskin tells us in *Praeterita*<sup>23</sup> about the formation of his own style is relevant:

Had it not been for constant reading of the Bible, I might probably have taken Johnson for my model of English. To a useful extent I have always done so; in these first essays, partly because I could not help it, partly of set, and well set, purpose ... The turns and returns of reiterated *Rambler* and iterated *Idler* fastened themselves in my ears and mind: nor was it possible for me, till long afterwards, to quit myself of Johnsonian symmetry, in sentences intended either with swordsman's or paviour's blow, to cleave an enemy's crest or drive down the oaken pile of a principle.

In his mature style—in this very passage—I think we can recognize the Johnsonian element: I cannot recognize the

[p.18]

Biblical. Elsewhere, though I do not deny its presence—and especially in the images—it is one of many resources. I think resources is the best word. It is, so to speak, one of the colours in his paint box, used at his own discretion. He has many others. And what makes the total effect, for me, so very unlike the Authorised Version, is the periodic structure of Ruskin's prose. Already in the passage quoted, which is familiar and epistolary compared with the high passages in *Modern Painters or Stones of Venice*, you will have noticed the transition nor was it possible. That is learned from classical Latin. And so, in the long run, is the Ruskinian period as a whole. A structure descending from Cicero through the prose of Hooker, Milton, and Taylor, and then enriched with romantic colouring for which Homer and the Bible are laid under contribution—that seems to me the formula for Ruskin's style. If you could take away what comes from the Bible it would be impaired. It would hardly, I think, be crippled. It would certainly not be annihilated. This is real influence, but limited influence. The influence of Italian epic on Spenser would be a good contrast. If you took away from the *Faerie Queen* everything that is learned from Ariosto and Boiardo, what would be left would be either nothing or a radically different poem. This is quite consistent with the view that Spenser has added something of his own and even transmuted his originals. The alchemist may turn silver into gold: but he had to have the silver.

Bunyan, at first sight, will strike most of us as far more Biblical than Ruskin. But this impression is partly due to the fact that both are to us rather archaic and rather simple in syntax. To that extent any unlearned author of Bunyan's time would be bound to remind us of the Bible whether he had ever read it or not. We must discount that accidental similarity and look deeper. I take an example at random:

---

<sup>23</sup> XII.

So *Mistrust* and *Timorous* ran down the hill, and Christian went on his way. But thinking again of what he heard from the men, he felt in his bosom for his Roll, that he might read therein and be comforted: but he felt, and found it not,

[p.19]

Then was Christian in great distress, and knew not what to do, for he wanted that which used to relieve him, and that which should have been his pass into the Celestial City. Here therefore he began to be much perplexed and knew not what to do. At last he bethought that he had slept in the Arbour.

The question is not how much of this might occur in the Authorised Version, but how much might be expected to occur in Bunyan if he had not read it. Much of it, of course, is quite unlike the Bible; phrases like *Then was Christian in great distress, he wanted that which used to relieve him, Here therefore he began to be much perplexed*. There remain *he went on his way, he felt and found it not*, and the use of *so* to introduce a new step in a narrative. These are in the manner of the Authorised Version—though this use of *so* is not very common there and is far commoner in Malory. But I do not feel at all certain that Bunyan is deriving them from his Bible. And if we look through his work we shall find that his best and most characteristic sentences often have a very unscriptural ring:

But the man, not at all discouraged, fell to cutting and hacking most fiercely.

So I looked up in my Dream and saw the clouds rack at an unusual rate, upon which I heard a great sound of a Trumpet...

Why, he objected against Religion itself; he said it was a pitiful low, sneaking business for a man to mind Religion.

Some also have wished that the next way to their Father's house were here, that they might be troubled no more with either Hills or Mountains to go over: but the way is the way, and there's an end.

At last he came in, and I will say that for my Lord, he carried it wonderful lovingly to him. There were but a few good bits at the Table but some of it was laid upon his Trencher.

Such passages seem to me the essential Bunyan. His prose comes to him not from the Authorised Version but from the fireside, the shop, and the lane. He is as native as Malory or Defoe. The Scriptural images themselves take on a new homeliness in these surroundings: 'She said she was sent for to go

[p.20]

to her Husband: and then she up and told us how she had seen him in a dream, dwelling in a curious place among Immortals, wearing a Crown, playing upon a Harp.' The Crown and Harp

come no doubt from the Apocalypse, but the rest of the sentence comes from Bedfordshire and in their village setting they are somehow transformed. Just so his Delectable Mountains are Bedfordshire hills magnified, green to the top. Without the Bible he would not have written the *Pilgrim's Progress* at all, for his mind would have been utterly different; but its style might have been much the same without the Authorised Version.

If I am right in thinking that the Authorised Version as a strictly literary influence has mattered less than we have often supposed, it may be asked how I account for the fact. I think there are two explanations.

In the first place, we must not assume that it always gave so much literary pleasure as it did in the nineteenth century. Thanks to Professor Sutherland, most of us now know about the egregious Edward Harwood who in 1768 published his *Liberal Translation of the New Testament: Being an attempt to translate the Sacred Writings with the same Freedom, Spirit and Elegance With which other English Translations of the Greek Classics have lately been executed*. Harwood wrote to substitute 'the elegance of modern English' for 'the bald and barbarous language of the old vulgar version'. And no doubt Harwood was, by our standards, an ass. But can he have been the only one of his kind? Or does he voice a widely spread feeling which only reverence concealed? 'Bald and barbarous', lacking in elegance... we have heard something not quite unlike this before: 'the most grossest manner', *simplicitas sermonis, humillimum genus loquendi*. It is not a charge anyone would be likely to bring against the Authorised Version or its originals to-day. Those who dislike Scripture are now more likely to call its style florid or inflated; those who like it would praise it for sublimity. When and how did this change occur?

[p.21]

The answer, I suggest, is that the modern approach, or what was till lately the modern approach, to the Bible is deeply influenced by the Romantic Movement; by which I here mean not the Lake Poets but that taste for the primitive and the passionate which can be seen growing through nearly the whole of the eighteenth century. The men who were engaged in exhuming the ballads, the Elder Edda, the Sagas, the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Kalevala*, the forgers of *Otranto* and *Ossian*, those who dreamed of bards and druids, must have heard the Bible with new ears. The primitive simplicity of a world in which kings could be shepherds, the abrupt and mysterious manner of the prophets, the violent passions of bronze-age fighting men, the background of tents and flocks and desert and mountain, the village homeliness of Our Lord's parables and metaphors now first, I suspect, became a positive literary asset. The 'vile bodies' which St. Thomas had to explain were no longer felt to be vile. Something of the same sort was happening to Homer. Scaliger had found him low. Chapman had revered him for his hidden wisdom. With Pope's preface we reach a different attitude. 'I would not be as delicate', he says, 'as those modern critics who are shocked at the servile offices and mean employments in which we sometimes see the heroes of Homer engaged. There is a pleasure in taking a view of that simplicity, in opposition to the luxury of succeeding ages; in beholding monarchs without their guards, princes tending their flocks, and princesses drawing water from the springs.' He

significantly adds that he has admitted into his version ‘several of those general phrases and manners of expression which have attained a veneration even in our language from being used in the Old Testament’.

I suggest, then, that until the Romantic taste existed the Authorised Version was not such an attractive model as we might suppose. That would be one cause limiting its influence. The second cause was, I believe, its familiarity.

This may sound paradoxical, but it is seriously meant. For

[p.22]

three centuries the Bible was so well known that hardly any word or phrase, except those which it shared with all English books whatever, could be borrowed without recognition. If you echoed the Bible everyone knew that you were echoing the Bible. And certain associations were called up in every reader’s mind; sacred associations. All your readers had heard it read, as a ritual or almost ritual act, at home, at school, and in church. This did not mean that reverence prevented all Biblical echoes. It did mean that they would only be used either with conscious reverence or with conscious irreverence, either religiously or facetiously. There could be a pious use and a profane use: but there could be no ordinary use. Nearly all that was Biblical was recognizably Biblical, and all that was recognized was sacer, numinous; whether on that account to be respected or on that account to be flouted makes very little difference. Mark what Boswell says under Sat. April 3d 1773:

He [sc. Dr. Johnson] disapproved of introducing scripture phrases into secular discourses. This seemed to me a question of some difficulty. A scripture expression may be used like a highly classical phrase to produce an instantaneous strong impression.

‘Like a highly classical phrase’—that is the point; and producing a strong impression. It is difficult to conceive conditions less favourable to that unobtrusive process of infiltration by which a profound literary influence usually operates. An influence which cannot evade our consciousness will not go very deep.

It may be asked whether now, when only a minority of Englishmen regard the Bible as a sacred book, we may anticipate an increase of its literary influence. I think we might if it continued to be widely read. But this is not very likely. Our age has, indeed, coined the expression ‘the Bible as literature’. It is very generally implied that those who have rejected its theological pretensions nevertheless continue to enjoy it as a treasure house of English prose. It may be so. There may be people who, not having been forced upon familiarity with it by

[p.23]

believing parents, have yet been drawn to it by its literary charms and remained as constant readers. But I never happen to meet them. Perhaps it is because I live in the provinces. But I cannot help suspecting, if I may make an Irish bull, that those who read the Bible as literature do not read the Bible.

It would be strange if they did. If I am right in thinking that the Bible, apart from its sacred character, appeals most easily to a Romantic taste, we must expect to find it neglected and even disliked in our own age. The Counter-Romantic movement is indeed so violent that those of us who do not share it almost wonder if there is not something pathological in the violence. The hatred of Romanticism has reached that stage at which it can see no differences of kind between the things hated. I read the other day an essay in which the author dismissed Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse* on the ground that 'Morris manages these things better than Chesterton ever did; and nobody wants to preserve William Morris'. I can understand, even if I deplore, the taste that does not want to preserve William Morris. What staggers me is the implication that Chesterton and Morris wrote the same sort of poetry. It is as if a man said 'Holbein does all these things better than Titian'. I can only conclude that the author's revulsion from Romantic poetry has reached a degree of violence at which the difference between the cool water-colour effects of Morris, his northern bareness, and his monotonous plashing melody cannot be distinguished from all the gold and scarlet and all the orgiastic drum-beats of Chesterton. Phobias make strange bedfellows. Perhaps to those who cannot endure the presence of a cat, the huge, square-headed tabby Tom and the little smoke-faced goblin from Siam are all one. But clearly in an age so anti-Romantic as this, all those qualities which once helped the Bible as literature will work against it. David weeping over Absalom, Moses at the Burning Bush, Elijah on Carmel, the Horror of Great Darkness, the Maniac among the Tombs—

[p.24]

what have these passages to say to an unbeliever unless he is a Romantic or to a Counter-Romantic unless he is a believer?

What I am saying involves the view that an approach to the Bible which seemed to many of us in our youth to be simply human, was in reality the product of a particular period in the history of taste. I hope you will find this the more credible because of our brief glances at the Bible's earlier history. The Medieval taste for which the literal sense was merely the dry crust of the honeycomb concealing the golden sweetness of the allegory, and the Humanistic taste which felt that the simplicity of Scripture would be improved by rhetoric, may each have seemed, in its own day, natural and eternal. Against that background we can see in proper perspective the eighteenth and nineteenth century taste. No doubt we may conclude that the Counter-Romantic taste of the twentieth will also prove ephemeral; indeed, whatever the hidden fuel may be, it can hardly blaze in its present fury for very long. It will be succeeded by other attitudes which we cannot predict.

Inevitably we ask whether any of these is likely to be favourable to a literary appreciation of the Bible. Stripped (for most readers) of its divine authority, stripped of its allegorical senses, denied

a romantic welcome for its historical sense, will it none the less return on the wave of some new fashion to literary pre-eminence and be read? And of course we do not know. I offer my guess. I think it very unlikely that the Bible will return as a book unless it returns as a sacred book. Longinus could enjoy it without being a Christian. But then Longinus came as near to being a Romantic as a Greek could, and his view of the world and man was in its own way a religious one.<sup>24</sup> It would be rash to expect many more of his kind. Unless the religious claims of the Bible are again acknowledged, its literary claims will, I think, be given only 'mouth honour' and that decreasingly. For it is, through and through, a sacred book. Most of its component parts were

[p.25]

written, and all of them were brought together, for a purely religious purpose. It contains good literature and bad literature. But even the good literature is so written that we can seldom disregard its sacred character. It is easy enough to read Homer while suspending our disbelief in the Greek pantheon; but then the *Iliad* was not composed chiefly, if at all, to enforce obedience to Zeus and Athene and Poseidon. The Greek tragedians are more religious than Homer, but even there we have only religious speculation or at least the poet's personal religious ideas; not dogma. That is why we can join in. Neither Aeschylus nor even Virgil tacitly prefaces his poetry with the formula 'Thus say the gods'. But in most parts of the Bible everything is implicitly or explicitly introduced with 'Thus saith the Lord'. It is, if you like to put it that way, not merely a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach. You can read it as literature only by a tour de force. You are cutting the wood against the grain, using the tool for a purpose it was not intended to serve. It demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms: it will not continue to give literary delight very long except to those who go to it for something quite different. I predict that it will in the future be read, as it always has been read, almost exclusively by Christians.

If many critics, especially older critics, speak of it differently to-day; I suggest that they may be influenced by amiable but unliterary motives. A sacred book rejected is like a king dethroned. Towards either of them there arises in well-disposed minds a chivalrous compunction. One would like to concede everything except the thing really at issue. Having supported the deposition, one would wish to make it clear that one had no personal malice. Just because you cannot countenance a restoration, you are anxious to speak kindly of the old gentleman in his personal capacity—to praise his fund of anecdote or his collection of butterflies. I cannot help thinking

[p.26]

that when a critic old enough to remember the Bible in its power prophesies for it a great future as literature, he is often unconsciously swayed by similar motives. But such courtesies will not preserve it. Neither the Bible nor those who still read it as believers invite them; and the

---

<sup>24</sup> v. cap. XXXIV.



C.S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of The Authorised Version*. The Ethel M. Wood Lecture delivered before the University of London on 20 March 1950. London: The Athlone Press, 1950. pp.26.

---

generation which is now growing up will disregard them. For the Bible, whether in the Authorised or in any other version, I foresee only two possibilities; either to return as a sacred book or to follow the classics, if not quite into oblivion yet into the ghost-life of the museum and the specialist's study. Except, of course, among the believing minority who read it to be instructed and get literary enjoyment as a by-product.

---

© 1950 C.S. Lewis Pte Ltd. Reproduced by permission. This lecture is licenced to remain on-line until 31<sup>st</sup> July 2011.

Prepared for the Web in August 2006 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---