

Reflections on Translation:

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In the Foreword to Markings W. H. Auden describes the problems he met in working on Hammarskjöld's manuscript. Ronald Knox in his delightful little book, Trials of a Translator, Hilaire Belloc in the lecture he once gave at the Taylorian, describe the pitfalls one encounters in attempting to capture the spirit of an author in a language different from that in which it was enfolded. The translators of Mother Theresa's letters faced all the difficulties these authors describe. There were additional traps, in that the thermofaxed copies are frequently faint, and deciphering them often resembled the task of an epigrapher. There are any number of words and phrases common enough in 19th century Bavaria which are non-existent today, certain idioms which do not have an English equivalent, or if they do, carry a meaning quite different from that intended by Mother Theresa. As a result, even the best translators confessed that Mother's exact meaning sometimes baffled them.

Knox points out that three questions must guide a translator, and in this case, I would say, the editor as well: Is it accurate? Is it intelligible? Is it readable? Accuracy and intelligibility are difficult enough, but the really crucial problem is readability, a problem made more so by the fact that many of the documents themselves are less than interesting to the contemporary reader. The letters of Mother Theresa are not a Notre Dame Fioretti, and Sisters will not be tempted to open them at random for a significant sentence or quotation for the day.

There are literally hundreds of letters in answer to requests from pastors and school boards for the Sisters to open schools, and hundreds more informing officials of transfers, enclosing lists of Candidates and Novices, or asking Bishops for confessors and chaplains for convents. But even those which deal with routine administrative matters are valuable in what they reveal of this marvelously gifted woman. If Theresa of Avila's versatility and genius are demonstrated both by her mystical insights and her practical attention to details in her foundations, Theresa Gerhardinger's personality is equally evidenced in the wide range of topics covered in her letters.

To increase the problems confronting the translator, and eventually the editor, was the complexity of Mother Theresa's mind. Writing in a century before the invention of the typewriter, she frequently found her thoughts racing ahead of her pen. A word reminds her of another angle of a problem, and she inserts it immediately in a parenthetical clause or phrase, --only to have a word in the parenthesis remind her of something else she wished to comment on, with a subsequent parenthesis within a parenthesis! The translator, and frequently the editor as well, found herself tackling the sentence as if it were an algebraic equation, removing brackets, parenthesis, punctuation, and pruning the subordinate elements in search for the primary idea. Since the thoughts are all inter-related, even in translation the sentence remains considerably longer and more complex than contemporary terse, concise and condensed English.

Early in the work I was forced to decide whether it was better to give as literal a translation as possible, and thus produce non-English, or whether to translate the translation for greater intelligibility for the modern reader. Knox, Belloc and Auden all recommend the latter course, and that is the one I have taken. To assure validity, most of the letters were translated twice, so that I was able to collate both versions. Wherever divergence of interpretation was significant I consulted Sister Enrica who gave invaluable help in arriving at a decision. Occasionally a translator, doubting the overtones of a work, scrupulously gave me a list of alternatives to choose from, which while frustrating in the extreme, especially when I hit such a letter at the end of a day, was frequently justified, in that from the background of preceding letters, and in the context, I was able to make a choice. A few of the letters were written in French, some in Italian, and one, which I did not edit, appears in Mother Theresa's own English version.

I have tried to change as little as possible in the letters, the difficulty in exact translation frequently being not one of vocabulary but of sentence structure. There are also phrases which carry emphasis in the original, but when translated become simple redundancy preventing the reader from grasping the real meat of the sentence. To attempt to find fresh expressions for certain religious phrases which might have become trite through use may well result in a distortion of the fact that Mother Theresa was formed in a school of spirituality that tended to express truths in formulas.

The only real liberty of omission or change I have allowed myself, therefore, is the modernization of the salutation and signature of the letters. In the original these are elaborate, so far removed from even the most formal patterns used today as to convey totally false impressions. We have only to consider the possible overtones in a literal interpretation of "Very truly yours," with which custom permits 20th-century Americans to conclude letter to total strangers, to understand that in a century and country in which titles and rank were of great importance, elaborate and formal modes of address did not signify servility or insincerity on the part of the writer.

Translators, editor and readers must all be constantly aware that to read the letters without a knowledge of the historical situation, 19th-century spirituality, and the cultural milieu in which they were written is to risk serious misinterpretation. It is true that any one who reads all the letters will automatically become aware of the cultural and historical backdrop, just as reading Pepys' diary gives an intimate picture of life in 17th-century England. But there is much in Pepys that becomes meaningful only to those already familiar with the England of his day, as there is much in Mother Theresa's letters which demands extensive background reading.

The reader who thinks she notes an inconsistency in the style of the letters is correct. Some of this can be attributed to the editor; initially I was reluctant to edit freely, and there is a preponderance of Teutonic structure and style in my editing of the early letters. However, Mother Theresa herself changed style noticeably over the years; the letters of the middle and later years are written in leaner prose, and are considerably shorter than the earlier ones.

Nevertheless, I am not satisfied with the English of the manuscripts which are here presented to North American sisters for continued study. Whether I could do a better job were I to go over the total body of material will have to remain in the area of conjecture. There simply is not time for revision. As more and more requests came in for specific information about Mother Theresa, it became obvious that, inadequate though the editing might be, the Sisters were eager to have the opportunity of reading and studying the documents themselves. I hope the English rendering of the selected letters for the three volumes which will deal with her spiritual bequest, the early history of the Congregation, and the North American houses, will be more consistently contemporary.