Yet You See I am Alive

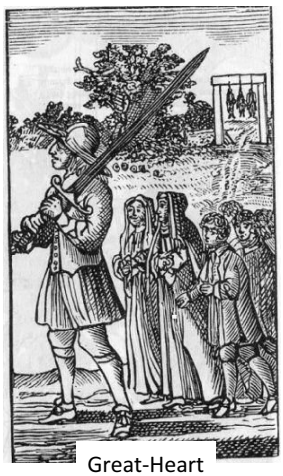
Translating Grand Narrative

Dinah Livingstone thinks about translation and the Christian Grand Narrative.

Translation

I gave this talk to the SOF Day Conference in Oxford last September . I am a translator and before I said anything about Grand Narrative, I wanted to make a couple of points about translation. Before the talk I played a song in Spanish and those who didn't speak Spanish might have been wondering what it was all about. The song was introduced by the words of Tomás Borge in prison. He and his friend Carlos Fonseca were 2 of the 3 founders of the Sandinista Front, which they set up to overthrow Nicaragua's brutal US-backed dictator Somoza. The song was about the death of Carlos, who was killed in an ambush in 1977, just two years before the triumph of the Revolution. Carlos had often been reported killed but had a reputation for popping up again. This time he was really dead. Borge relates:

> When we were in prison a National Guard officer came to us, full of glee, to tell us that Carlos Fonseca was dead. We replied: 'Carlos Fonseca is one of the dead who never die.'



Great-Heart

I want to focus on the translation of just two lines of the song:

> *Una bala en la selva de Zinica*
> *penetró en tu recio corazón de santo.*

Now if we translate that literally we get 'A bullet in Zinica forest penetrated in your stubborn heart of a saint.' That sounds comically like Father Ted on Craggy Island. So I translated it: 'A bullet in Zinica Forest struck you in your great heart.' I think that sounds better, so my first point is the most literal translation isn't always the best. But 'struck you in your great heart' picks up another resonance in English: with Great-Heart in *Pilgrim's Progress.* And as it happens Great-Heart has something in common with Carlos. He often nearly died but survived. When Christiana is afraid of the Valley of the Shadow of Death he tells her: 'I have often been through this valley and have been much harder put to it than now I am. Yet you see I am alive.' If you translate words into another language and culture, the words *always* pick up new resonances. At the same time the translation must try to be *faithful.*

My second translation example is from the *Dark Night* of John of the Cross. This is a mystical love poem in which a woman slips out unseen at night to meet her man and they are blissfully united. When they make love, she feels so at one with him that she might have *become* him, she could not have told herself from him. In the Spanish the woman is called *amada:* beloved (feminine), and the man *amado:* beloved (masculine). The relationship is completely reciprocal. You can't tell who is loving and who is being loved. Both are doing both. She addresses the night:

> *O noche que juntaste:* O night that joined/united
> *amado con amada:* beloved (m) with beloved (f)
> *amada en el amado transformada:* beloved (f) changed into beloved (m).

This poem is famously difficult to translate because English does not have that grammatical felicity of a masculine and feminine past participle: you can't tell whether 'beloved' is male or female. It's a kind of Beecher's Brook for translators, a real challenge. Quite a few have attempted it. Perhaps the worst translation I have ever come across is that given in Don Cupitt's book *Mysticism after Modernity.* This translation is probably quoted rather than made by Cupitt, whose interest does not lie in the translation or the poem itself; as philosophers will, he just guts it to extract a philosophical point – actually a good point. Anyway here is the ghastly translation:

> O night that joined Lover with Mistress,
> the Mistress transformed into the Lover.

That translation has no power of sound or rhythm at all. And what's worse 'Mistress' sounds like a Tory politician's bit on the side. Certainly no reciprocity there: he is the active controller/payer. She can't phone him at home etc. And, incidentally, why that horrible Latinate 'transformed' when everyone knows that in stories frogs *change* into princes, *pumpkins* are *changed* into golden coaches and 'we shall not all sleep but we shall all be *changed*'. The words 'Mistress' and 'Lover' do mean sexual partners, so we can't exactly call it a mistranslation, but the resonances are all wrong. I'll come back to this poem later, but here (with some trepidation) is my own translation of that last line:

> she who was his love changed into her love, him.

Grand Narrative

So now to Grand Narrative, by which we mean a story about the whole trajectory of humanity. Post-modernists keep telling us that Grand Narrative is dead. Twenty years ago communism collapsed: the Marxist story of the coming of a just society through the dictatorship of the proletariat. In that story the proletariat is the engine of history and history itself is a kind of *deus ex machina* – a sort of god if you like – with scientific laws that make the glorious end of the story inevitable. Although the Soviet Union never really embodied that vision and was not really a communist society, its collapse discredited communism and its Grand Narrative.

The Christian Grand Narrative of the coming of a just society has also been discredited. As we do not believe in inevitable scientific laws of history as a *deus ex machina*, neither do we believe in the agency of supernatural beings to bring about the desired goal.

In the New Testament we find two or perhaps three related 'takes' or versions of the Grand Narrative of the good society: Jesus preaching the kingdom of God, which is the reign of justice and peace on Earth; and the Christ epic with its twin story of humanity as one single body, the body of Christ, *and* the story of the marriage of heaven and earth with Christ as the bridegroom. In all these stories the supernatural God *acts* and human fulfilment is brought about through his agency.

Like many of us today in Britain, I find it impossible to believe in a supernatural agency. Talk of the supernatural is a foreign language to me. Does that mean these Christian stories collapse or do they still work if we translate them into non-supernatural terms? Can these stories still inspire us without their supernatural guarantee? I think the answer is yes. I think they are still alive. That is because I think humanity invented those supernatural beings in the first place. They were always part of our human capacity to apprehend the world in *poetic terms* – they were supernaturalisations, personifications, of cosmic and earthly forces. As Blake puts it, we chose forms of worship from poetic tales.

So what I want to do is look at those three New Testament 'takes' on the Christian Grand Narrative and see what they say to us in the language of common humanity, because we do need a Grand Narrative if we are not just to drift into futility or disaster.

The Kingdom of God

First the Grand Narrative of the coming of the reign of God. In Luke's gospel (4:18) when Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he goes into the synagogue and quotes the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free.

The time has come, he says, the *kairos,* the right time. The time is *now*. (Lk 4:43). In Luke, the Sermon on the Mount is the Sermon on the Plain and in fact the texts are *plainer* (6:20):

> Blessed are you who are poor,
> for yours is the kingdom of God.
> Blessed are you who are hungry now
> for you will be filled.

Jesus preaches a kingdom or 'reign' of justice and peace on Earth, which is good news for the poor and hungry. The world is turned upside down. The kingdom belongs *first and foremost* to the poor. Jesus is certainly not 'seriously relaxed about the super rich.' He condemns them: 'Woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation.' (Lk 6:24) It is very hard for the rich to enter the kingdom. Bankers with big bonuses are probably banned. So the kingdom is both personal and political – within us and among us. It is personal because the individual has to *want* a reign of justice and peace in order to belong to it. It is no use just grabbing as much as ever you can and to hell with everyone else.

The kingdom is political because it is about a good society. And in our globalised world the *polis* has to be the whole Earth – an end to poverty, hunger, misery, curable disease, an end to unjust wars. It is also political because it is about *co-operation* or, if you like, 'love your neighbour as yourself'. We can see the anti-kingdom at work, for example in the extraordinary campaigns of US health businesses and their allies to destroy what they call Obama's Nazi Health Scheme – his attempt to bring some sort of universal free health care to the USA where 45.7 million people can't afford any health insurance at all (2007 Census – even more in a later study). The kingdom is political because the anti-kingdom, the pursuit of wealth or growth at all costs and at the expense of others, not only excludes the vast mass of humanity from a decent life, but also now threatens to destroy the Earth herself.

When talking about translation I said that when we translate, the translation cannot fail to pick up resonances from the target language and culture but at the same time the translation had try to be faithful to the original. If we translate Jesus' story of the coming of the reign of God into our own culture today, we can stress, for example, our own concerns with the current environmental crisis, aggravated by hyper-consumerism and a capitalist system that pursues growth at any cost. We heard that Jesus said the Kingdom belongs first and foremost to the poor. That means that not only should the poor have the

wherewithal to live a decent life but also that we who are rich, either as individuals or as a society, should at least *moderate* our demands, or we will be excluded from the Kingdom. Or it will never come at all – our planet will die. I think that resonance is *both* necessary for our translation today, *and* faithful to the original gospel.

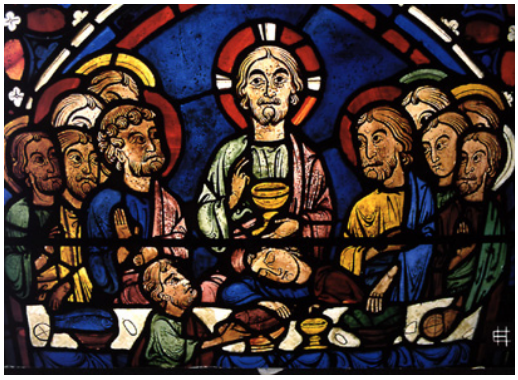
Jesus says that he is inaugurating the Kingdom but it is not yet complete. It is both *now* and *not yet*. At his Last Supper he says: 'I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer: for I tell you I shall not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God.' (Lk 22:15) It seems he thought the kingdom or reign was going to come soon. He says: 'When you see these things taking place you know that the kingdom of God is near. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all has taken place.' (Lk 21: 31) But of course people on Earth are still poor and hungry and we are still waiting for the reign of justice and peace. When Jesus went away and did not return, when that reign did not come on Earth within one generation, gradually the story of the Kingdom was transferred to heaven above. Perhaps we could call that a mistranslation.

Jesus thought a supernatural God would guarantee the coming of his Kingdom on Earth. If we do not believe in a supernatural God, we have *no* guarantee, but we can still be inspired and struggle for that vision of a fulfilled, happy humanity at home on a well cared-for Earth, a global society in which everyone has a decent life. We *can* translate it into purely human terms. The kingdom is political but it is not a political programme. We have to work it out for ourselves, embody or translate it into human institutions. It is a humanist vision, the grandest of all Grand Narratives.

The Body of Christ

Another related way of describing the fulfilment of humanity was to see it as one single body growing to maturity. Paul recalls (1 Cor 11:23) that 'the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread…broke it and said: "This is my body…" and this is what leads him to reflect on the new humanity as one body: 'For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.' (1 Cor. 12:12). Christ is the name for the social body which is the new liberated humanity. Jesus gives a version of the whole of humanity as himself in his story (beginning with *food)* of the judgment: 'I was hungry and you gave me food…As you did it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters you did it to me.' (Mt 25:34)

In the Christ epic, which became attached to Jesus and which we find first in letters traditionally attributed to Paul – the earliest new Testament writings – Christ is both Jesus and the figurehead and namesake hero of his people, the new Adam, representative of humanity in all its potential. Perhaps



Last Supper
Chartres
Cathedral
window

surprisingly, the Pauline letters are full of poems, particularly the three marvellous Christ poems in the letters to the Philippians (2:6) Colossians (1:15) and Ephesians (4:4). Christ's incarnation, death, descent to the lowest depths and resurrection becomes an epic of humanity's – and the whole Earth's – struggle for liberation. There is no room to quote these poems here (but reading them out loud is recommended).

The Philippians poem, that may have been an early Christian hymn, focuses on the *shape* of the drama. The movement is *down* and then *up* of Christ, one who was 'in the form of God' 'emptying himself' down to Earth, assuming humanity even in its lowest form, its most painful mortality, death on a Cross, and then this humanity *in Christ* being *highly exalted.*

In Colossians Christ is 'the head of the body, the church'. In him 'the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily and you have come to fullness in him.' (2:9). In Ephesians Christ is 'head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all… so that he might create in himself one new humanity… in one body' (Eph. 1:23; 2:15).

That collective new humanity is seen as an articulated body with Christ as its head and with different members playing the different, necessary roles: 'For if the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were a ear, where would be the sense of smell? If all were a single member, where would the body be?' (1 Cor. 12:17.) The project is the building up of the body of Christ, 'to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.' (Eph. 4:12). It is not yet complete. Paul can say:: 'I fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ, for the sake of his body, the Church.' (Col. 1:24). Here too we have the tension between *now* and *not yet*. The epic is the myth of a people – in this case humanity – as the body of Christ coming to *embody* the divine wisdom (1 Cor. 1:24), 'the whole fullness of God'.

Humanists can read this as bringing the God whom *we* invented, *we* set in heaven down to Earth, emptying himself back down into humanity and then that humanity aspiring back up to the ideals *we* set in God and *embodying* them. This idea of humanity as one *social* body reaching 'maturity', its full potential, is another take on the Grand Narrative of the Kingdom. 'We who are many are one body, because we all share the same bread' (1 Cor. 10:16). If we translate it into non-

supernatural terms, as in the kingdom story, we have no *guarantee,* that the happy ending will be reached.

At the moment humanity clearly does *not* all share the same bread. Some eat far too much and some starve. Once again, in our translation into our secular English language and culture of today, we can hear resonances with our own concerns. In thinking about the image of humanity as a single body, we could reflect that a body should be healthy, have enough to eat but not too much. As we know obesity is a major problem in the rich West today, particularly in the United States. We could develop that line of thought of 'too much' being as unhealthy as 'too little'. Once again, there is no problem in translating the image of a single body into a purely humanist vision. The difficulty is translating the vision into reality. With no God to ensure it, that is a purely human task.

Bridegroom and Bride

Now to the divine marriage. I said I would return to the John of the Cross poem in which the protagonist, the woman, slips out at night to meet her beloved and they are united in a blissful union. She exclaims to the night:

O night that guided,
O night more delightful than the dawn,
O night that united
beloved with beloved,
she who was his love changed into her love, him.

John of the Cross was a mystic who intended his poem to express union with the divine. Mystics of many cultures have often expressed that union in erotic terms. Some mystics believe their experience is supernatural and some do not. But the curious thing is, either way, what they describe is very similar. In his poem, although John believes his experience is supernatural, he has done the translating himself, into wonderful human poetry.

That blissful union is the story of an individual spiritual journey. We saw with the Grand Narrative of the Kingdom of God that the message was both personal and political, and we find the same is true here with this story of the Divine Marriage. For where have we heard those exclamations in praise of the Night before? Where had the poet heard them before?

Surely in the *Exsultet*, the great praise poem to the Paschal candle sung at the Easter Vigil with its repeated *This is the night* and *O truly happy night: O vere beata nox:* This is the night… when the children of Israel were released from slavery in Egypt... This the night when Christ broke the chains of death and ascended conqueror from hell …' 'O truly happy night in which heaven is married to Earth and God to humanity.' Later in the Easter Vigil the water is blessed in the font, and in what is surely a fertility ritual for a marriage night, the paschal candle is repeatedly plunged into it, with a prayer that the water may 'become fruitful'.

Jesus sometimes refers to himself as 'the bridegroom' (Mt (:15; Lk 5:33). Paul calls the church Christ's bride (e.g. 2 Cor.11:2). We are back with the Christ epic, but this time instead of the image of the whole Christ as a single body, we have the image of Christ the bridegroom with his bride, the united male and female human form divine.

Carlos Fonseca and Haydée Terán at their wedding

The Beautiful City

We find that image developed in the later Book of Revelation, where the bride becomes the beautiful city: 'I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, as a bride prepared for her husband. ...And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying: "See the dwelling of God is among humans."(21:2). God comes down to Earth He comes down into human society – the city , the *polis* – which finally comes to embody the qualities of kindness we set as ideals in God. It inspired our London poet Blake:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
to Primrose Hill and St Johns Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold
And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her little ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen,
And fair Jerusalem his Bride
among the little meadows green.

Of course London can also be the city of dreadful night. Camden Town tube station late at night is a horrible edgy place with drug dealing and the threat of violence. But walking about London you get visionary glimpses of that beautiful city, the new Jerusalem. From Parliament Hill, where kites are flying, you can look down on 'London flower of cities all' and people strolling on Hampstead Heath engage in countless conversations. London is a city of 300 languages. That is one description of a city: umpteen conversations. Love is builder of cities and on fine days on the Heath you see young couples coming out to picnic, with their bag of goodies and bottle of wine. Work is also builder of cities. On the top deck of the red bus a nurse going home tired after a late shift sits dozing and

knitting. The bus driver knows her route. In the early morning I see the little group of building workers standing outside the caf with their fags and big polystyrene cups of tea. I go to my corner shop and the shopkeeper, who just happens to speak Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, English and a bit of Arabic, laughs when I can't resist buying yet more of his wonderfully cheap plants for my small garden. He is a Muslim but at Christmas, he shoved a bottle of wine into my shopping bag as a seasonal gift.

The poetic image of the new Jerusalem is not a political programme but it can inspire the vision of a city, which must be worked out in practice. Mayor Ken Livingstone's best moments were inspired by his vision of London, the city he loves, as in his speech the day after the London 7/7 bombing:

> This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at presidents or prime ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners – black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Jew, young and old …

Then he said to the bombers:

> In the days that follow look at our airports, look at our sea ports and look at our railway stations, and even after your cowardly attack, you will see that people from the rest of Britain, people from around the world will arrive in London to become Londoners and to fulfil their dreams and achieve their potential. They choose to come to London, as so many have come before because they come to be free, they come to live the life they choose, they come to be able to be themselves.

I've focused on London, my city, but of course, our political vision must be global – act local think global. In the vision of the New Jerusalem, the marriage of heaven and Earth, we don't have to take the supernatural bits literally. It is an allegory, not difficult to translate into purely human terms, but of course much more difficult to embody in the reality of our lives on Earth.

Present!

In the Carlos Fonseca song I began with, the last line of the chorus was: *'Nicaragua entera te grita Presente!*: All Nicaragua proclaims you are Present!' In Nicaragua and indeed the whole of Latin America, they honour their heroes and martyrs by calling out their names in a ceremony – at Mass perhaps – and the people reply: *Present!,* as in a roll call. At the demonstration outside the House of Lords when the Pinochet extradition case was being tried, you could hear them calling out the name of Chile's elected socialist president Allende, who died in Pinochet's bloody coup that inaugurated his reign of torture and mass murder. They were shouting: *'Se siente, se siente. Allende está presente!:* We sense it, we sense it. Allende is present!'

I often walk through London and feel the presence of great spirits from our own radical tradition. In Old St Pancras churchyard I stand by Wollstonecraft's tomb: *Mary Wollstonecraft: Present!* In Bunhill Fields I nod to Blake: *William Blake: Present!* And to Bunyan with his Great-Heart: *John Bunyan: Present!* In St Giles Cripplegate I bow to Milton. *John Milton: Present!* And I hear his words ringing in my ear, what he would have to say to bankers bagging big bonuses despite their responsibility for a recession in which so many have lost their jobs and their homes:

> **Help us to save free conscience from the paw of hireling wolves whose gospel is their maw!**

The slogan of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381 was 'When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?' Led by Wat Tyler the peasants camped on Blackheath on their way into London. In choosing to camp on Blackheath, the 2009 Climate Camp paid its respects to Wat Tyler: *Wat Tyler: Present!*

The English radical tradition has strong Christian roots, deep in the Christian Grand Narrative. In this talk I have spoken of Jesus, who announced the Kingdom of God, and of the Christ Epic of him as the namesake hero of a new humanity as one body, sharing the same bread; as the bridegroom with his bride, the beautiful city the new Jerusalem. These three stories are a single Grand Narrative of a whole liberated, humane humanity at home on Earth. The Grand Narrative has been sneered at and dismissed because we no longer believe in its supernatural components. But talking in parables about the Kingdom or talking about humanity as a single body or a beautiful city and bride, are *already* poetic tropes, metaphor, allegory. We just have to figure that the supernatural elements – such as God – are *also* poetic tropes. Then as I have tried to show, it is not difficult to translate into purely human terms – losing the supernatural guarantee. So as in the Eucharist, I say, thankfully, *Jesus Christ: Present!*

We need a Grand Narrative for the maturity of humanity, fulfilling its potential and being sane enough to look after the Earth. We can translate the one we've got already into our own common language. Of course it must be a good translation *both* with the right resonances in our own culture with our major concerns today, *and* faithful to the gospel of human kindness flowering on Earth. Then the Grand Narrative is not dead. So I conclude with the words of Great-Heart: 'I have often been through this valley and have been much harder put to it than now I am. Yet you see I am alive. '

This is a cut and edited version of the talk Dinah Livingstone gave to the Oxford SOF Day Conference in September 2009. She is a Londoner, poet, translator and editor of *Sofia.*