Autumn 2005 Honorable Mention

Emily Dalton

Instructor’s Foreword

Emily Dalton wrote “William Tyndale’s Biblical ‘Translation’” for my course “Rhetorics of the Journey” in Autumn 2004. In considering this expansive rhetoric, the question of what is lost or gained in linguistic and cultural translation in the experience of the journey gave Emily the general idea to work on a particular translation whose effects on our modern English language can still be seen today. William Tyndale, preacher and biblical scholar, began his momentous task to translate the bible into English amidst great political and religious debates over the relationship between the individual and church and what constituted sacred language in sixteenth-century England. For Emily, Tyndale’s goals went beyond an exercise in language; “Tyndale’s biblical ‘translation’ stemmed in reality from a complex interplay of theological, political and social considerations that allowed it to act as a vehicle for profound ideological and linguistic change.”

Context played an essential role in Emily’s assessment of the ultimate value of Tyndale’s translation; she organized her argument according to sub-sections that consider the “theological climate” and dimensions of Tyndale’s translation, the “traces of anticlericalism” that may be seen in his writing to the final “linguistic and cultural repercussions” of his work. Her own ethos in the final, revised version of her essay emerges as a scholarly voice that guides us through the twists and turns of Tyndale’s considerations in making his translation. Emily’s research is a fine example of a scholarly inquiry and assessment of a text in translation. The final persuasive power of her essay lies in her own credibility in creating a voice that illuminates not only the intricacies of language but also the journey of the translation as a rhetorical act.

Laura Roman
“No other book has so penetrated and permeated the hearts and speech of the English race than has the Bible—what Homer was to the Greeks, and the Koran to the Arabs, that—or something not unlike it—the Bible has become to the English.”

- Albert Cook, professor of English Language and Literature at Yale, 1920 (McGrath 253)

Secluded in a musty attic in the maritime city of Antwerp, dodging any encounter with the religious authorities who had condemned him as a heretic and a traitor, William Tyndale, preacher and biblical scholar, worked away at one of the most momentous tasks undertaken in the history of the Christian tradition. Tyndale, one of the first to translate the Bible into English, has always appealed to the popular imagination as a heroic figure whose intentions in translating consisted of providing the laity with a more pure and widely available version of the Scriptures. Tyndale himself catered to this widely-held and largely idealized image of his translation through his own enumeration of his goals, which he named as linguistic clarity and accuracy and the desire to make more accessible the Scriptures that he saw as the only complete, simple source of Christian truth. Yet, Tyndale worked on his translation during the 1520’s and 1530’s, a time of extraordinary political and cultural turmoil characterized by a drastic reevaluation of the place of the individual in relation to the Christian Church. Far from being a purely linguistic exercise, Tyndale’s biblical “translation” stemmed in reality from a complex interplay of theological, political, and social considerations that allowed it to act as a vehicle for profound ideological and linguistic change.

William Tyndale, theologian and translator

William Tyndale was born around 1494 in Gloucestershire and educated at Magdalen College in Oxford, where he received his B.A. in 1512 and his M.A. in 1515, and at Cambridge University, where he studied divinity and may have been ordained into the priesthood (Daniell, William Tyndale 51). Even his enemy Thomas More acknowledged him as “well known before he went over the seas, for a man of right good living, studious and well versed in Scripture, and in divers places in England was very well liked, and did great good with preaching” (Tyndale viii). Tyndale completed his first translation of the Bible into English in 1526, with the aim of rendering the New Testament into ‘proper English.’ The violent diatribes of Catholic authorities such as Thomas More and the attempt to suppress translation on the part of the Catholic Church eventually led Tyndale to flee England and to settle in the port city of Antwerp, which had begun to gain a reputation for its Protestant sympathies. Also the center of an extensive publishing trade with strong links to English booksellers, Antwerp offered an ideal location for the completion of Tyndale’s 1534 revision of his translation. Tyndale was eventually betrayed, however, and was arrested in May of 1535. Despite protests from the English government, he was executed in 1536 for what Catholic authorities viewed as an unsanctioned, heretical and
ultimately threatening mistranslation of the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.

The Theological Climate surrounding Tyndale’s translation

Tyndale himself often claimed the goals of this translation consisted of linguistic clarity and accuracy. In the preface to his 1534 edition, for example, he describes his endeavors to “look over [his] New Testament again and to compare it with the Greek, and to mend whatsoever I could find amiss” (Tyndale 13), and even entreats his readers, “wherever they find faults, [to] show me, or to write to me” (Tyndale 16). Upon closer examination, however, it is clear that Tyndale infused his translation of the Bible into the vernacular with a specific agenda shaped by the political, theological, and social climate in which he worked. The early sixteenth century saw the rise of the Humanist movement, which promoted the view of humans as rational individuals capable of challenging received doctrine, particularly doctrine that labeled the body as tempter of the soul. The growing anticlericalism of the era, which climaxed in Martin Luther’s nailing of the famous “95 Theses” to a church door, led to the rejection of a great deal of superstition surrounding the Bible and revolutionized biblical scholarship (Daniell, The Bible in English 10).

Both opponents and supporters of Tyndale’s undertaking recognized the profound theological implications of his translation. Tyndale himself saw Scripture not as the “passive recipient of a translator’s actions” (O’Sullivan 20), but as an agent through which a translator could advance particular theological views. Although his fellow Reformer Martin Luther, who had completed a German translation of the Bible a few years earlier, stressed the paramount importance of a biblical translator’s obligation to seek first and foremost the literal sense intended by the author, it was widely recognized that conformity to Lutheranism, Calvinism, or Roman Catholicism could be ensured through guiding readers toward a specific interpretation of the Bible (O’Sullivan 2). Most Bibles of the Reformation era, in fact, regardless of the sect of Christianity for which they were intended, encouraged specific readings through their use of marginal notes, glosses, prefaces, reading aids, summaries, maps, tables, and dictionaries which sought to restrain the free interpretation of the Bible and which were often viewed as far more suspect than biblical texts themselves.

Similarly, Catholic opposition to Tyndale’s biblical translation arose from deeply-held concerns regarding the ideological impact of the Bible, which was viewed as an essential tool in the cultivation of Christian “spiritual growth, personal integrity, and doctrinal correctness” (McGrath 191). Catholics generally perceived the Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible as “the bedrock of Western Christian life and thought” (McGrath 191), having more authority than any other document placed in Church custody. Because God entrusted the Holy Scripture exclusively to the Catholic Church, it became the Church’s duty to defend it and to discourage its members from succumbing to the temptation of reading a translation that lacked Church approval, and that might contain marginal notes hostile to the Catholic Church. Indeed, as Rev. Henry Graham elucidated in his 1911 essay on the then-formal position of the Roman Catholic Church with regard to its exclusive authority to translate the Bible into English, the Church had always guarded the Bible from error and degradation, had grounded its doctrines upon it, and possessed, therefore, the unique right to claim the Bible as its book (J. Long 142-146). Many of More’s positions were thus taken to “buttress the authority of a Church on the defensive” (Partridge 43-45): he condemned what he viewed as Tyndale’s promotion of the principal doctrines of the Reformation movement, which included the belief that faith
provided sufficient grounds for salvation (rather than faith and good works, as Catholic authorities claimed), the idea that faith alone rather than the absolution of a priest could ensure salvation, the rejection of the concept of free will, the view that the sacraments were needless constructs of the priesthood, the belief that Christians were bound not by human laws but by the laws of Christ, the interpretation of prayers to saints or relics as forms of idolatry, and the conviction that Purgatory did not exist (Partridge 46). More and other Catholic authorities pointed to the inherent flaws of English translations that “refused to be tried by the ancient Latin translation, which is the text of the fathers and of the whole Church” (O’Sullivan 12). In insisting that the Scriptures provided sufficient grounds in themselves for the resolution of theological matters, Protestant reformers were, in effect, dismissing fifteen hundred years worth of theological analysis based on the Latin translation and were subordinating their concern with linguistic accuracy to the more important issues of “convention, community and legitimation by the authority of the institution” (O’Sullivan 12). More himself voiced this perspective with particular aggression in writing that of all “wretches the foulest is he who pretends to use scripture to convince unsuspecting innocent readers why the Church’s teachings are wrong” (Daniell, The Bible in English 107). Tyndale, conversely, drew his support from such figures as Augustine of Hippo (354-430), who laid the foundation for a far more liberal theory of translation in stating that as long as the sense of their words remained intact, biblical texts would not be damaged or degraded by translation, for “the meaning of Scripture is strictly autonomous from the temporal, verbal signs by which it is expressed” (L. Long 3). Ultimately, the conflict over Tyndale’s work grew out of irreconcilable differences in the Catholic and Protestant perspectives on translation firmly rooted in differing views on the Scriptures.

**Traces of Anticlericalism**

Tyndale’s stance on political power also shaped his translation strategies. Just a few years before the publication of Tyndale’s New Testament, Luther’s presentation of the Bible as an alternative to Church authority had transformed the Scriptures into a kind of political symbol of the search for a new order in society, one that would redefine the relationship between the state and the individual (J. Long 137-138). In fact, many Humanists believed that restoring the text of the Vulgate, St. Jerome’s Latin translation from the Greek, would inspire the automatic reform of religious practices; more than a linguistic exercise, translation into the vernacular represented the quest for a more pure Christianity untainted by the excesses of ecclesiastical tradition. Furthermore, Scripture that had once asserted the authority of the Catholic Church came to be used under Tyndale to inspire loyalties to Henry VIII. The Coverdale Bible and the Great Bible, for example, contained title-pages designed to depict Henry’s newly-established role as head of both Church and State (O’Sullivan 141). Many biblical translations from the Reformation era even sought to promote English colonial exploits. The European power struggle between England and Spain took on religious connotations as the English began to view the conversion of Native Americans to the Protestant faith as an essential step in the expansion of Christ’s empire. English colonial ventures were thus often cast as Protestant undertakings inspired specifically by the recent Protestant focus on the Book of Revelation. The Geneva translation of the Bible, for example, prepared in the 1550’s, included a detailed commentary on the Book of Revelation based largely on John Bale’s *The Image of Both Churches* (1545), which argued that a vigorous effort was required on
the part of Protestants to convert as many Catholics as possible before the imminent arrival of Christ. In light of the intertwining of the national identity with a Protestant identity, colonial exploits took on new proportions inspired by the religious arguments of Reformation translators (O’Sullivan 145-146).

Tyndale himself wove anti-clericalism into his translations. A political as well as a theological revolutionary, he argued for the establishment of England as a Christian state under a Christian prince free from the influence of what he saw as a completely alien system centered in Rome (Daniell, *The Bible in English* 157). He maintained that Catholic priests asserted that “The Scripture requireth a pure mind and a quiet mind, because [man] is altogether cumbered with worldly business . . . if that be the cause, then it is a plain case that our prelates understand not the Scriptures themselves, for no layman is so tangled with worldly business as they are” (Brown 45). Furthermore, he proposed that when “we call men our heads, that we do, not because . . . of their names, parson, vicar, bishop, pope, but only because of the Word which they preach. If they err from the Word, then may whosoever God moveth his heart, play Paul and correct him” (Brown 62). Convinced that the Pope and the clergy persecuted the laity and manipulated princes for the benefit of Rome, Tyndale expressed his anticlericalism through both his linguistic shifts and his choice of illustrations accompanying his Bible: the identification of the Pope with Antichrist promoted by such German artists as Hans Holbein and Lucas Cranach, from whose collection Tyndale selected apocalyptic images, facilitated the communication to a largely illiterate laity of the image of the Pope “as a usurper, as deceitful and secretive, and in all possible ways antithetical to God” (O’Sullivan 138-141). Furthermore, Tyndale’s use of such words as “lay people,” whose prayers he viewed as no less effectual than those of priests, explicitly drew attention to the clergy’s illegitimate separation from and domination of the body of Christians, thus designating them as victims of clerical conspiracy (Day 107).

**Birth of a “Rhetorical Nationalism”**

Even Tyndale’s choice of English as his language of translation had important political and theological implications. The rise in confidence in the English language that arose in the sixteenth century helped spark his decision to tackle the translation of the Bible into the vernacular. Historically, much doubt about the translation of the Bible into English had rested on concerns over the merits of the English language itself. English had suffered a loss of prestige following the Norman Conquest in 1066, which led to a suppression of English in public life. During this period, the French court had flourished as the most chivalrous, refined, and widely-imitated of European courts, and French itself had become a kind of *lingua franca* superior to the increasingly dismissed English language, which was seen as incapable of conveying the “subtle undertones necessary for diplomacy, the fine distinctions of philosophy, and the complexities of legal and financial negotiations” (McGrath 24). By the fourteenth century, then, French had joined Latin, whose prestige endured throughout the Middle Ages, as a language of the elite, while English had been labeled as the language of the peasantry, capable of expressing only crude and ordinary thoughts and, most importantly, lacking the sophistication and grammatical structure essential for the communication of nuanced biblical truths.

The sixteenth century, however, brought with it an extraordinary increase in the expressiveness of the English language (O’Sullivan 49) that allowed it to surpass even Latin in its importance to the new cosmopolitan culture that blossomed in England during the
Renaissance. As England’s poets, translators, and playwrights propelled English into the foreground amid other European languages, national identity became tied to the growth of a literature in the vernacular (McGrath 27). By the early sixteenth century, English had already begun to displace French as the language of England’s public discourse, public elementary education, and even epic literary works such as *The Canterbury Tales* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. What can be termed a “rhetorical nationalism” (McGrath 25) began to sweep England as the act of writing in or translating into English came to be seen as a testament to the dignity of the English language and, indeed, of the English nation itself. The Hundred Years War (1336-1565) and other military victories against the French under Henry V further fueled the growing enthusiasm for English in consolidating the popular view of French as the language of the enemy, a language inappropriate for the discussion of the great philosophical, religious, and literary works of the English tradition.

The growing importance of English in relation to matters of religion emerged through such venues as the York “mystery plays” (McGrath 31), performed around 1350, that depicted the creation, fall and redemption of humanity in drawing extensively on biblical narratives. These plays, performed in English, infused English popular culture with one of the first presentations of Christian themes in the vernacular, in effect fueling the demand for an English translation of the Bible itself. This taste for a Bible in the vernacular sparked the adoption of English as the language of the religious underground—despite the conclusion of a series of Oxford debates in 1401 that English posed an acceptable candidate for biblical translation, writing in English came to be associated so strongly with the holding of heretical views that even as late as 1513 religious authorities such as John Colet, dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, were being suspended from their positions for having undertaken such translations as that of the Lord’s Prayer into English (McGrath 33). Increased antagonism toward a clergy charged with incompetence in Latin and separated by a widening gulf from the political and cultural life of the nation thus set the scene for a “powerful amalgamation of religion and nationalism” (McGrath 36) that invested Tyndale’s choice of English with a larger political and social significance.

As the communal consciousness of the Middle Ages gradually dissolved, Tyndale seized the opportunity to orient the radical new confidence in the individual that was characteristic of the Humanist movement toward theological matters, playing upon the growing dissatisfaction with external approaches to faith that depended upon priests for the interpretation of the Bible. His reevaluation of the laity as the center of the theological universe in need of access to public biblical texts (Day 114) reflected his argument that biblical narratives themselves were colored by accounts of Jesus being shunned by religious authorities; parables about lost sheep, lost coins, bread-making, and working in vineyards; stories of Christ associating with prostitutes and layabouts; and other such “low” experiences.

**William Tyndale, rhetorician**

From these diverse and complex influences sprung a translation carefully crafted to fulfill Tyndale’s own ideological aims. First, Tyndale drew on various linguistic appeals to elicit his readers’ sympathy and to establish his own authority as translator. His deep interest in matters of language, in its “grace and sweetness” and its “sense and pure understanding” (Davis 6), was reflected in his skillful distribution of stresses and in his extraordinary ability to capture the style of both the long Hebrew narratives in the Bible.
and the more colorful and emotionally elaborated language in the eight historical books after Deuteronomy (Daniell, *The Bible in English* 137). He mined the richness of the English language, with its plain Anglo-Saxon base and direct yet flexible syntax, to invest his words with aesthetic appeal. Tyndale clearly intended biblical passages such as the following, taken from his 1534 translation, to be read aloud: “And they came in haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe laid in a manger” (Daniell, *The Bible in English* 139). The rhythmic cadence of the sentence, which dances between the “a” sounds on either side of the central “Mary,” highlights Tyndale’s meticulous attention to aesthetics that transformed his text into a kind of counterexample to the widely-held view that English was far too base for biblical translation. Without abandoning the imaginative power of the biblical narratives he was translating (Day 86), Tyndale infused his work with the language of exhortation and persuasion, adding yet another dimension to the careful craftsmanship behind his work. His version of Romans VIII, for example, illustrates several figures characteristic of logical arguments in the sixteenth century. His use of *protopre*, a tone of language implying exhortation and argumentation, manifests itself in various schemes such as *traductio*, the repetition of a single word that displays its various meanings. In verses 26 and 27 of this chapter, the reiterated word is hope: “For we are saved by hope. But hope that is seen as no hope. For how can a man hope for that which he seeeth?” (Tyndale Romans 8:26-27). Tyndale also employs *erotema*, a series of questions introduced to emphasize a point with rhetorical vehemence: “What shall we then say unto these things? If God be on our side: who can be against us? Which spared not his own son, but gave him for us all: how shall he not with him give us all things also?” (Tyndale Romans 8:31-32). The final lines of his version of Romans VIII are characterized by both *epiprochasmos*, a concise summary at the conclusion of an argument, and *polee*, a repeated use of a word interposed by other words for emphasis, as in the reiteration of the word “neither” (Partridge 51): “Yea and I am sure neither death, neither life, neither angels, ...neither any other creature shall be able to depart us from the love of God, showed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Tyndale Romans 8:39).

Tyndale’s concern for linguistics and aesthetics, however, was not purely a literary one (Davis 23). In fact, Thomas More’s verbose renunciation of Tyndale’s work hinged on his adamant disapproval of certain key phrases in Tyndale’s text that he saw as having profound theological implications. One such point of contention was the substitution of the word “elder,” or “senior,” for the Greek word *presbuter*, which was translated in the Vulgate as “priest.” More proposed that this rhetorical choice was inappropriate because the office of “elder” had secular connotations, and, furthermore, not all priests were elderly. Moreover, the word “senior” as employed by Tyndale retained vestiges of mockery due to its association with the French “seigneur,” whose connotation at the time was derogatory. Not only had Tyndale denied the full religious significance of the priesthood by relegating it to the level of the secular, therefore, but he had also introduced a disparaging note that strengthened his challenge to the institution of the priesthood. Even Tyndale himself acknowledged his own agenda, though he cast it in a more positive light, arguing that the English “elder” mirrored more closely the meaning of the Greek *presbuter*, or for that matter the Latin *senior*, or *presbyter*, in that it connoted an officer whose role was purely didactic rather than one of mediation between God and humanity. He defended his choice in asserting that the New Testament meaning of “priest” was merely that of an elder whose role entailed bringing youth into a full understanding of Christ, “and by them that give all their study to quench the light of truth and to hold
the people in darkness, understand the disciples of Satan and messengers of Antichrist, whatsoever names they may have or whatsoever they may call themselves” (Brown 56). Tyndale even offered the radical assertion that all men are priests through Christ, that no official title could establish its bearer as a messenger between God and the body of the Church, and that priests were to be obeyed only as long as they preached truly. In subtly shifting his vocabulary, then, Tyndale allowed his anticlericalism to seep through the text and to implicitly reshape his readers’ vision of the Catholic clergy.

A second debate arose over the use of the word “congregation” rather than “church” for the Greek ekklesia and the Vulgate congregatio. Tyndale maintained that the Greek word for “church”, Kuriakon, meaning “pertaining to the Lord,” had not come into use until the third century and would therefore be an anachronism in a biblical narrative set during the lifetime of Christ. On a more subtle level, his choice of “congregation,” with its etymological undertones of “flock” or “herd,” rested on his belief that “church” more directly reinforced the complementary functions of the priests and the laity and the “unjust” authority of the former in establishing Christian doctrine (Partridge 42). In his Anewere Unto Sir Thomas More’s Dialoge, Tyndale announces that “Church has diverse significations,” including that of a building or of the clergy, while a congregation implies, by contrast, “a multitude or a company gathered together in one, of all degrees of people” (Day 110). His rejection of what he saw as the less egalitarian “church” thus stemmed from a fear of misleading people into viewing the Church as a collection of priests, bishops, monks, and other religious authorities largely unrelated to the body of the laity that he saw as its core (Day 77).

The controversial use of the word “love” rather than “charity” for the Greek agape sparked yet another heated argument between Tyndale and More. The Latin amor signified physical love, while the Latin caritas denoted love from esteem. “Charity,” maintained More, adhered more closely to the definition of caritas than did love; furthermore, the medieval Church had expressly avoided the use of the term “love” because of its associations with amor, which was considered a distraction from holiness that undermined the celibacy of the priesthood (J. Long 143). Finally, Tyndale’s translation of the Greek New Testament metanoeite as “repent” rather than “do penance,” the phrase found in St. Jerome’s translation, and his substitution of “acknowledge” for “confess” from the Greek homologeo, were also seen as potentially subversive of ecclesiastical tradition (Partridge 42). In the eyes of More and other Catholic authorities, these rhetorical choices promoted a more individualized construction of faith that minimized the importance of Church sacraments such as confession and the role of the clergy in facilitating the laity’s quest for salvation.

Conclusion: Linguistic and Cultural Repercussions

Tyndale’s translation surfaced during a period of critical linguistic development that allowed it to play a pivotal role in the engineering and innovation of the English language. In the absence of an official body such as the Academie Française, charged with the task of rendering the French language “pure eloquent and capable of treating both arts and science” (McGrath 257) (James I had little interest in such matters), English was left to be molded chiefly by the influence of circulating printed material. Printed books, for example, became critically important in the establishment of standard lexical patterns and forms of spelling. Tyndale’s Bible, in addition to its more obvious impacts on the Reformation movement, also contributed to cultural literacy (much of the English population used his
Bible to learn to read), and thus was instrumental in the establishment of linguistic norms in both written and spoken English (Daniell, *The Bible in English* 158). In fact, Tyndale’s gift to the English language was immeasurable: his English inspired such great Elizabethan writers as Shakespeare, who modeled much of his syntax and diction after that of Tyndale, and whose theatrical portraits of villainous bishops and other religious authorities, which were highly influential in shaping the public perception of these figures, were drawn largely from the anticlerical writings of Tyndale and other early English Reformers (Day 287).

Furthermore, the constant reading of Tyndale’s Bible energized the English language through the naturalization of many Hebrew, Latin and Greek phrases used frequently in biblical contexts. Thanks to the immense cultural authority of “biblical English,” Tyndale was able to coin such phrases as “the powers that be” (Romans 13), “my brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4), “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5), and “a law unto themselves” (Romans 2) that continue to be used in modern English. Tyndale’s revival of such words as “Jehovah,” and even his invention of the words “Passover,” “scapegoat,” and “atonement,” whose Hebrew roots had previously had no English equivalent (McGrath 77-78), allowed his translation to function as a stimulus for linguistic enrichment as well as theological revolution. Ultimately, Tyndale’s technical skill and his profound knowledge of Hebrew, Latin, and Greek became tools through which he could clarify the English language, which changed rapidly “in compass and tone” (L. Long 3) after the introduction of his New Testament in 1534.²

Tyndale’s translation thus surpassed even his own ambitious goals. Although he anticipated the shattering effects his translation would produce on the institution of the Catholic Church and, indeed, deliberately infused his work with subtle linguistic shifts loaded with theological, political, and nationalistic implications, Tyndale himself could not have predicted the legacy of cultural and linguistic innovation his translation would leave in its wake. The immensely divisive and contradictory suggestions inspired by Tyndale’s specific agenda in translating, and the effects that these suggestions produced, testify not only to the tremendous influence of the Bible in English society, but also to the extraordinary power of the translator.

Footnotes

1 Antwerp was, at the time, a center of both Christian Humanism and “heretical” publications. Home to many English expatriates during the 1520’s and 1530’s, it witnessed the printing not only of Tyndale’s Pentateuch and revised New Testament, but also of George Joye’s translations of the Psalms and portions of the Book of Prophets, Coverdale’s 1535 translation of the Bible, and “Matthew’s Bible” of 1537, the first English Bible to be licensed.

2 Incidentally, the King James Bible, one of the most widely read monuments of the English language, borrowed over four-fifths of its New Testament and large portions of its Old Testament directly from the language of Tyndale.
Works Cited


