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Putting on the Mind of Ælred: Reflections of a Translator¹

MARIE ANNE MAYESKI

WHEN I UNDERTOOK to translate Ælred's Sermons 29–46² for the Cistercian Fathers Series,³ I did not fully anticipate what the task would entail. I did not realize that the complexities of English would engage me at least as much as those of Latin. I soon came to realize that what was required was nothing less than to put on the mind of Ælred and render that mind in English that was precise, accurate, and contemporary, yet still a vehicle for Ælred's own thought and expression. I did not want my voice to obscure his own. I doubt that I have fully achieved this goal. But I struggled mightily to do so. Here is the story of part of that struggle.

Let me begin with some reflections on Ælred's awareness of his audience. Ælred himself is quite explicit about the way in which he intends to tailor his interpretations, as well as his language, to the needs of the monks. In Sermon 33, section 20, Ælred compares what he is doing in interpreting the text to the healer who lays out different foods for people with different illnesses. Then he says, "if by chance one kind of food does not please, another may."⁴ Already we see Ælred's habitual concern to hold different, often opposing, ideas in tension. He speaks of the monks as ill, and, in illness, the medicine may be as bitter as necessary. Yet Ælred

1. A version of this paper was presented at the Cistercian Studies Conference, Kalamazoo, MI, 13 May, 2011.

2. *Ælredi Rievallensis: Sermones I–XIV*, *Collectio Claravallensis prima et secunda*, ed. Gaetano Raciti, CCCM 2A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989) 241–370.

3. Ælred of Rievaulx, *Liturgical Sermons 2: The Second Clairvaux Collection and the Durham Collection*, trans. Kathryn Krug and Marie Anne Mayeski, CF 77 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, forthcoming).

4. S 33.20.169–70. Further references to the Brepols volume of the sermons will be given in the body of the essay by sermon, paragraph, and line numbers. For this text see RB 39.

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wants the food he offers, that is, his interpretations, to please as well as to heal. We may look to his language, therefore, to see what he believed would heal his monks and what might please them.

For one, he seemed to believe that a clear and educated understanding of the meaning of the text would be healthful. More than once, he resorts to the language and the methods of the schools, not just the literary methods that were part and parcel of the general education, but the more philosophical methods that had recently received increased interest in the schools. The first paragraph of Sermon 37 on the feast of Saint Benedict gives just one of many instances where Ælred employs careful distinctions in the manner of the new logic. "Either one lives well, or one lives badly," he says, "but in any case one ought to get benefit from the feast" (S 37.1.9-10). The subsequent sermon flows from there, showing how those who live well would benefit in some ways and those who live badly in others.

In Sermon 34, logical distinction blossoms into a more philosophical reflection on the nature of the soul. In paragraph eighteen he explains the various natural faculties of the soul and the hierarchy that exists among them. Interestingly, he does not name the faculties, with one exception, but describes them. He speaks of the faculty that can see and distinguish corporeal reality, that which can discern good and evil, and finally, the highest faculty, intellect, which is capable of seeing God (S 34.18. 152-158). Later in the same sermon, he distinguishes between the various modes of divine communication: visions, interior inspirations and external voices (S 34.21.181-84). One is not surprised by Ælred's interests or by his use of academic strategies. But here, in sermons meant as food for the sick, meant to please the spiritual palate, it is significant. His borrowing from the academic world is rare, judicious, tempered by the avoidance of specifically academic terminology, and not without criticism. In S 40.17, for instance, he refers to the activity of the schools somewhat negatively, speaking of those who investigate varying different opinions in Biblical interpretation but fail to find the truth because they do not live the truth (S 40.17.146-48). Nonetheless he seems to believe that his monks would be more spiritually healthy if their thinking were clarified by precise distinctions, informed by an understanding of human nature, and generally informed by good scholarship.

Many individual diners as well as chefs of distinctive national cuisines believe that food that pleases is also *picante*; Ælred must have thought so, at least on some intuitive level, because his sermons are spiced with peppery criticism. Some of his best spice is found in those many passages in which he applies the Biblical texts allegorically to the specific and concrete life situations of the monastery. One of my favorite instances occurs in S 31.2. Ælred has been explaining the way in which worldly desires manifest themselves in vanity, sensuality, and ambition, even in the monastery: "For we too desire meaningless trappings, if we take pains with our cheap clothing, anxious that [our garments] may appear too wide or too narrow, at one point too short, at another, too long" (S 31.2.195–97). For a fleeting moment, I had an image of myself in front of a department-store mirror, checking the possibilities of a dress; it was almost immediately replaced by an image of a twelfth-century monk. What a lovely sense of kinship that produced. Then I wondered how he managed his worldly desires without a mirror but quickly realized that we vain people can always manage. Somehow, both I and a monk of Rievaulx were standing in exactly the same place, hearing Ælred's voice in gentle rebuke.

Occasionally, the spice that Ælred adds to his textual meal is very strong. He has a reputation for being too soft as an abbot, but these sermons demonstrate that he knew the salutary power of a very hot pepper or, perhaps even better, a scalpel. One such example opens S 34, On the Purification of Saint Mary. Ælred notes that the example of the holy fathers who have gone before are a source of embarrassment to him because they point up the wretchedness of the contemporary monk (S 34.1.3–6). Then he says, *confundor plane*, and the verb in that phrase gave me no end of trouble. Older Latin dictionaries give two English meanings: the first is "to bring someone's plans and activities to naught," with the nuance of shame or loss of reputation for the one so "confounded." The second meaning is "to embarrass or put some one in a bad light." The meanings overlap, but the first is clearly the stronger and indicates that the confounded person is much more than embarrassed. The English cognate originally had the same two meanings, but to use the cognate itself in my translation did not sound quite right, not as contemporary as I wanted. I went in search of a word hoard for the first meaning of the word, a treasury of options from which I could choose the one whose

nuances best suited the context. My usual set of dictionaries and thesauri did not give me what I wanted. Neither did the excellent book by Edith Scholl, *oc.so*.⁵ With a deep sigh of resignation, then, I surrendered to the last resort, the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Now this is the last resort only because my copy is the 1971 shrunken edition, four regularly sized pages reduced to one quarto-sized page; it can be read only with a magnifying lens that must be very carefully manipulated. But the OED didn't let me down. Not only did it document the declining fortunes of the first meaning, 'confound', in English, but it gave me at least a small hoard of words that I could use in my translation.

The search for exactly the right language occasionally led me into labyrinthine paths. I suspect that the paths I took were impelled as much by self-indulgence as by professional angst. I cannot resist the siren's call of words and their etymological history. I had a variety of dictionaries and thesauri in French, Latin, and English, but usually, the various Latin dictionaries provided for my needs and, upon occasion, offered up an unsuspected jewel. I was looking up the word *suscipio*. It is a word neither uncommon nor ambiguous, but in the act of polishing the translation I often subjected the ordinary to a bit more scrutiny for its original literal meaning. The word *suscipio* describes the act by which a putative father raised a newborn infant from the ground, thereby acknowledging paternity. In the context I was translating (S 39.1.9–15), Ælred uses the word to describe that action by which God, in the mystery of the Incarnation, elevates human nature by uniting the Divine word to it in one Divine person. Could Ælred have known that literal usage? Lewis and Short gave several Ciceronian examples in their references, which meant that Ælred could have known this wonderfully congruous root meaning.

So far we have been examining closely Ælred's language: its clues to his attitude toward his audience, its complexity, and its embedded richness. Let us turn now to the question of Ælred's imagination. I first explored the topic of Ælred's imagination in an essay published in 1979.⁶ In that piece I was interested in what Ælred said or implied about the role

5. Edith Scholl, *Words for the Journey: A Monastic Vocabulary*, MW 21 (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian, 2009).

6. Marie Anne Mayeski, "A Twelfth-Century View of the Imagination: Ælred of Rievaulx," *Noble Piety and Reformed Monasticism*, ed. E. Rozanne Elder. *Studies in Medieval Cistercian history* 7, CS 65 (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian, 1981) 123–29.

of imagination in theology and spiritual development. In my translation project, I was trying to watch his own imagination at work, a considerably more complex task.

S 32 is a response to the Feast of the Purification, and Ælred takes his central text from the antiphon and responsory for the feast, "Adorn thy marriage chamber, O Sion." Some eighty-five lines into the sermon, he borrows the language of Ezechiel's description of the new temple, a public structure, to be built in Israel. But as Ælred proceeds it is clear that he is describing a different kind of structure altogether, a domestic dwelling, with inner rooms, meant only for familiars, and an interior or marriage chamber, kept for solitude and intimacy. The analogy works perfectly if the translator and reader keep in mind the layout of a twelfth-century landowner's compound. Ælred describes watchtowers, two stages of courtyard, and a domestic dwelling that contains the inner chamber (S 32:11).

Upon this literary and architectural structure he builds his exhortation. From the watchtowers, guards identify those who approach, keep out enemies, and protect the goods accumulated through labor. This description teaches the monk to have a long-distance vision of the possible approaches of the devil so as to protect the fruits of his spiritual labors (charity, joy, peace, etc.). The external courtyard, to which all are admitted, is the memory where "good and bad, friends and enemies [enter] without difference or discretion" (S 32.12.107-08). Ælred describes the function of deliberation, on guard in the vestibule: to decide whether or not to admit what delights the memory to the domestic quarters, which "represent the consent of the will" (S 32.18 l. 155). From there it is but a few short steps to the inner chamber, which is affection. The soul is the householder who must bring our Lord through the door into the inner courtyard by thinking of him, introduce him into the vestibule by taking delight in him, lead him into the domestic quarters by deliberating how to please him and choosing to do so, and, finally, meet him in the marriage chamber where the soul may experience the sweet intimacy of love's embrace (S 32. 19-20). But, Ælred continues, the marriage chamber must be adorned so that the Lord may enter it. Ælred goes on then to describe the physical structure of a room as the framework for his explanation of the dynamics of human affection, drawn usually by pleasurable, useful, or

virtuous things. Thus, Ælred gives another example of sound psychological and philosophical reflection, which was the business of the schools.

This intricate analogy of the human psyche as an elaborate medieval dwelling is a powerful example of how Ælred's imagination works. First, it draws together the Biblical text with a concrete analogy from Ælred's world and that of his audience. The analogy is developed at great length and always consistently and logically. What he says about the various relationships between the parts of the structure, their individual rooms, and the way in which humans inhabit them is faithful to the common experience. He need only imagine the large structure and the social relationships it housed, and he has everything he needs. Within that framework, he presents a wide range of teachings. He presents the inner dynamics of the human person, the fundamentals of social organization, and strategies for identifying and rebuffing the wiles of Satan as well as for building upon natural human inclinations to develop virtues and spiritual skills. All of this he holds together for some 235 lines, and, in each case, the spiritual and supernatural realities are shown to be intimately related to their natural foundation. This is true analogy, as Aquinas would later define it, and it is a highly satisfying example of Ælred at his theoretical and literary strength. It is a wonderful meal for ailing monks (and, I might add, for lay people): simple, nourishing to both mind and emotions, uncluttered by unnecessary sauces, sweet rather than savory.

There are some less satisfying examples. All of my powers were put to the test when it came to the translation of S 35, for Palm Sunday. There may well be a liturgical rather than a Scriptural or imaginative reason why Ælred, in S 35.6, introduces the story of Samson and his hair (Jgs 13-16), but if so, and failing the great support of Father Chrysogonus Waddell, *ocso*, I do not know it. The logic of the piece goes like this: Christ works our redemption in a way that is wise, strong, and sweet. As wisdom conquers evil, so Christ conquers Satan, binding him with the triple cord of wisdom, strength, and sweetness. Satan had previously tied up humankind with the triple cord of habit, bitterness, and carnal appetite, bonds that the Lord broke in redeeming us. Ælred cites Ps 116:16, "You have broken my chains," and then, presumably by imaginative association, he introduces Samson. Well and good. Jesus is the stronger man who tied the strong (Ælred quotes Matthew) and Samson's strength was

legendary; Jesus broke our chains and Samson his own, both for the glory of God. But then Ælred engages himself with Samson's hair. I sensed a problem coming: how would Ælred reconcile Samson's story with monastic obligation?

He first gives an allegorical interpretation of hair; this leads him to the Song of Songs (Sg 7:5; 4:9) and to a shaky conclusion that hair signifies the thoughts of one's heart. By some concordance of memory, I suppose, he brings in the injunction of Dt 21:10–12, that an alien woman must shave her head before marrying an Israelite warrior, and that one in Jgs 13:5 about shaving the head of a leper. He also introduces the story of Rahab the harlot of Jos 6, describing her as crossing over to the embrace of Booz. From this odd mish-mash of texts Ælred draws a two-fold conclusion: sometimes it is appropriate to cut one's hair and, sometimes, to let it grow that it may be burned up as a sacrifice to the Lord.

Ælred begins this sermon with wonder at how Christ has loosed the bonds of humankind and ends it with the unloosing of the bonds of the ass as Christ heads for the cross. Beginning and end are beautifully consistent, but the road there is a bumpy one indeed. There is no overarching and controlling metaphor or allegory. The closest thing we have is a dominant narrative, the story of Sampson, to whose hair, cords, and involvement with Delilah (who, though, is not named) Ælred keeps returning. But the straight line of the story is interrupted by reflections on the leper and the alien woman desired as wife, each of them connected by a metaphoric but ultimately distracting link. Ælred even connects the story of Booz with that of the harlot who befriended Josue's spies.

The translator looks in vain for some transitional idea or language to mark the passage from one idea to another and presumes the fault is hers. She must take care to assign the appropriate personal pronoun to the figures, figuratively understood, who make sudden entrances and exits. In the end, I had to admit that this sermon did not work well, literarily speaking, that is. I have no idea how it may have functioned as an instrument of God's grace. What is operative here is rational deduction rather than imagination. Ælred applies the allegorical method and concordance of memory without his usual insight into the intimate connections between his real world and the divine mysteries revealed in the Biblical literature.

A similar intellectual use of Biblical allegories, those which involved

the interpretation of female persons as the soul or the church, causes the translator no end of challenges. This practice, of course, was deeply embedded in the tradition by Ælred's time, and his usage does not depart in significant ways. But it remains problematic, especially for the translator.

In S 33 on the Purification of Holy Mary, for instance, Ælred begins with an explicit acknowledgment of his intention to follow the allegorical method (S 33.2.16–18). This rare appeal to his method may signal that he is aware of the complexity, even tension, in what he is about to unfold. The text on that he expounds is the injunction from Leviticus that mandates the purification of the woman as well as the circumcision of a male child (Lv 12:2–8).

In his commentary, two female characters are interpreted allegorically, the child-bearing woman and the female infant. Ælred affirms that customarily the woman in Scripture is interpreted sometimes negatively, sometimes positively, but he interprets the woman in this text as the monk who has received grace and brings forth an evangelical life, represented by the “male children” who signify strong and perfect spiritual works. According to Ælred, “female children” do not stand for anything evil but represent following the commandments and living faithfully in a chaste marriage. This is all very traditional and straightforward. But for the translator the problem is pronouns. If I write *she* referring to the monk, as Ælred does, it does not read as good English. Ought I to insert *the soul of the monk* as referent or change the pronoun to *he*? Could I legitimately use a plural that Ælred doesn't and get by with the gender-inclusive *they*? Or ought I keep to Ælred's usage and hope my reader knows the tradition well and is carefully following Ælred's allegory? This is not an insurmountable problem. But it does force the translator to slow down and think very carefully about the issue of gender in Ælred's work. During long paragraphs about “her” confession and “her” shame, it is fairly easy to forget that Ælred is describing the life of the monks. Perhaps that is beneficial after all. The pronoun/referent conflict suggests that the monk and the woman, any woman, stand in the same relationship to God.

Pronouns more generally are a problem for the translator. There is little need for pronouns in Latin, as the conjugated verb indicates the grammatical person that is the subject of the verb. But English needs pronouns, and the only choices not only indicate the subject but limit its gender—male or female. Only the plural pronouns are gender in-

clusive. Further, in Latin and many modern languages, possessive take their (grammatical) gender from the noun they modify. In English, the possessive pronoun indicates, and limits, the gender of the possessor; English does not have grammatical, only personal, gender. Ancient languages are often more inclusive in this way. Latin has two words, *homo* and *vir*, to distinguish between a generic human person and a male one. Until recently, English usage required both to be translated as *man* and accepted the latter word as both general and particular.

As I said at the outset, I cannot honestly say that I have fully put on the mind of Ælred. But I have certainly penetrated it more deeply in my struggle not only to master his thought but also to approximate his language in appropriate, contemporary English. Through his language I have discovered the layers within his audience, found unexpected richness hidden within his word choices, and better understood the role he envisioned for academic knowledge in the spiritual journey. I have seen his imagination at work at its best and, also, when it was overruled by his intellect and did not function quite as well. I have experienced a profound empathy with his struggles for the right words. I have felt beset, as always, with the skewering of gender in the tradition but found myself in unexpected places within the text: sometimes in the skin of Ælred the author; at other times, sitting contrite among the monks in front of Ælred the abbot.

Ultimately, of course, to put on the mind of another is not merely a matter of words and translation. As Saint Paul indicates in his letter to the Philippians, it requires action and lived experience, a total conformity of one's life to that of the model (see Ph 2:5). Better, perhaps, for the translator—or the reader—to aspire to plumb the depths of another's mind. In the case of Ælred, as revealed in these sermons, that mind has riches for a lifetime of work.

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