

TRANSLATORS'

impressions

J. B. PHILLIPS AND E. V. RIEU

An Interview with a Fellow-Translator

Some years before the publication of the New English Bible, I was invited by the BBC to discuss the problems of translation with Dr. E. V. Rieu, who had himself recently produced a translation of the four Gospels for Penguin Classics. Dr. Rieu was asked about his general approach to the task...

Rieu: "My personal reason for doing this was my own intense desire to satisfy myself as to the authenticity and the spiritual content of the Gospels. I approached them in the same spirit as I would have approached recently discovered Greek manuscripts."

Phillips: "Did you get the feeling that the whole material is extraordinarily alive?—I got the feeling that the whole thing was alive, even while one was translating. Even though one did a dozen versions of a particular passage, it was still living. Did you get that feeling?"

Rieu: "I got the deepest feeling that I possibly could have expected. It—changed me; my work changed me. And I came to the conclusion that these words bear the seal of—the Son of Man, and God."

I found it particularly thrilling to hear a man who is a scholar of the first rank as well as a man of wisdom and experience openly admitting that these words written long ago were alive with power. They bore to him, as to me, the ring of truth.
(from "Ring of Truth" by J. B. Phillips)



BE Still.

THOUGHTS AND READINGS FOR MEDITATION

ONE

**From the Introduction to
"The Four Gospels - A New Translation"
by E. V. Rieu for Penguin Classics**

The inclusion of the Gospels in the Penguin Classics series entails no new assessment of their literary, as against their spiritual, importance. For the last hundred years they have stood up to ruthless analysis and have emerged from it supreme in both respects.

No great translation has ever been produced from a poor original. Indeed, the more I hear the Authorised Version praised, the more confidently I argue that the Greek Gospels must needs possess some comparable beauty. But that is not to say that their beauty is the same as that of the AV; and it has been borne in on me by years of intensive study that they possess a beauty that is all their own.

The difference of spirit is not easy to describe. I find it partly in their greater speed, partly in the sharper definition of the pictures they present and the feelings they evoke. They have a starkness, an urgency and a reality which in our English version are slightly blurred.

The language in which Christianity was given to the world had changed much in the thousand years since Homer wrote it, much modification and loosening, but the language is still Greek, still beautiful, simpler than that of Plato and Demosthenes, but still charged with untranslatable subtlety. And it



did what was asked of it. It enabled four men, undertaking the hardest task that ever faced a writer, to produce the four masterpieces which conquered the world.

Too large a dose of Form-Criticism might well reduce one to the condition of a man

who stands before a Raphael and keeps on asking where the artist got his paints. No one can reasonably doubt that the Gospels are true—the oral tradition they embody is firmly based on the reports of eye-witnesses—but what has impressed me most is the fidelity to detail. Not that we should be surprised at that; everything that Jesus had said and done was precious to both those who reported him and their eager audiences. Such is the faith I have acquired for the authenticity of the material which our Gospel-writers undertook, as Luke says, 'to arrange in narrative form'. But it was by no means a foregone conclusion that the stringing together of a number of short narratives and bits of teaching, however true and graphic they might be, would result in an entity that could be called a book, still less a literary masterpiece. It is true that the writers did not feel it their duty, like a modern biographer, to present a balanced view of a whole life, nor to narrate everything in the order of its occurrence—indeed I do not think they always knew it. But they had other difficulties to contend with—to create the impression of rapid and relentless forward movement from the divine beginnings to the predestined end... they had, like the Greek tragic dramatists, to write for an audience

who were conscious of that end before the first words of the first line were spoken. That they succeeded as they did constitutes a miracle which is unique in the history of literature and the annals of religion. We can account for it only by remembering that they were inspired by a unique personality. Just as Jesus lived in the oral tradition that preceded the Gospels, so he inspired and unified the writings that eventually summed it up. One might almost say that Jesus wrote the Gospels.

If I were trying to convince an unbeliever of the majesty and spiritual stature of the Risen Christ, I would take him straight to the last chapter of John and ask him to look, through John's eyes, at the Son of Man standing alone on the beach in the light of dawn, with a fire at his feet, on which a fish is cooking for his breakfast.

I had hoped to bring out the separate contribution that each of the Four Evangelists has made to the portrayal of Jesus. But I found this impossible; for the particular aspect that each of them stresses is never quite neglected by the rest. For instance, Mark, seeing him through Peter's memory, has more to tell us than the rest about the eyes of Jesus, the angry look with which he quelled the Pharisees, and the loving gaze he turned on the young nobleman who proved to be too rich. But Luke alone tells us how Jesus, with a look and a word, brought Zacchaeus down from his perch in the Sycamore. I will therefore attempt to put into words some impressions of Jesus as a man which the study of all four Evangelists has left on my mind.

Superimposed on all my previous impressions is one of power, tremendous power, utterly controlled. A strong wind swept through Palestine; but if it rooted up the rotten tree, it did not crush the injured reed. The eyes that carved a way for Jesus through a murderous crowd could also draw a tax-collector to abandon his profession.

It was his eyes that seem to have impressed his followers most deeply. Of the other features of his face they left no record. But of his stature we learn this, that he was big and strong. His long stride carried him ahead of his disciples, whom he usually led, and who were sometimes hard put to it to catch him up. It was only when he sat down to teach that he had to raise his eyes to hold his standing listeners.

His voice was powerful. Sitting in an anchored boat he could make it carry across the water to a large crowd standing on the beach. This was his customary teaching voice—the cases where he found it necessary to raise it to a higher pitch are noted. Interruptions must have been frequent when he was arguing with his enemies. When he was preaching to a friendly audience they came in the pauses that he left between his paragraphs. For he did not pile parable on parable with breathless haste.

He was a master of ready speech and witty repartee, but most of the sayings that have come down to us bear every sign of careful preparation. They have the qualities of poetry, and with the aid of paradox, exaggerations, or play on words, were cast in such a shape as would enable them to find their way into the dullest mind and stay there. His way of putting things was as original as the things themselves. He told his disciples to say: 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done our duty.' Who but he would have avoided the less memorable wording, 'We have *only* done our duty'? In fact he chose his wording to make people use their brains, and his biographers have faithfully recorded its peculiarities, seldom venturing to 'correct' him when he looks down on mortal time from the high viewpoint of eternity and uses the present tense for past and future events.

He was a learned man, who knew the ancient Hebrew writ by heart. And though, as far as we know, he wrote nothing for publication, he was a man of letters too, for his parables are *literary* masterpieces. They had to be, or the lessons they conveyed would never have sunk in.

And they are full of quiet humour. The crowds must often have laughed. But did Jesus himself laugh? Later writers say that he did; but the Gospels leave us only to read between the lines and yearn for some record of a lighter-hearted moment. He was certainly no glum ascetic, and when he joined these easy-living friends of his to enjoy a glass of wine with them, what was his conversation? Again, we have no reports. Yet it must have been irresistible charm or they would not afterwards have not gathered around 'to hear him speak'.

But there was little relaxation. He had his times of rest and prayer (if prayer was rest), but when in action he was ruthless to himself and well-nigh inexhaustible. Not quite; for the great reservoir of healing power within him was sometimes drained. Then he evaded the importunate crowds or fell into the sleep of exhaustion. On one occasion he slept through a storm at sea; yet the moment he was wakened he was in command. Sometimes too it seems that the power was not at his disposal. He was of two worlds and always mindful of his great commission; but there were hours of doubt and disappointment. He had his times of exultation, but moments of divine impatience too, when he was homesick for Heaven. He kept his eyes on Satan and saw him fall like lightning from the sky; but Satan also had his eye on him. The passage from the Jordan to beyond the empty tomb was not an effortless and undisputed progress; and no man can conceive the force that went into the final victory.

I have tried to catch a few glimpses of the Perfect Man through the eyes of his disciples, concentrating on his human attributes because it was as a man that they

themselves first learnt to know and love him. Indeed they labour to portray his full humanity and make it clear that it was not till the very end, or after it, that they realised the fact, and understood the purpose, of his descent from Heaven. For the rest, let the Gospels speak. Of what I have learnt from these documents in the course of my long task, I will say nothing now. Only this, that they bear the seal of the Son of Man and God, they are the Magna Charta of the human spirit. Were we to devote to their comprehension a little of the selfless enthusiasm that is now expended on the riddle of our physical surroundings, we should cease to say that Christianity is coming to an end—we might even feel that it had only just begun.
Highgate, May 1952.

TWO

**From the Translator's Preface to
"Letters to Young Churches"
(The New Testament Epistles)
by J. B. Phillips**

It is surely a remarkable incident, if it is not the Providence of God, that these human, un-selfconscious letters of the very early days of Christianity should have been preserved. What is even more remarkable is their astonishing relevance today. It seems that the men who wrote these letters concentrated upon the essential spiritual core of human life. They provide that spiritual vitamin, without which human life is at best sickly, and at worst dead. While scarcely touching on any "modern problem" they yet manage to give pointers of principle which show the way, and the spirit, in which the problems of even a highly complex age such as ours may be tackled successfully.

The present translator who has closely studied these letters for several years is struck by two things. First, their surprising vitality. He is continually struck by the living quality of the material on which he is working. Some will, no doubt, consider it merely superstitious reverence for "Holy Writ", yet again and again the writer felt rather like an electrician re-wiring an ancient house without being able to "turn the mains off". He feels that this fact is worth recording. Secondly, he is struck by the extraordinary unanimity of the letters. The cynic may suggest that these men were all in a conspiracy together (though it is difficult to see what motive they could have for such a thing), yet the fact remains that in their different ways and from their different angles they are all talking about the same thing, and talking with such certainty as to bring a wondering envy into the modern heart. Perhaps this could be made clearer by taking four illustrations, common to them all, in which their attitude to life differs fundamentally from that of most people today.

1 They all had a tremendous sense of the overwhelming Moral Perfection of God.

Today, when to many people God is a vague benevolence with about as much moral authority as Father Christmas, this may strike a strange, and possibly, salutary note. The terrific “fuss” made about sin and salvation, and the insistence on the only safe approach to God being through Christ, are both due to this acute sense of the peril of a sinful being coming within range, as it were, of the blazing light and purity of God. God, by His very Nature, must mean instant destruction to all evil, and whereas all religions attempt “bridgeheads” towards Him, it is only through Christ that a real and safe bridge has been built between man, who has morally failed, and God the incredibly active and powerful Source of all Life, Love, Goodness, Truth and Beauty. The only safe approach to, and the only means of living in spiritual union with, such a Power lies in Christ—God-become-Man. Without special privilege, power or defence, Christ defeated Evil and then, overcoming a revulsion that men can hardly begin to imagine, He deliberately allowed Himself as Representative Man to experience in Person the ultimate consequence of Evil. These early Christians can hardly find words to express their awed appreciation of the free, but costly, Bridge that was built for Man by this Act of God.

2 In view of the above convictions we can hardly be surprised to find in these writers a condemnation of “false teachers”. This condemnation may strike us at first as odd and even un-Christian. We commonly suppose that all roads of the human spirit, however divergent, eventually lead home to the Celestial Benevolence. But if we were seriously to think that they do not, that false roads in fact diverge more and more until they finally lead right away from God, then we can at any rate sympathise with what may seem to us a narrow attitude. For example, an “unorthodox” view of Christ which really means that the “Bridge” is still unbuilt, was anathema to these men who were sure of the truth, and had in many cases known Christ personally. It is at least possible that our “tolerance” has its root in inner uncertainty or indifference.

3 To the writers of these letters this present life was only an incident. It was lived, with a due sense of responsibility, as a preface to sharing the timeless life of God Himself. To these men this world was only a part, and because of the cumulative result of human sin a highly infected and infectious part, of God’s vast created universe, seen and unseen. They trained themselves therefore, and attempted to train others, not to be “taken in” by this world, not to give their hearts to it, not to conform to its values, but to remember constantly that they were only temporary residents, and that their rights of citizenship were in the unseen world of Reality. Today when all the emphasis is thrown upon making the

most of this life, and even Christianity is only seriously considered in many quarters because of its social implications, this point of view is comparatively rarely held. Yet as we read what they have to say we may perhaps find ourselves saying a little wistfully, “perhaps these men were right”.

4 The great difference between present-day Christianity and that of which we read in these letters is that to us it is primarily a performance, to them it was a real experience. We are apt to reduce the Christian religion to a code, or at best a rule of heart and life. To these men it is quite plainly the invasion of their lives by a new quality of life altogether. They do not hesitate to describe this as Christ “living in” them. Mere moral reformation hardly explains the transformation and the exuberant vitality of these men’s lives—even if we could prove a motive for such reformation, and certainly the world around offered little encouragement to the early Christian! We are practically driven to accept their own explanation, which is that their little human lives had, through Christ, been linked up with the very Life of God.

There is one other point that should be made before the letters are read. Without going into wearisome historical details, we need to remember that these letters were written, and the lives they indicate were led, against a background of paganism. There were no churches, no Sundays, no books about the Faith. Slavery, sexual immorality, cruelty, callousness to human suffering, and a low standard of public opinion, were universal; travelling and communications were chancy and perilous; most people were illiterate. Many Christians today talk about the “difficulties of our times” as though we should have to wait for better ones before the Christian religion can take root. It is heartening to remember that this faith took root and flourished amazingly in conditions that would have killed anything less vital in a matter of weeks. These early Christians were on fire with the conviction that they had become, through Christ, literally sons of God; they were pioneers of a new humanity, founders of a new Kingdom. They still speak to us across the centuries. Perhaps if we believed what they believed, we might achieve what they achieved.

London, 1941—Redhill, 1946.

THREE

From the Translator’s Preface to
“The Book of Revelation”
by J. B. Phillips

Books of revelation, or apocalypses, were common in Jewish literature in times of national persecution, and this Christian apocalypse closely follows the form and style of such writings. Yet the claim made at the very beginning of the book is

startling and unique—it is no less than “a revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave Him”, and which was disclosed to John through an angelic intermediary. Although there was much argument and hesitation before this book was established within the canon of the New Testament, the historic fact is that from about the fifth century onwards the Western Churches at least accepted this book as uniquely inspired.

Although the majority of Christians quite cheerfully accept the inclusion of this mysterious book within the New Testament canon, my strong impression is that very few of them have read it in any detail. Most Christians, for example, are familiar with the Messages to the Seven Churches contained in the first three chapters, and know something of the closing two chapters of the book with their strangely haunting vision of the Holy City, the New Heaven and the new earth, and the strong promises of God to the faithful believer. But the intervening chapters remain puzzling and baffling to many sincere Christians. The form and idiom of apocalyptic writing is indeed strange to modern minds, and while the queer visions provide every opportunity for the diversion of cranks and fanatics, the sober Christian soon finds himself at a loss to understand (and in consequence frequently neglects) the book completely.

I was naturally tempted to omit this book altogether from my translational work, a course, incidentally, taken by Calvin in his New Testament Commentary. But this would lead to the obvious implication that I was taking it upon myself to exclude this work from the New Testament! After much study I became satisfied that the Christian Church was justified in including this book in the Sacred Canon.

Like many another Christian I knew this book only superficially. My hope was that just as the essential truth of the Gospels and Epistles sprang to fresh life in the process of translation, so new truth and understanding would break upon me as I attempted to turn this peculiar Greek into modern English. It soon became clear that, although the task was not the same as it had been in the other parts of the New Testament, it could prove useful and even, in the true sense of that threadbare word, thrilling. For in this book the translator is taken into another dimension—he has but the slightest foothold in the time-and-space world with which he is familiar. He is carried, not into some never-never land of fancy, but into the Ever-land of God’s eternal values and Judgments. It is true that the expressions are often conventionally apocalyptic, but the translator can hardly fail to sense the urgency of the Seer as he tries to express the inexpressible. Surely something of the sense of timelessness, the feeling of the supra-mundane, can be conveyed?

Now although I do not possess the special knowledge required in a commentator on

apocalyptic, I feel it is legitimate and indeed might prove useful to record something of my impressions as a translator. The most obvious and striking feature of the book at first sight is the oddness of the Greek in which it is written. The differences in style and composition between the various books of the New Testament is completely hidden for most English readers by the overall majesty of the Authorised Version. (Indeed it is doubtful whether any difference in the style of the writing between any of the New Testament books could be detected if one worked from the Authorised Version alone. The actual difference in style between, let us say, Luke's Gospel and Paul's Epistle to the Romans is very marked and, like other modern translators, I have made some attempt to reproduce this difference in the mode of translation.) But when one is confronted with the language of Revelation it is no mere difference of style which makes one gasp, but crudities, grammatical errors and a quite extraordinary juxtaposition of words. So wholly different is the book in its word-usage and composition from the Fourth Gospel that many scholars find themselves unable to believe that both could be written by the same person. The Fourth Gospel is written, within its limited vocabulary, smoothly and correctly and would probably have caused no literary qualms in a contemporary Greek reader. But Revelation piles word upon word remorselessly, mixes cases and tenses without apparent scruple, and shows at times a complete disregard for normal syntax and grammar. Here, for example, are a few words from chapter 8, verse 13, translated literally, representing roughly the appearance such Greek would present to an educated reader of the first century:

*And I saw, and I heard one eagle flying
in mid-heaven saying in a loud voice,
"Alas, alas, alas for the inhabitants upon
the earth from the remaining voices of the
trumpet of the three angels about to
sound the trumpet!"*

And such an example could be multiplied

again and again. But, generally speaking, the tumultuous assault of words is not without its effect upon the mind, although I must confess I find it very difficult to believe that such a surprising attack could have been deliberately engineered. The inspired words seem to me to pour forth in a stream both uninhibited and uncorrected, and I therefore find it impossible to agree with those who say that this work is either a revision of an earlier one or a combination of several such works. The writer's mind is plainly steeped in the spirit and in the knowledge of Jewish apocalyptic. There is hardly a single direct quotation from the Old Testament but there are scores of parallels, echoes and recollections of it. John's words give the strong impressions of one whose thoughts and thought-forms are Hebrew, and yet it is a puzzle to understand why such a keen and intelligent mind could not readily have mastered the simple usages of New Testament Greek. I make therefore this bold suggestion: that the writer, who had a genuine ecstatic experience, wrote down what he saw *during the visions*. The intense emotion of his being, as it were, "in the heavenlies", the excitement of seeing what is normally invisible to human eyes, and the frustration of having to use human words to describe what is beyond human expression would, it seems to me, fully account for the incoherence, the strange formation of sentences, the repetition and the odd juxtaposition of words. If we suppose this to be true and if we suppose also that the writer were wholly convinced that what he had written was in fact written while "in the spirit", then we can reasonably imagine that he would shrink from correction or revision lest he distort or modify the revelation he had been given.

I feel I must record that, once one has absorbed the initial shock of the peculiar Greek, the effect of the language of this book is most powerful. The crowns, the thrones, the gold, the jewels, the colours, the trumpets, the violence of action and the impact of incredible numbers and awe-inspiring size—all these images stir that

threshold of the brain where monsters lurk and supernatural glories blaze. John is stirring with a kind of surrealistic artistry the vastnesses of our unconscious minds. The book is probably an impossibility for the pictorial illustrator, but the figures created in the mind are vivid and powerful enough to transport us to another spiritual dimension. Once we are gripped by the mysterious compulsion of these visions we find the "silence in Heaven for what seemed to be about half-an-hour" almost intolerable. The "solitary eagle flying in mid-air", crying out in pity for the inhabitants of the earth is, out of its context, bizarre to the point of absurdity, but, set as it is, it is almost unbearably poignant. And how beautifully right, how poetically satisfying it is to read that the leaves of the Tree of Life in the New Jerusalem are for the healing of the nations! The poetic impact of the book carries us away to a realm where the pedestrian rules of grammar no longer apply—we are dealing with celestial poetry and not with earthly prose. To be literal-minded and studiously analytical in such a work is to kill its poetic truth. Dissection is not infrequently the death of beauty.

If there is any truth in my surmise that John was reluctant to alter or improve the messages he wrote down in ecstasy, then the reader will understand my own even greater reluctance to demolish the high poetry of these strange utterances by reducing them to the language of everyday experience. Almost any poem can be made to look ridiculous by having its superficial meaning reduced to ordinary prose. This by no means proves that a poem is bad poetry; on the contrary it emphasises the proper use of poetry which, by indefinable subtleties of rhythm, rhyme and cadence, can strike chords and overtones forever beyond the reach of the finest prose. Consequently my earnest hope is that the use of modern language has not quenched the flame which blazes through this magnificently ecstatic poem of the Majesty and Sovereignty of God.

Swanage, Dorset, 1956.

The hand of the Eternal was on me in a trance, and as I gazed, there was a storm-wind blowing from the north! —a huge cloud with fire flashing out of it, and with a sheen encircling it and issuing from it, the colour of amber. Out of it appeared the forms of four Creatures, and this was their appearance: they had the same form, each with four faces and four wings, with limbs straight and gleaming like burnished bronze... all four had in front the face of a man, on the right the face of a lion, on the left the face of a bull, and the face of an eagle at the back... Wherever the Spirit impelled them to go they went, never turning as they moved... Whenever they moved, I heard their wings sound like the sound of many waters, like the thunder of the Almighty... Above the vault over their heads was the semblance of a throne, blue like a sapphire, and on the throne-like appearance there was the semblance of a human form; from the waist upwards I saw Something glowing like amber or fire, from the waist downwards there was Something resembling fire, while all around there was a bright halo like the rainbow that appears in the clouds

after rain. Such was the appearance of what resembled the Splendour of the Eternal." from Ezekiel 1 (MOFFATT)

"On each side, encircling the Throne, are four Living Creatures covered with eyes in front and behind. The first Living Creature is like a lion, the second is like a calf, the third has a face like a man, and the fourth Living Creature appears like an eagle in flight. These four Creatures have each of them six wings and are covered with eyes, all around them, and even within them. Day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty, Who was and Who is and Who is coming." from Revelation 4 (JBP)

It has been suggested that each of the Gospels brings an integral part of the character of Christ to the fore: Matthew, the King, the Lion of the tribe of Judah; Mark, the suffering Servant; Luke, the humanity of the Son of Man; and John, the eternal Word, the Son of God; and that perhaps these are represented respectively by the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle.