

Tasking the Translator: A Dialogue of King Alfred and Walter Benjamin

John Lance Griffith (National Taipei University of Technology)

Unlike most modern theorists Alfred does not set himself the goal of analyzing his own analytical assumptions; he does not provide us with a sustained commentary of his intellectual development or with an outline of his exegetical and philosophical program. And, also unlike most modern writers, most of what we know of him comes not directly through his own writings but through history's reconstruction of him, of his life and works; and most of that derived from Asser's contemporary *Life of King Alfred*.

M. R. Godden's recent essay suggests that Alfred may not be who we think he was, or rather that we may not know as much as we think we do, casting doubt on the long accepted notion that the historical King Alfred contributed to the translation project as a prefatory author and translator(1-23). However, to

engage with Alfred the Great is in some ways to engage not so much with a mind as with a spirit; not so much a thinker thinking as a soul struggling. And so while investigations into the historical Alfred matter, the specific role of the historical Alfred, indeed even the existence of the historical Alfred, is not central to our understanding of the conceptions of translation explicitly and implicitly defined through the translation project taking place at the end of the 9th century. Whether the translator was Alfred himself, an inseparable tangle of Alfred and numerous collaborators, or a set of translators working wholly without Alfred's direct input, the translations and the prefatory material still function as a whole, and speak to us with a voice (whether collective or singular), presenting us a nexus of ideas and values and concepts with which to engage. Whether we refer to Alfred (the historical figure and now disputed contributor) or to "Alfred" (a solitary signifier for this unspecific collective set of thoughts), the reference is the same.

The following essay is a study of translation principles or attitudes toward translation—call it the age's spirit of translation, call it "Alfred"—manifest in the prefaces to the selections in the translation project. I parallel this zeitgeist of early medieval translation with the modern voice of Walter Benjamin in order to hear the dialogue (the "echo" as Benjamin might say) between medieval and modern struggles to define the value (social and philosophical) of the translator's task, given both the power and the limitations of his productions; to experience a translation, as it were, of the medieval through the modern, and the modern through the medieval.

For Alfred, to reflect on translation is not, as for Benjamin, to reflect on the nature of language or the relationship between languages. That is not to say that there is not a depth, even a subtlety, to his sense of language, of

literature, and of translation. On the contrary, I think Alfred does offer, for example, a voice worthy to engage in conversation with a modern like Walter Benjamin. For Alfred, to think about translation is to think about the nature of man and the nature of God; about the relationship between word and man, between man and the Word, between the individual man (speaking reading thinking translating) and the greater body of men (fighting dying living governing) of which he is a part.

Benjamin (famous for his rather un-Alfred-like statement that neither poetry nor translations are intended for the reader [253-254¹])) challenges the modern translator to discover the purpose of translation in a world where language is suspect, incomplete, esoteric. What can the value of translation--or for that matter, of any text or of any linguistic expression--be in the world after Babel? For Benjamin, translation in the modern world is not merely, or even primarily, about the reproduction and transmission of information contained in an original. Translation is the recreation of an original, a transformation towards a higher state of (linguistic) being: "No translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (256). The translator's task is thus in part an attempt to approach a pure language of truth and revealed expression:

In this pure language—which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages— all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. This very stratum furnishes a

1) All references to Benjamin are from "The Task of the Translator," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 253-263.

new and higher justification for free translation It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. (261)

The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, manifest; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational. For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language informs his work If there is such a thing as a language of truth, a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives, then this language of truth is--the true language. And this very language, in whose divination and description lies the only perfection for which a philosopher can hope, is concealed in concentrated fashion in translations. (259)

A translation issues from the original--not so much from its life as from its afterlife In [translations] the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding.

As the unfolding of a special and high form of life, this process [of translation] is governed by a special high purposiveness All purposeful manifestations of life . . . have their end not in life but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages (254-255).

All suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux--until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning. If, however, these

languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness? (257)

Benjamin's search for the "pure language" would not, I think, have been beyond Alfred's comprehension. Were he surprised at all, it would probably be at the fact that anyone thought the point up for discussion, at the notion anyone felt compelled to point out that human language, fractured into its various dialects since the collapse of Babel's famed tower, was impure. Much of the modern angst over the quality of a given translation (its literal faithfulness to an original versus the freedom it employs in trying to capture the spirit of that original) stems from modern doubts about the reliability of language and the stability of meaning. But in reading Alfred, one gets the sense that there was no crisis of language to be uncovered in his day. Alfred and his contemporaries, through to Chaucer's time, did not weep as George Eliot wept upon reading Strauss' *Lives of Jesus*, discovering the instability of the Gospels, their contradictions, their lapses, their great collapsing holes of meaning and of supposed truth. And so this observation in the 14th century by Chaucer:

. . . ye woot that every Evaungelist
 That telleth us the peyne of Jhesu Crist
 Ne saith nat alle thyng as his felawe dooth;
 But nathelees hir sentence is al sooth,
 And alle acorden as in hire sentence,
 Al be ther in hir tellyng difference.
 For somme of hem seyn moore, and somme seyn lesse,

Whan they his pitous passioun expresse –
 I meene of Mark, of Mathew, Luc, and John –
 But doutelees hir sentence is al oon. (2133-2142)²⁾

For Alfred, revelation was achieved through the resurrection of the body not the resurrection of texts. On reading Benjamin, Alfred might perhaps be taken aback, perhaps intrigued, that any individual man should contemplate turning back the tides of time and establishing, by himself, in his own time, the age before Babel. To pass beyond Babel on the way back to Eden would have been, for the medieval thinker, an image of death, the vision of a dying and resurrected man at the end of history. Which is another way of saying that Benjamin's eschatological metaphors, colorfully playing with images of purity and resurrection, would have appealed to Alfred if he read them in translation – but he presumably would not read them "literally", for they could not be true of life in the human world as Alfred understood it, only true and attainable in the purity of the next world.

And so for Alfred the task of the translator is not to recover a pure language, but to purify the spirit of the reader. Translation does have a high purpose and it is a means of connecting one with the divine, just not in the pure abstract way that Benjamin envisions. Compare two images of a forest of words, first in Benjamin, then Alfred:

Unlike a work of literature, translation finds itself not in the center of the language forest but on the outside facing the wooded ridge; it calls into it without entering, aiming at the single spot where the echo is able to give, in its own language, the reverberation of the work in the alien one

2) Citations from *The Canterbury Tales* refer to *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

(258-259)

I then gathered for myself staves and props and tie-shafts, and handles for each of the tools that I knew how to work with, and cross-bars and beams, and, for each of the structures which I knew how to build, the finest timbers I could carry. I never came away with a single load without wishing to bring home the whole of the forest, if I could have carried it all—in every tree I saw something for which I had a need But He who instructed me, to whom the forest was pleasing, may bring it about that I may abide more comfortably both in this temporary dwelling by this road as long as I am in this life, and also in the eternal home that He has promised us I believe he will . . . both make this present road easier than it was before, and in particular will illuminate the eyes of my mind so that I can discover the most direct way to the eternal home and to eternal glory and to the eternal rest which is promised to us (Preface to the translation of Augustine's *Soliloquies* 138-139)³

Benjamin's forest is a metaphor for language itself, for the dark and confusing nature of language. Alfred's forest, conversely, is a metaphor for life, for the place of language, specifically acts of translation, in life. The materials (the writings of the Church fathers) with which one constructs one's life—a mental life, a spiritual life, a verbal life—come out of the forest in pieces. They are never entirely sufficient, just as one's ability to build is always limited by one's own insufficiencies. But one does the best that one can with the materials at hand and with the application of one's abilities. This process of building and maintaining a dwelling is a continual one; it is life itself. It is movement back and forth to the forest, in a perpetual transfer and reconfiguration of the material

3) All references to Alfred are from *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*, ed. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (London: Penguin, 1983).

found there. It is a private act, a building of a temporary dwelling in which to rest the mind and spirit in this life, but also a public act, the construction of a dwelling which can be seen by others on that road, a way of being useful in and to the world, for utility more so than architectural accuracy or merit is the sign that one is fit for such a dwelling ("May He who created both [earthly and heavenly abodes] both grant that I be fit for both: both to be useful here and likewise to arrive there" [139]).⁴⁾

So to be fit, to be useful in this life, Alfred uses material from the sacred wood to transform his England, translating it, as it were, moving it forward in preparation for a strong future by moving it back to a better time in its history:

And I would have it known that very often it has come to my mind what men of learning there were formally throughout England, both in religious and secular orders; and how there were happy times then throughout England; and how the kings, who had authority over this people, obeyed God and his messengers; and how they not only maintained their peace, morality and authority at home but also extended their territory outside; and how they succeeded both in warfare and in wisdom; and also how eager were the religious orders both in teaching and in learning as well as in all the holy services which it was their duty to perform for God; and how people from abroad sought wisdom and instruction in this country. (Preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care* 124-125)

But as Alfred prepares to take the throne he perceives that such an edenic time has passed and England has fallen into a state of political, cultural, and

4) For a discussion of the sources for Alfred's building metaphor, see Valerie Heuchan, "God's Co-Workers and Powerful Tools: A Study of the Sources of Alfred's Building Metaphor in His Old English Translation of Augustine's Soliloquies," *Notes and Queries* 54 (2007): 1-11.

spiritual decay:

. . . nowadays, if we wished to acquire these things, we would have to seek them outside [of England]. Learning had declined so thoroughly in England that there were very few men on this side of the Humber who could understand their divine services in English, or even translate a single letter from Latin into English . . . Remember what punishments befell us in this world when we ourselves did not cherish learning nor transmit it to other men . . . (Preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care* 125)

And so Alfred decides to embark on his great translation project, one that is tied as closely to his public as to his private life. Alfred's prefaces as often note the personal need which drove his work as the cultural reform which he took to be the public end of that work. Both Alfred and his kingdom are afflicted, for which affliction translation becomes a remedy:

When I recalled how knowledge of Latin had previously decayed throughout England, and yet many could still read things written in English, I then began, amidst the various and multifarious afflictions of this kingdom, to translate into English the book which in Latin is called *Pastoralis*, in English "Shepherd-book" . . . (Preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care* 126)

I, Alfred, honoured with the dignity of kingship through Christ's gift, have clearly perceived and frequently heard from statements in holy books that for us, to whom God has granted such a lofty station of world office, there is the most urgent necessity occasionally to calm our minds amidst these earthly anxieties and direct them to divine and spiritual law. And therefore I sought and petitioned my true friends that they should write down for me from God's books the following teaching concerning the virtues and miracles of holy men, so that . . . I might occasionally reflect in my mind on

heavenly things amidst these earthly tribulations. (Preface to Werferth's translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* 123)

King Alfred was the translator of this book: he turned it from Latin into English, as it now stands before you. Sometimes he translated word for word, sometimes sense for sense, so as to render it as clearly and intelligibly as he could, given the various and multifarious worldly distractions which frequently occupied him either in mind or in body. These occupations, which beset him during his days on the throne that he had accepted, are virtually countless (Preface to Boethius 131)

According to Asser, many of Alfred's personal tribulations were of his own devout making. At the age of 17 he begins to worry about the state of his soul, in particular the consequence of his impure thoughts and threats to his chastity. So he decides to pray to God. Many men have followed Augustine at this point, but Alfred does not. He asks that God send him an illness in place of his impurity. He falls violently ill, succumbing to an excruciating condition which affects him for the rest of his life, even during his kingship when he struggles daily through his work or else is crippled in pain. The affliction does not stop him, however, from governing or from securing England against the Viking invaders after a series of difficult military campaigns, one of his most important accomplishments.

The image of Alfred presented in Asser's *Life* (again, immaterial whether that "Alfred" is a historical figure or an iconic expression of his age) is of a man on a desolate island trying to hold a collapsing world together. His body has betrayed him. He is surrounded by ignorance and folly. He has a people he wants to lead and to teach and to strengthen, as individuals and as a nation, but they are in the grip of the fear and the folly and the idleness that comes

from an ignorance of their history and of the values (more specifically of the texts which encode the values) underpinning their moral and political universes. He faces a brutal and vicious enemy in the heathen Vikings, a manifest evil.

Yet he perseveres, sustained in part, I think, by a sense that translation is a daily and never ceasing individual activity of the good man: a private act with personal and political consequences; an act of impressing one's own personal vision and experience of universal truth on the community of which one is a part. An act of engaging, in one's own voice, with the divine. Alfred's concept of literary translation was influenced by his own personal experience, physical and metaphysical translation, as it were; which is to say, by his movement through the world, through Christian life as he experienced and understood it.

Notable here is that Alfred ties his afflictions and worldly distractions both to the rationale for the translation project and to the type (and the quality) of translation he undertakes: "sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense."⁵ He acknowledges that his own translations may not be entirely accurate:

After I had mastered it, I translated it into English as best I understood it and as I could most meaningfully render it (Preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care* 126)

. . . in God's name [he, Alfred] implores each of those whom it pleases to read this book to pray for him and not to blame him if they can interpret it more accurately than he was able: for every man must say what he says and do what he does according to the capacity of his intellect and the amount of time available to him. (Preface to Boethius 132)

5) The phrase he uses in both the prefaces to Gregory (126) and to Boethius (131).

Every translator must work according to his capacity so that (the work now being available in the vernacular) every man can read according to his.

But if these translations are inconsistent (sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense) or radically different from the originals in structure or in content (as Alfred's translation often were⁶⁾), how can this serve either the individual translator or his community of readers?

Moreover the texts Alfred chose for his project do not seem to form what we would think of as a canon of essential cultural texts, the ones which are the most necessary for all men to know (Preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care* 126).⁷⁾

6) Alfred's approach to translation can be appreciated even in modern English translations of his own work, because the most striking part of Alfred's translations is often *not* at the micro-level of syntax and diction. The original author's content was neither sacred nor safe in Alfred's hands. While some of the translations are what we think of as "literal" or "word for word" prose translations, Alfred was not afraid to both add and delete text according to the dictates of his own vision of the work. His translation of the *Consolation* often replaces biographical elements from Boethius' life with Alfred's own reflections on the philosophical subject under discussion (the concept of the immortal soul, for example, seems to have interested him especially and he sometimes interjected material on this theme even when it was not in the original text); he replaced classical allusions with examples and metaphors of his own choosing; and in the case of the *Consolation*, he even changed the structure of the text (Boethius' meeting with Lady Philosophy) by introducing a more familiar Patristic (Christian) structure, a dialogue between the characters of Mind and Wisdom. See Keyes and Lapidge's introduction 30-31.

In the other translations, such changes were often on a smaller scale. As Keyes and Lapidge note (139, note 6), in the *Soliloquies* Augustine wrote about the importance of pure solitude and private contemplation, while Alfred in his translation stresses the need for quiet while working in a group. Why? Because this is how Alfred conducted his readings and his translations. Augustine's compositions were the product of solitude, but Alfred's were collaborative efforts. So Alfred offers his readers not Augustine's advice, but a reflection from his own personal experience that he believes to be equally, if not more, valuable for their education.

7) Gregory's tract (late 6th century) is a guide for spiritual and by extension political governance of a Christian community. Among the other important translations

Of course, Boethius' *Consolation* and Orosius' *History Against the Pagans* were significant theological texts, but the choice of Augustine's *Soliloquies*, for example, seems somewhat minor given the importance of his other works.

Yet it is the somewhat idiosyncratic nature of the choices that is significant. These are texts that Alfred himself knew and which meant something to him – as an individual, as a Christian, as a King. The first fifty *Psalms*, for example, like the *Consolation*, were translated by a man surrounded by his enemies and looking for divine guidance. So the choice of texts for his translation project suggest that, for Alfred, translation is both a personal and a political act; an expression of private experience and of cultural knowledge; an objective quest for Truth begun in the subjective cells of, as he might say, the hive of one's own mind.⁸⁾

commissioned by Alfred (or to which he may himself have contributed) are Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* (early 6th century), an important tract about acceptance and faith in a largely unfair and inhospitable world (later translated by, among others, Chaucer and Queen Elizabeth); Augustine's *Soliloquies* (early 5th century); the first fifty *Psalms* of King David; Gregory's *Dialogues* (late 6th century); Orosius' *History Against the Pagans* (an early 5th century tract refuting the pagan argument that they were better off before Christianity and that the decay of Rome was a consequence of having abandoned the pagan gods); and Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (early 8th century).

In addition to the translation project, Alfred's program of cultural revival included the establishment of several schools, the writing of a revised Law Code, and the vernacular recording of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (a year by year compilation of historical and contemporary sources through to Alfred's own reign).

8) "Accordingly, just like the clever bee which at first light in the summertime departs from its beloved honeycomb, finds its way with swift flight on its unpredictable journey through the air, lights upon the many and various flowers of grasses, plants and shrubs, discovers what pleases it most and then carries it back home, King Alfred directed the eyes of his mind far afield and sought without what he did not possess within, that is to say, within his own kingdom." (*Life of King Alfred* Chapter 76 [page 92]).

As Alfred observes in the Preface to Augustine's *Soliloquies*, God rules over both humanity's "temporary habitations" and the "eternal abodes" of the next life (139). But human beings only yet know their temporary, shifting, collapsing, dissolving world and the structures they must continually rebuild (from whatever materials are available at the moment) to the best of their limited ability. As God, speaking a pure language of absolute meaning, knowing the hearts and minds of men, requires no translation; so men, without certainty and purity of expression, rely on translation, or rather on what amounts to a series of re-translations, re-visions, re-structurings of what has been lost and scattered in the dark wood of the world.

Facing the problem of how to shore up his people's culture and values through language, specifically through the encoding (or re-coding) of alien texts in his people's own language, Alfred's engineering of English culture is driven by this paradox: Alfred sought to unify England, to give Englishmen a sense of shared identity through shared culture and shared religious and political values, but he founded such unity on a collection of non-determinate, non-permanent texts. His cultural and religious absolutes were encoded in personal, indefinite, subjective expression. He did not establish, nor I think intend to establish, with his translation project what we understand to be a canon: a set of stable, permanent, objective texts from which individual interpretations and ultimately a collective cultural interpretation can be derived. He had no sense, as the Renaissance and the Enlightenment did, of that kind of stable canon (precisely the kind of stable text that Walter Benjamin and modern linguists began to doubt and to challenge in the modern period). In almost modern (Benjamin) fashion, Alfred too goes beyond what is "literal" and "objective" and "absolute" and "original" (with respect to the original author) and embraces what is "free" and "subjective" and "impermanent" and "original"

(with respect to the translator).

What is not modern in him, what marks his medievalism, is that he seems largely untroubled by this activity. His vision of the world does not encompass, and so does not require, certainty or stability or permanence, either from texts or from any other human production or endeavor. The essence of education and intellectual work is not primarily elucidation or the delineation of the known from the unknown, the certain from the uncertain. Rather, intellectual activity is continuous translation in the sense of continuous interpretation, the unending construction of a cathedral for other pilgrims to meditate in, of a dwelling for fellow travelers to rest in. An eternal abode, however, is still the province of God. If one's private architecture is well-designed, it can illuminate in the sense of casting a little light onto the darkness surrounding, maybe even, as in Alfred's case, if one has the political power, it can revitalize the dying culture of a people; but it is not revelation in the sense of bringing them certain truth or providing them an unshakeable foundation. Translation remains a private act to be combined with the private acts of one's collaborators in the fashioning of, one can but hope, some workable social order and some rugged path to what, again one hopes, looks like it might be some kind of truth.

This is in part what Christians mean when they speak of seeing through a glass, darkly (I Cor. 13:12). And so Alfred's medieval concept of translation challenges us in many ways as Walter Benjamin's essay challenges us, asking us if we can accept this uncertain vision or if we require more from our translations; if we believe we can found a society on a series of individual interpretations and private linguistic expressions, or if we will look to translation to be part of the solution to the problem of indeterminacy, subjectivism, and moral and cultural incoherence that defines our modern Babel.

주제어: 알프레드 대왕, 발터 벤야민, 『알프레드 대왕의 생애』, 앵글로 색슨 문화, 번역 이론

Works Cited

- Alfred the Great. *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources*. Ed. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge. London: Penguin, 1983.
- Benjamin, Walter. "The Task of the Translator," *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913-1926*. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996. 253-263.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer* 3rd ed. Gen. ed. Larry D. Benson. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
- Godden, M. R. "Did King Alfred Write Anything?" *Medium Aevum* 76 (2007): 1-23.
- Heuchan, Valerie. "God's Co-Workers and Powerful Tools: A Study of the Sources of Alfred's Building Metaphor in His Old English Translation of Augustine's Soliloquies." *Notes and Queries* 54 (2007): 1-11.

Tasking the Translator: A Dialogue of King Alfred and Walter Benjamin

Abstract

John Lance Griffith

At the end of the ninth century King Alfred the Great charged the most learned scholars of his day with the task of translating Latin texts into the English vernacular, a project Alfred viewed as central to his ultimate goal of initiating a sweeping social and moral reformation of English life and learning. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin challenged the modern translator to consider the purpose and the nature of his task, its philosophical and epistemological consequence. This essay examines the life and work of Alfred the Great -- the interconnection of that life and that translation work -- and considers how medieval translation practices help us to think about the problems posed by Walter Benjamin for the modern translator, about the medieval/modern divide. Alfred sought to unify England, to give Englishmen a sense of shared identity through shared culture and shared religious and political values, but he founded such unity on a collection of non-determinate, non-permanent texts. His cultural and religious absolutes were encoded in personal, indefinite, subjective expression. Questing for the universal, in almost modern (Benjamin) fashion, Alfred goes beyond what is "literal" and "objective" and "absolute" and "original" (with respect to the original author) and embraces what is "free" and "subjective" and "impermanent" and "original" (with respect to the translator). In the midst of the moral and cultural incoherence that defines our modern Babel, the dialogue between Alfred and Benjamin challenges us to consider how we should define the value (social and

philosophical) of the translator's task, to consider with what we should task the translator.

Key Words

King Alfred, Walter Benjamin, Asser's *Life of King of Alfred*, Anglo-Saxon culture, translation theory