

## PROVIDENCE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE MISSION AND LIMITS OF TRANSLATION

This workshop commenced with a presentation by Philip Chmielewski, S.J., in which he showed the theological significance of Walter Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator." Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) was a totally independent scholar of German-Jewish extraction, an *homme de lettres* who concentrated on the philosophy of language. Although he was primarily a literary critic, Benjamin's thought may be understood in a theological mode as Chmielewski's presentation demonstrated.

Chmielewski speaks of divine activity and the work of justice in terms of Benjamin's understanding of translation. The treatment of justice would benefit from an examination of the phenomenon known as translation, in part, because the text which can be translated can be an event such as the preaching of the word or an effective system of distributive justice. Just as the *De Auxiliis* controversy (In the dispute over grace, Pope Clement VIII decreed in 1607 that the Dominicans and D. Banez should not be accused of Calvinism nor L. de Molina and the Jesuits of Pelagianism) cleared up the understanding of God's salvific will when the West became cognizant of many pagan lands, so may a consideration of the transmission of texts aid the treatment of translation among a number of value communities.

Benjamin's essay, "The Task of the Translator," is representative of what happens in Christian mission when it deals with the transmission of values. There is always a disjunction involved in the attempt to transmit the word of God into particular cultures. The value structure which a missionary tries to announce in some as yet unaddressed microculture may be thought of as akin to an original text. In the process of translation, however, this original will live on only in its demise. Benjamin holds that a translation marks the original's stage of continued life. The life of the original attains its latest and most abundant flowering in translation. The translator has the task of re-echoing the original, pressing language to its limits.

Following A. MacIntyre one may speak of two important aspects of language-in-use, viz., naming and particularizing. The latter means this: by saying something speakers/writers communicate more or other than what they have actually said. For this "particularizing" to be effective, one must depend on a set of beliefs shared by both speaker and audience. This corresponds to what classical rhetoric called tropes, i.e., using words in other than their literal sense as in metaphors. Thus the translator faces an array of tropes which convey a meaning only indirectly found in the words themselves. Insofar as we undertake translation in our work of mission toward the other, we share in provident activity in such a way

that cooperation with the word and creative independence grow in direct proportion to one another.

How do translators accomplish their task? They enter upon a tradition, act with freedom, establish a network of engagement and create an interlinear present. In the act of translating the translator enters traditions which require a faithful interpretation. The translation removes the tradition from its former context. Why so? It is now headed toward a new situation and along this path it no longer serves its usual ends.

One can make this proportion. The translator stands to the traditions (and to the other in the receiving tradition) as the self does to God. Translators cannot reproduce the tradition from which they originate, nor can they constrain the culture which they address along these lines for the first time. In the work of the translator the message continues and flourishes in new fields in unexpected ways and manners.

The respondent, William O'Neill, S.J., began by making a parallel between words used in everyday speech, poetic diction and the divine Word or Logos. Whereas in ordinary conversation words reveal that which is other, in poetic diction words reveal even as they are subtly revealed. One may then think of the divine Logos as God's utterance, utterly itself in disclosing the Father, i.e., the divine ecstasis of the Word as Word.

O'Neill then spoke about the self-illumination of language within language which for Gadamer is an internal illumination of the essence (*eidos*) of discourse, embracing the "infinity of the unsaid." There followed a complex discussion of the term, disclosedness, in Gadamer and in W. Benjamin. For Benjamin, languages are not foreign to one another but are related to one another in what they mean.

O'Neill concluded by applying these ideas on translation to the development of doctrine issue. Doctrine or dogma reflects the imperfection of all language so that its translation into a different cultural context (such as the Swahili refugees in East Africa) is not merely an imitation of the original, but rather its extension and enrichment.

As the paper by Philip Chmielewski and the response by William O'Neill make clear, this workshop had to do with the application of literary deconstruction (in the persons of W. Benjamin, J. Derrida and P. De Man) to theology. Deconstruction is not so much a school of criticism as it is a climate of thought difficult to reduce to set theses. Deconstruction focuses on the problem of what constitutes a text (be it literary, philosophical or theological) rather than on what a text means. The deconstructive critic aims to disclose the abyss of words. The term, deconstruction, sums up Derrida's reworking of Heidegger's term, destruction.

The discussion focused on a number of issues. Benjamin distinguishes three kinds of languages: the original, the translation and the pure language. Some of those in attendance wanted to know more about this pure language which Benjamin argues is distinct from both the language of the original and that of the translation.

The second question had to do with linguistic integration. It was asked how one recognizes integration if recognition depends on the historical recognition of

the context. It was pointed out by Chmielewski that the languages of people exceed their ability to articulatedness, that people express themselves in ways that go beyond rhetoric such as in dance, in song and even in how they hold their children.

The final question dealt with the relationship between translation and the act of reading. It was thought that translation is qualitatively different from the act of reading. All in all, this workshop was difficult for those unfamiliar with deconstruction and W. Benjamin's work. It was agreed that this topic ought to be pursued at next year's convention.

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