

David Gissen
with the assistance of Rabbi David Freelund
Reviewed by Kimberly Johnson

A Psalm from David



When we translate a text, we typically do so into a particular language—defined by geographical space and time—but other possibilities can be cultivated within translations. The following essay examines the translation of one of the most translated texts—Psalm 23 (“A psalm of David”) from the Hebrew Testament—based on ideas of disability, space, and intelligibility.¹ While this essay focuses on an experimental translation of a Hebrew text, the ideas in it are axiomatic and can be applied to any textual work.

Psalm 23, a text that dates to the period of the First, Solomonic Temple (960BCE–586BCE) is an exemplary instance of an ancient text continuously translated from early sources in Hebrew, Greek, and Coptic into many other languages—for example, 7th-century Latin, 12th-century Arabic, 17th-century British English, 19th-century French, and 20th-century Chinese and “Global” English. The most famous translation of the psalm is from the King James Bible of 1611, a work of translation that transformed the modern English language:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me
beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of
righteousness for his name’s sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I
will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they
comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine
enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my
life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

All translations invoke different forms of subjectivity. The King James translation opened the text of the Old and New Testaments to a larger, non-Latin-reading audience. Many of the most recent translations of Psalm 23 bring in concerns such as gender or power—for example replacing male pronouns for God with non-gender-specific pronouns. The “Contemporary English Version” (1995) of Psalm 23 replaces the pronoun for God—“he”—with “you,” as in the following verse:

*You let me rest in fields of green grass.
You lead me to streams of peaceful water, and you refresh
my life.*

While this type of translation has become commonplace in religious texts, it represents a larger ethics of interpretation: the translations of Psalm 23 into 17th-century English expanded the intelligibility of worship, and

the more recent gender-neutral translations suggest greater sensitivity to the inter-relationships of gender and power.

Within this specific ethical framework of translation and reproduction, we might imagine almost endless opportunities for bringing subjectivities into interpretations of work. It is possible that translations could also emerge from more intersectional thinking about subjectivity and more conceptual frameworks for considering how subjectivities are represented within language.

As someone with a disability, I have often considered how all forms of cultural interpretation might be more open to the ways I and other disabled people experience the world. It's exciting to translate a text so that it can be read by someone in a foreign language, but how can we translate texts (or any other cultural artifacts) so that they can be understood by someone with a physical, experiential reality that is foreign to us? Who understands what and where is pre-determined by knowledge of a particular language, but it is also determined by one's ability to understand something within a particular physical context. How language is perceived in certain environments limits or expands the possibilities of intelligibility. Braille is a wonderful alphabet, but it is not a system of translation that remakes language. Another approach towards accessibility and language might be added.

The text shown below is a new translation of Psalm 23. This is an English to English "dynamic" translation that makes the psalm easier to hear in the type of large and noisy spaces that typify Jewish and Christian worship, and it is also translated into language much more easily heard by people with hearing impairments. In this translation, the text's original words—heavy with fricative and sibilant phonemes (eg. the word "shepherd" or "restoreth") as well as diphthongs—are replaced with words that contain phonemes more easily heard at a distance and in a reverberating space. Tonally, the general sound frequency of the psalm is at a much lower register when spoken aloud; again, this aids in its intelligibility for people with hearing impairments and in a noisy context.

*My guardian, I am your lamb. You tend to me.
You let me lie in a green meadow and lead me to a quiet pool.
You maintain me and guide me along the road.
In the valley of the dead, you make me bold by guiding me with
your cane.
You let me eat when in danger. You put oil on my head and I drink
plenty.
I know love and tender care every day; and I will dwell by you
eternally.*

When read aloud, the text will sound strange to most readers due to the low frequency register of its language, and it will make the reader's larynx vibrate in ways that might feel unusual.

This "dynamic" translation is the result of many variations on particular phrases, which were tested both semantically and technically. The meaning of the language holds close to the original, although some deviations are apparent. Technically, many different possibilities for each verse were tested with audio equipment and simulators.² The resulting audio was listened to by the author and also fed into a voice-to-text transcription tool to interpret its general intelligibility. The resulting "environmental translation" is significantly more intelligible in audibility-challenged environments than is the original King James version.

Ultimately, this gender-neutral, low tone, "environmental" version of Psalm 23 suggests possibilities for translation more generally. Translation is typically a realm of expertise either in particular languages or in literary genres (in the case above, liturgical literature). But translation can be opened to other forms of expertise. Those of us who shape, analyze, and historicize the spaces and environments within which texts appear might become more involved in translating and reproducing cultural artifacts. The ethical opportunities for expanding the perception of culture and meaning should be open to all.

Review

By Kimberly Johnson

As a kid, I listened to a lot of loud music. If I'm honest, I still do. As a consequence, my hearing is skittish: there are registers that elude me in the common ranges of human speech, and my capacity to listen with discrimination is diminished in environments where sound collides and bends: cocktail parties, cavernous spaces.

In what David Gissen describes as the "large, reverberative European cathedrals," I have muddled my way through sermons alongside murmuring awe-seekers in the semidark. All the voices blur together, and the susurrus of reverent footfalls blends with the muted car-horns from outside to resonate like a harmonic against the tinnitic whine I hear waking or sleeping. What I hear is a distorted cathedral, a misshapen synagogue, a partial mosque: an aural shape naved in muddle and apsed in mute.

In the jostle of pilgrims and tourists, there's only one word I hear clearly, broadcast in gentle but stern tones of reminder over the pious public address system: *Silence*. Through the illegible press of voices: *Silence*.

It seems metaphysically appropriate to me that the only sound to arrive intact at my hearing is *Silence*. The general din of prayer and prayer-tourism produces a kind of noise-cancellation device around me, leaving the way clear to the holy and unanswerable silence at the heart of the architecture.

Gissen's accommodated translation of Psalm 23 seeks to drop the resonances of prayer down below the hubbub, below the bouncy frequencies of stone walls and the mutter of traffic through the window glass. *My guardian, I am your lamb*, it begins, incorporating the weaknesses of the body—the weaknesses of my very ears—into its song.

Gissen's low tones ask me to listen for a spell from within that weakness. But as I listen, appreciating the increased intelligibility of his song, I must confess that I crave not *more* intelligibility but *less*. Gissen's technical solution to my muddled hearing may allow the psalm's words to carry through the cathedral with less distortion, with less interference from the throng and its whispered veneration. But I haven't entered the sanctuary for words—not even words as august and affirmative as those of Psalm 23. I have entered precisely to have the stone and vault absorb the rabble, to have the whispers in their counter-amplitudes reduce to hush. I have entered for silence. For Simone Weil, nothing else so characterizes the voice of the divine: "The word of God is silence."

In contrast to that divine silence, Gissen's environmental translation heightens my sense of its sound, of the substantiality of the translation *per se*, of the words that refuse to be abstracted or noise-cancelled away. Gissen's low-tone psalm insists at my ears in unsublimable registers of physicality, and lodges in my throat in confirmation of my heavy, ramshackle, mortal body. It succeeds in keeping the sound of the world and its syllables present to my understanding, sneaking in around the nodes of my own unhearing. Gissen's psalm overwrites the silence. By enduring as an aural artifact, Gissen's psalm offers a prayer that dispels the silence with all its metaphysical resonance. Instead of the damped silence of my tinnitis, I actually *hear the words*—words about the comforting apprehensibility of the divine. But precisely because I hear the words, I can no longer dwell in holy silence. Words about God overwrite the word of God that is silence. I long for the psalm to end, for my return to the illegibility of the holy.

That is to say: perhaps paradoxically, Gissen's psalm cultivates its own obsolescence.

1 In Jewish practice, the psalm is read in mourning rituals and as a prayer for the ill.

2 The text was read into a convolution reverb processor utilizing impulse responses made in several, large, reverberative, European cathedrals.

3 Simone Weil, "The Love of God and Affliction," *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (Wakefield, RI: Moyer Bell Publishers, 1999), 467.

Biographies

David Gissen is a historian, theorist, curator, and critic whose work examines histories and theories of architecture, landscapes, environments, and cities. His recent work focuses on developing a novel concept of nature in architectural thought and experimental forms of architectural historical practice. Gissen is the author of *Manhattan Atmospheres: Architecture, the Interior Environment, and Urban Crisis* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014) and *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), and he edited of the "Territory" issue of *AD Journal* (2010) and *Big and Green* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003). His essays have been published in journals such as *AA Files*, *Cabinet*, *Grey Room*, *Log*, *Quaderns*, and *Thresholds*, as well as a wide range of magazines, newspapers, blogs, and books. His curatorial and experimental historical work has been staged at the Museum of the City of New York, the National Building Museum, the Yale University Architecture Gallery, the Toronto Free Gallery, and the Canadian Centre for Architecture, among other venues. Gissen is currently an associate professor at the California College of the Arts.

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Kimberly Johnson is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *Uncommon Prayer* (Persea Books, 2014), and of book-length translations of Virgil (Penguin Classics, 2009) and Hesiod (Northwestern University Press, 2017). Her monograph *Made Flesh: Sacrament and Poetics in Post-Reformation England* was published in 2014 by the University of Pennsylvania Press, and her work on the religious literature of the English Renaissance has appeared in numerous journals, including *Milton Quarterly* and *Modern Philology*, with a forthcoming essay in *PMLA*. With Jay Hopler, she edited *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry* (Yale University Press, 2013). Recipient of grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, Johnson teaches Renaissance literature and creative writing at Brigham Young University.

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