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# Translation as Blood Loss: German Lutheran and American Presbyterian Variations on a Medieval Catholic Hymn

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## Translation as Blood Loss:

### German Lutheran and American Presbyterian Variations on a Medieval Catholic Hymn

Protestants and Catholics now sing each other's hymns and think nothing of it. This was not always the case. Christian hymnody was once drawn along sharp sectarian lines. When, how, and why did this change? This presentation hopes to offer a tentative answer by analyzing a particular hymn, a medieval Latin Catholic poem, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century German Lutheran translation, and a number of English translations of that translation, including the dominant one by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Presbyterian. The phenomenon of that hymn's translation reveals an ecumenical impulse in the form of borrowing song texts across confessional lines. The differences between the different versions of the hymn demonstrate what is distinctive about each recontextualization of the text, notably an increased amount of theological abstraction and a decreased amount of blood between the original and Gerhardt, and between Gerhardt and his English-language translators. The consistent themes between all the versions of the hymn shows what seems to be its inalienable essence.

The Latin poem "*Membra Jesu Nostrī*" consists of a series of seven poems, each dedicated to one of the wounds of Christ. We do not know who wrote most of "*Membra Jesu Nostrī*." Saint Hermann Joseph, the Norbertine canon, wrote "To the Heart." The rest was probably by the Cistercian abbot Arnulf of Leuven, who also flourished in the early 13<sup>th</sup>-century, although there may have been a number of authors. This is not as important as the fact that Gerhardt and Gerhardt's translators believed the entire text to have been written by Bernard of Clairvaux, whom Lutherans and other Protestants have tended to hold in high esteem, due to his passionate, personal love relationship with Christ.

The different parts of the Latin poem certainly express that kind of relationship. The first-person narrator of the poem embraces Christ and his wounds, one at a time. At Christ's feet, the

narrator demands to wash himself in Christ's blood, which he describes as flowing over everything without ceasing. At Christ's knees, the narrator asks his "lover" to force him against the bloody cross, that he might find rest. He compares the blood in Christ's hands to a stream of roses, noting that his body wears "the royal purple of blood," which the thirsty narrator drinks until he drips with it. At Christ's side, the narrator finds "sweet honey," a purifying fountain, and a place to hide.

Waxing more abstract, the narrator finds the fount of wisdom and kindness in Christ's chest, where the Apostle John suckled. The narrator then compares the foul vanity of his heart to the sweet purity of Christ's, which is now drained and twisted by pain. At Christ's face, the narrator expresses similar laments of passion and pity, the details of which we will discuss shortly. All of the parts of the poem are full of passionate, sensual, sensory imagery emphasizing Christ's love, in the form of his shedding of blood, and the narrator's love for Christ, in the form of him imbibing and embracing that blood. These themes are not surprising, given the poem's context in late medieval northern Europe.

The 17<sup>th</sup>-century German Lutheran pastor and poet Paul Gerhardt translated all seven parts of "*Membra Jesu Nostris*," adapting each as a poem in a series. German church composers eventually adapted all of these as independent hymns, but they only arranged one of these as a hymn in Gerhardt's lifetime. "*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*" arguably became Gerhardt's best known hymn, helping establish him as the most renowned German hymn-writer, with the possible exception of Martin Luther. It is Gerhardt's version of the portion of the original poem "To the Face"; and like that portion, we will discuss it alongside its best known English counterpart in a few moments.

Gerhardt lived in a time of great tumult: the Thirty Years' War, famine, plague, the death of most of his children, and, eventually, the premature death of his wife. He lost his pastoral position in Berlin for being too friendly toward Calvinists. In this violent and uncertain era, Gerhardt composed poetry of great hope in the midst of suffering. His contemporary poets, musicians, and artists were

likewise known for their overflowing expressions of emotionalism. It is surprising, then, that Gerhardt's translation softens some of the suffering and emotion described in the original.

Gerhardt's versions of the first six parts of "*Membra*" does retain much of the fervor of the original, keeping in the spirit of its author, whom Gerhardt believed to be Bernard; but Gerhardt's version of the text is more abstract and theological. At Christ's feet, there is still a flood of blood, but Gerhardt overtly notes its role in the atonement. At Christ's knees, Gerhardt tends to make vague statements – that there is much blood, for example – rather than provide visually vivid descriptions of the qualities of that blood. Gerhardt's language remains intimate, but his emphasis is on Christ and on what Christ does, rather than on what the narrator does toward Christ. At Christ's hands, Gerhardt dwells on the effect of Christ's blood in purchasing sinners' salvation, rather than on the physical characteristics of that blood. At Christ's side, Gerhardt depicts the river of blood originating here without mentioning honey, love, or the filth it cleanses, but describing it as a "wide gate of grace." Christ's chest is still the source of wisdom and kindness, but no one has suckled there in Gerhardt's version. He depicts Christ's heart as the source of goodness and redemption without also presenting it as the bodily organ pumping blood. While Gerhardt did retain many elements of the original poem in his series, he did render it more abstract, more overtly theological (and, specifically, rendered it Lutheran in its theology, with his appeals to grace), in addition to removing and softening many of the references to blood.

These observations are equally true of "*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*," Gerhardt's version of the original's "To the Face"; these observations are true to an even greater extent of "O Sacred Head Now Wounded," a translation of Gerhardt's hymn by James Waddel Alexander, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Presbyterian pastor. Alexander's translation has established itself as the normative translation of the hymn. I should emphasize here that Alexander translates Gerhardt's hymn without including any material from the Latin original except what was already in Gerhardt. To an even

greater extent than Gerhardt, Alexander tends to *tell* us about Christ's death and its effects, rather than *show* us, using imagery with visual referents, what Christ's dying process might have looked like. But do not let me merely *tell* you; let me *show* you, using the parallel translations in your handouts as a guide. (I should note here that I have attempted to be as awkwardly wooden and literal as possible in my translations of the original and of Gerhardt.)

In the first stanza of the original, there are vivid depictions of the woundedness of Christ's head: *bloodied, shattered, wounded, beaten*. These verbal adjectives convey a sense of action having happened to Christ. Gerhardt simply describes Christ's head as *covered with blood and wounds*, a less dynamic description. Alexander does not mention blood at all, either here or elsewhere in his translation. Likewise, the original presents Christ's head as "smeared with spit," which Gerhardt softens, removing the spittle proper and simply describing Christ as "spat upon." In Alexander's translation, there is no spit or spitting. At least the paling of Christ's color receives equal treatment in all three versions, with the end of the first stanza in the original corresponding to the end of both Gerhardt and Alexander's second stanzas.

The Latin poet begins his second stanza with a description of Christ's receding "greenness," a use of the term comparable to Hildegard of Bingen and other medieval poets, referring to life-energy. Gerhardt and Alexander adapt this to the sensibilities of their audiences, referring instead to the fading red of Christ's lips and cheeks. Gerhardt even adds a new reference to color in "the pale power of death," which Alexander picks up on in the archaic "wan." I should note here that when I designed the handout I had not yet figured out that every one of the original stanzas corresponds to every two stanzas in both Gerhardt and Alexander's versions. Gerhardt and Alexander pick up on the narrator's sense of blaming himself in the original, expanding it in their fourth stanzas, both framing Christ's suffering as an act of grace, with Gerhardt emphasizing Christ on the cross as the receiver of God's wrath, a theme absent from Alexander.

In all three versions of the hymn, the narrator greets Christ as his shepherd, corresponding with stanza three of the original and stanza five in both translations. While the original and Gerhardt both describe Christ's mouth as the source of honey and sweet milk, Alexander weakens this metaphor to a simile, emphasizing what Christ's mouth is the source of: love and truth. Gerhardt and Alexander after him here note Christ's paleness in dying. The narrator embraces Christ in all three versions, with Gerhardt providing the most passionate, perhaps even motherly embrace – in his “arms and lap” – which Alexander downplays to a more brotherly, chest-level hug.

Stanza four of the original introduces the most potentially theologically problematic passage in the text. The narrator suggests that he should die with Christ on the cross. Gerhardt includes this in his version, while Alexander omits it entirely. Medieval mystics and early modern Lutherans with Pietist leanings would not hesitate to express their passionate love for Christ in terms that would make those with more careful doctrine shudder. As a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Presbyterian, perhaps more academic and systematic in their theology than any other American denomination, Alexander was doubtless more keen on safeguarding the unique role of Christ in advancing salvation history by means of his sacrifice without suggesting that sinners can somehow help accomplish what only Christ could. All three versions at least agree that believers should find their departure from this life in the embrace of Christ.

The fifth and final stanza of the original imagines what that dying moment of the believer might be like, as the narrator prays for Christ, “his embracing lover,” to appear to him on the cross in the narrator's moment of death. Without calling Christ his lover, Gerhardt, expands on the narrator's desire to see Christ crucified in his dying moment, asking to see Christ's “distress on the cross.” Alexander, too, omits all reference to Christ as lover and, in this case, to Christ's suffering or distress. He would simply like to see the cross itself in his dying moment, for it is the symbol and means of salvation.

Alexander has sanitized the blood and much of the passionate emotion from the original, as well as rendering his version of the text more abstract and theological. In both of these regards, Alexander has continued and completed trends already present in Gerhardt. This is the kind of hymn that American Protestants demanded.

A brief comparison with the numerous other English-language translations of the texts confirms this. Granted some of the translations that have not received wide circulation are inferior in quality, with awkward rhymes (such as “faithfulness” with “face” or “ruthlessly” with “lie”) or with awkward phrases which undermine the seriousness of the hymn (“Can death thy blood deflower?”). Beyond such aesthetic concerns, the other translations possess a greater quantity of blood, such as “O Head Blood Stained and Wounded,” apparently borrowing from Alexander, and “O Wounded Head and Bleeding.” While these are more close to Gerhardt’s text in their word selections, they were simply less palatable to 19<sup>th</sup>-century American Protestants. As further evidence of this, I would like to point out the overt presence of “bleeding” and the effects of death in the standard translation in English-language Catholic hymnals.

Comparing Alexander’s hymn with the standard English-language hymns that do emphasize blood reveals a compelling parallel. Most of these stem from the more emotionally expressive Methodist-Holiness revival tradition: “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness”; “There is a Fountain”; “Nothing but the Blood”; “Are You Washed in the Blood?”; “There is Power in the Blood”; and “I Know a Fount.” What these share with “O Sacred Head Now Wounded” is their emphasis on what Christ’s blood accomplishes spiritually – salvation! – rather than on Christ’s blood as a physical substance. Alexander’s translation would seem to be part of a larger tendency in English-language hymnody toward theological abstraction compared with earlier German hymnody and Latin devotional poetry.

Even with its sanitizing and theologizing tendencies, Alexander's hymn is graphic and emotionally expressive, relative to the standards of his own church community. His hymn marks a significant departure from Presbyterian norms. While Methodists and Baptists had been singing hymns by members of other denominations for over a generation, Presbyterians in Alexander's time had only recently started singing Presbyterian hymns. Prior to that, they had limited themselves to only singing translations of the Psalms, such was the rigor of their insistence that all worship must be grounded in scripture. By offering a hymn that was not a translation of a specific Biblical text, Alexander was already departing from the norm. By presenting material from a tradition outside of Presbyterianism, he went even further. "O Sacred Head Now Wounded" stands as the fruit of Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Presbyterianism, a sign of an impulse toward ecumenism in hymnody.

The text has made its way down to the present, from Latin through German to English. Substantive changes have served to meet the aesthetic and theological needs of new communities of worship. Gerhardt infused the passion poem with a theology of grace. Alexander softened language of affection to be brotherly, rather than bride-like, toward Christ.

Indeed, brotherhood has been at the heart of the translation of this hymn, with Christians in worship moving together, borrowing, and learning from each other in their hymns far earlier than in more overtly theological and ecclesiastic ways – and with far greater success. Divided by doctrine and by institutional differences, Christians are united in song, however partially. For such a gain, the loss of blood from the text may be a small price to pay.

All of the versions of the text have been profound reflections on the passion, from the Latin original and Gerhardt's translation, to the myriad English translations that he inspired. While Alexander's version may have removed both some of the affective passion and some of the physical



details of Christ's suffering, the move toward a more abstract reflection on the dying process of Christ represents a recontextualization of the original theme, to which Alexander and Gerhardt alike have been faithful: Christians must take Christ's death personally and see their own deaths in its light.

Even though Gerhardt and Alexander both made significant changes to the text they were translating, making it more abstract, more theological, less bloody, and less passionate than the original, both translators presented their readers with words that were significantly more passionate than was the norm for their respective contexts. Captivated by the meaning they perceived in the text they received, they modified and adapted, but did not efface the suffering and love that they saw in the face of Christ.

The various versions of the text reflect the ways that Christians are inherently inclined to recontextualize the material of the past. Just as Christians claim that God became incarnate as a human, at a particular time and in a particular place, so too Christians must make incarnate the messages of the past in their own particular times and places. What was true of Christ and of the Gospel is true of hymns, especially those that have been translated once or twice.

As a post-script, I should point out the role of the tune, to which all of the versions of the hymn owe much of their success. Composed by Hans Leo Hassler in the generation before Gerhardt, it was originally a setting of an anonymous secular love poem, full of unrequited passion and the sufferings wrought by desire. While other composers quickly combined it with liturgical texts, Gerhardt's friend Johann Crüger provided its most lasting setting as the melody of "*O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*." Johann Sebastian Bach incorporated the tune into his St. Matthew Passion, where it comprises five of his twelve chorales, of which four are settings of "O Haupt," the other

being lyrics from another Gerhardt hymn. Especially once Felix Mendelssohn revived the St. Matthew Passion from obscurity in the mid-1800s, Hassler's tune and Gerhardt's lyrics received unprecedented attention. It is no accident that the proliferation of English translations dates from that era. But the tune has known a life beyond Gerhardt's lyrics or any translation of them. Cognizant of its ecumenical history, Tom Glazer used it for his folk song "Because All Men Are Brothers," which featured in the Labor Movement in the U.S. in the late 1940s and was further popularized by Peter, Paul, and Mary and by anti-war protesters in the 1960s. Also conscious in borrowing the melody from Hassler via Bach, Paul Simon recorded his "American Tune" in the early 1970s. In the song, the narrator suffers, dreams of death, and experiences a sort of resurrection. Simon has presented the American working man as a Christ figure.

Well-chosen words have power. Music, too, can inspire. Together, they possess an unparalleled ability to draw people together and to give them hope in dark times. The darkest call for words and melodies that are tried and true, if used and reused. "You can't be forever blessed," as Simon says, but one can always find solace in a song.