

J. CHESTER JOHNSON

**After Auden: Retranslating the Psalms**

*An Interview with Ann Cefola*

Timing is everything, the young poet would quickly learn.

In New York in the early 1970s, he gained unexpected access to a historic literary project: the Episcopal Church's retranslation of the Psalms of David (Psalter) as part of the revision of its 1928 Book of Common Prayer. Friends had shared first drafts and he had a few ideas about what he had seen. With youthful hubris, he wrote to the Psalter Committee, was then invited to discuss his ideas with its chair and join their initiative.

The committee needed a poet, and J. Chester Johnson would fill the vacancy left by W.H. Auden, who was returning to England. J. Chester Johnson discusses that life-altering turn of events and the psalm retranslation project in a conversation with Ann Cefola.

**C:** What appealed to you about the retranslation project?

**J:** For years, I had been fascinated with the literary history of the Anglican Church, of which the Episcopal Church is the American branch, and with the beauty, magnificence and tradition of language in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP). Just think about it—Donne, Herbert, Eliot, Lewis and Auden—all being associated with or having contributed to this liturgical guide.

**C:** Give us some context to the psalms, which are integral to BCP.

**J:** The psalms, a centerpiece of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, consist of 150 ancient worship poems composed between 2,500–3,000 years ago. Episcopalians use them for

both individual and corporate worship as part of BCP. In 1967, the Episcopal Church launched a plan to update BCP, and included in it, the Psalter.

**C:** How did the church go about this enormous task?

**J:** In 1968, the Episcopal Church appointed a Psalter Committee to do the retranslation. The nine committee members included Biblical scholars, theologians, musicologists and, of course, the poet Auden. The committee met twice a year for several days at the Episcopal Church's General Seminary or national headquarters, both in New York City. Committee members received draft psalms prior to each meeting. The number retranslated depended on length: Psalm 119 took days, while one like 117 would take less time. Once completed, the psalm went to the 22-member Standing Liturgical Committee, which would accept, modify or sometimes return each psalm.

**C:** How did you get tapped to work on the retranslation?

**J:** I had been working with poet Jean Starr Untermeyer (1886–1970) on some poetry translations. When I saw samples of the Psalter Committee's work, I thought there were some considerations missing—and sent a letter to a few committee members. The committee chair, the Rev. Canon Charles M. Guilbert (1909–1998), asked me to come see him. After a long conversation, he invited me to join the committee. As its youngest member, I was fascinated by the retranslation and never missed a meeting.

**C:** Wasn't the Rev. Canon Charles M. Guilbert a gifted linguist?

**J:** As custodian of BCP for 35 years, Charles had facility in all of the relevant languages—Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and English. He was the dominant force behind the ultimate BCP language. Over the years, Charles and I worked closely together, and I even named my son after him.

**C:** But the psalms had already been translated many times over centuries?

**J:** Yes. The Episcopal translation had come from the Hebrew to Greek (Septuagint), from Greek to Old Latin, from Old Latin to Jerome's Latin translation, from Jerome by way of German to the original Anglican version translated by Miles Coverdale (1488–1569).

**C:** What was the Church's rationale for the retranslation?

**J:** Significant discoveries had affected the current understanding of Hebrew, the psalms' original language. Reflecting this new scholarship, new translations had appeared, further highlighting the need for a more modern and scholarly BCP. While never stated by the Episcopal Church, these factors also brought into question Coverdale's original Anglican version. Coverdale, who did not know Hebrew, had relied on German and Latin texts for his English translation. Some of his words, like "runagates" or "minished," had also become obsolete.

**C:** What was the process used in the retranslation?

**J:** The Episcopal Church's process differed from a normal translation that would look solely at the original Hebrew. Our goal was to honor all the prior translations—from Hebrew to Greek to Latin and German to English—as "received text." In reviewing each stage of translation, the committee would determine if there had been a mistranslation and correct it, progressing through remaining steps.

**C:** What was your role as a poet?

**J:** My role became more critical in latter stages of each psalm's review, especially from Coverdale to the present form. I

would compare other modern translations to provide possible alternatives. I was also given substantial opportunities to help shape each psalm's final verse.

**C:** How did musicologists contribute?

**J:** Musicologists and other committee members would pay attention to the way syllables end lines in a process called "pointing." The psalms, chanted in either plainsong or Anglican chant in services, needed to be easily sung. Each retranslation took that into consideration before a psalm could be finalized.

**C:** How long did the project take?

**J:** The entire retranslation project took about ten years. However, draft psalms were made available for trial use by Episcopal parishes from 1974 to 1976. The 150 psalms—some short, some long, some confusing, some not so—had to be deliberately examined. It is no surprise that the project took the better part of a decade.

**C:** Were there any outcomes that surprised you?

**J:** Rather than producing their own versions of the psalms, Lutherans in the United States and Canada, and the Anglican Church of Canada, adopted our revised Psalter. Also, after the revised BCP was published in 1979, the Standing Liturgical Commission gave me a generous citation for my work as a Psalter Committee poet, and it is one of my favored possessions.

**C:** Did you work on certain psalms or all 150?

**J:** A significant number had been retranslated before I participated in 1971; however, psalms kept being re-reviewed for various reasons. As a result of questions raised by the Standing Liturgical Committee or from trial use in parishes or dioceses, psalms would come back to us periodically. Over years, this

gave me the opportunity to look at all the psalms.

**C:** How did you feel about the approach to the retranslation?

**J:** I generally agreed with it. I defended Coverdale in instances when no mistranslations were detected, words weren't obsolete, and poetry laudable. In instances when words were past a reader's understanding, I was glad to see them replaced. When all was said and done, the 1979 BCP did more than a decent job in retaining Coverdale's poetry—however, probably not as much as Auden would have preferred.

**C:** What was the most difficult update to do?

**J:** By far, Psalm 119. I found it long and tedious. It exemplifies legal piety, not the deeply human expressions of love, loneliness, shame, and redemption present in most psalms. Between 1,000 and 500 BCE when they were written, the psalms' original energy devolved, and 119 was one of the last, if not the last, composed.

**C:** Which psalms were most rewarding?

**J:** It was important for me to work on Psalm 103 and Psalm 139. Psalm 103, composed as if a New Testament redemptive poem, emphasizes forgiveness and grace. We wanted to retain that message, and it was a pleasure to preserve its sanctity.

Psalm 139 (BCP) had a personal association. I had a close Harvard classmate who had died young. His father, killed as a World War II pilot, and he shared the same lines from this psalm on their respective tombstones:

If I take the wings of the morning  
    And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
Even there your hand will lead me  
    And your right hand hold me fast.

Do you have other favorites?

I'm captured by many outstanding couplets and quatrains:

Psalm 8

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
    The moon and the stars you have set in their courses,  
What is man that you should be mindful of him?  
    The son of man that you should seek him out?

Psalm 78

For he remembered that they were but flesh,  
    A breath that goes forth and does not return.

Psalm 90

So teach us to number our days  
    That we may apply our hearts to wisdom.

Psalm 23

Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
    I shall fear no evil;  
    For you are with me;  
    Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

**C:** Today, you are an accomplished poet, essayist and translator.

**J:** I have several poetry books published, most recently *St. Paul's Chapel & Selected Shorter Poems* (second edition, St. Johann Press, 2010). Its title poem (below) is based on my experience volunteering at the chapel after 9/11. Located across from the World Trade Center site, the chapel served as the relief center for recovery workers. I'm particularly proud that the poem is on the memento card offered to the chapel's 30,000 weekly visitors. Readers can find more about my writings at [www.jchesterjohnson.com](http://www.jchesterjohnson.com).

**C:** What is the value for poets to work with an ancient text?

**J:** To learn we don't create literature ourselves in one lifetime. Many poets often dismiss the psalms as fusty, if not irrelevant. However, ancient texts can teach us how dependent we are on poets who went before us. The retranslation also taught me to recognize that something greater, including a wider audience, is always poised at one's shoulder. If we get stuck in present styles, we should suspect our motives, for we borrow wisdom and many noble—as well as ignoble—traits from our ancient past. We are always dealing with the same human themes. As Auden wrote me, "I don't believe there is such an animal as Twentieth Century Man."<sup>1</sup>

**C:** Did the retranslation work influence how you write poetry, and how so?

**J:** Psalms have a variety of lengths and each is handled differently. I felt a natural affinity with them as I write both long and short poems—from haiku to long narrative verse. Edward Mendelson, Auden's literary executor and biographer, wrote in the introduction to my most recent book that my poems have an ability to find "a form, style, and diction precisely suited to its subject." I learned a lot from the psalms along those lines. I'm sure "St. Paul's Chapel" depends in part on my work with the psalms. The line, "It stood," repeats throughout the poem—a technique known as epanalepsis you'll find in the psalms. In Psalm 13, the line, "How long?" is repeated early and often. In my opinion, Martin Luther King Jr., consciously or unconsciously, drew upon that same psalm line in speeches to emphasize the length of time African-Americans would go without freedom. He'd give some history, ask "How long?" and immediately answer, "Not long." This aural echo reverts back to techniques present in ancient texts.

**C:** Tell me about your participation in the Civil Rights Movement.

**J:** Born in Chattanooga, I spent most of my first eighteen years in Monticello, a small town in southeast Arkansas 20 miles west of the Mississippi River. My decision to return before the integration of public schools had to do with trying to find people I'd known but never found. I taught in Monticello's all African-American public school, and ran for mayor with a coalition of African-American support and a few whites—and lost, of course.

**C:** And you have written much about your experience at that historic moment.

**J:** You can find two recent articles online, “Evanescence: The Elaine Race Massacre,” published by *Green Mountains Review*; and “Becoming and Unbecoming Henri Faust,” on the *Best American Poetry blog*. Several additional pieces are housed in the Civil Rights Archives at Queens College, the school attended by Andrew Goodman before he, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner were martyred in Philadelphia, Mississippi during Freedom Summer of 1964.

**C:** Did the translation project influence your literary or professional career?

**J:** Little did I know, over 40 years ago when I started the retranslation that, in an intense and orphic way, my life would be tied to W. H. Auden (1907–1973). I lost count of the times I've been asked about him. This association has meant getting to know Auden's work and life but also learning about his friends and literary influences. The project and its aftermath have been integral to my literary and theological interests over the years.

**C:** Did you and W. H. Auden work together on the retranslation?



**J:** W. H. Auden and I corresponded but did not work together on the retranslation project. He left the committee just as I joined it. We exchanged letters regarding the project and his written responses were, with some exception, generally perfunctory but cordial.

**C:** What did Auden contribute to the Psalter?

**J:** In Psalm 27, Auden replaced “secret place” in Coverdale with “secrecy”; in Psalm 42, he replaced “water pipes” in Coverdale and “water floods” with “cataracts”; and in Psalm 95, he replaced “prepared” in Coverdale with “molded.” Auden argued strenuously to keep a lot of the old language; for example, in Psalm 122, he fought for “Jerusalem is built as a city that is at unity with itself,” and he was successful. I suspect there are several others retained at his behest. My online essays in the Best American Poetry blogs of September and October 2012 provide further insights.

**C:** Knowing him briefly, could you see the motivation for subjects in or approaches to his work?

**J:** A great deal of Auden’s work, especially from the 1940s forward, is replete with theological and related matters. Literary commentators frequently miss a good deal of Auden by paying scant attention to his theological underpinnings. Should critics fail to grasp this context, they will miss Auden’s reliance on religious and spiritual “reason.”

**C:** If someone wanted to learn more about Auden, what books would you recommend?

**J:** I recommend *Early Auden* and *Later Auden* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2000) by Edward Mendelson, which provide excellent overviews of the poet’s life and understanding of his work.

**C:** How did Auden feel about the Episcopal Church’s liturgical

reform?

**J:** In one letter to me, he called it “high-jinks.” He would have preferred the Eucharist, the ritual offering of bread and wine, be conducted in “a dead language,” i.e., Latin. In this regard, the reform initiative had incited him enough to attend a Russian Orthodox service where he couldn’t “understand a single word.” Notwithstanding, he felt compelled to help. He held the Eucharist in highest regard, describing it as “the link between the dead and the unborn.”<sup>2</sup> At one point, he wrote a church official, “I should be honored and delighted to serve in any capacity on the Standing Liturgical Commission.”<sup>3</sup>

**C:** Why do you think he shared his frustration with someone he hardly knew?

**J:** I’ve asked myself this same question for decades. I’ve come to this conclusion: he knew that, as a young person, I would witness liturgical reform for years to come and he wanted subsequent generations to know his reservations.

**C:** Why did Auden feel so strongly about preserving Coverdale’s version?

**J:** Auden had less concern about changes to the psalms than to the rest of BCP. He knew that Coverdale did not know Hebrew, which limited Coverdale’s scholarly command. Auden wrote me, “All I can do is to try to persuade the scholars not to alter Coverdale unless there is a definite mistranslation.”<sup>4</sup>

To your larger question—that is, why his loyalty to Coverdale? Considerable insight comes from a letter he sent to Charles Guilbert:

[...] our Prayer Book was compiled at the ideal historical moment, that is to say, when the English language was already in all essentials the language we use now—nobody has any difficulty understanding Shakespeare’s or Cranmer’s English, as

they have difficulty with Beowulf or Chaucer—at the same time, men in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries still possessed what our own has almost totally lost, a sense for the ceremonial and ritual in life and in language.<sup>5</sup>

Auden was too much of scholar to give carte blanche approval to whatever Coverdale translated, considering Coverdale's limitations, but Auden's ear and heart were undeniably with those who wrote in 16th century English.

**C:** What are your favorite Auden poems and why?

**J:** “In Memory of W. B. Yeats,” “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” “In Praise of Limestone,” “Stop All The Clocks,” “September 1, 1939,” “For The Time Being” and “The Sea and The Mirror.” They are real, well-structured, and have a specific point. Also, they reveal more about Auden's citizenship, humanity, knowledge and spirituality.

Auden's prose is also more than worth the effort. Princeton University Press published four books of Auden's collected prose and two more will be available within a year. If I taught writing today, I'd tell students to steep themselves in his book reviews, literary criticism and commentaries.

**C:** What advice would you give new or young poets?

**J:** Follow your own nose. While you may crave recognition and approval, be wary of that desire. Cavafy had good advice:

“There will be moments when, knowing how the public thinks and what it likes and what it will buy, [the poet] will make some little sacrifices—[the poet] will phrase this bit differently, and leave out that. And there is nothing more destructive to Art than that this bit be differently phrased or that bit omitted”.<sup>6</sup>

Also, be skeptical of teachers. I know a successful composer who had one instructor tell her she had little talent and

opportunity for success. Realize that one can learn techniques for writing, but no one can teach you to say something that has never been said and that has to be said.

1. W. H. Auden to J. Chester Johnson. July 6, 1971.
2. Ibid.
3. W. H. Auden to Charles M. Guilbert. December 22, 1967. The Archives of the Episcopal Church. Austin, Texas.
4. W. H. Auden to J. Chester Johnson. January 28, 1971.
5. W. H. Auden to Charles M. Guilbert. March 19, 1968. The Archives of the Episcopal Church. Austin, Texas.
6. Mendelsohn, Daniel. C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. New York: Knopf, 2009. P. lv.

Poet and translator Ann Cefola wishes to express her gratitude to David Lehman for the personal introduction to J. Chester Johnson

**J. Chester Johnson** is a poet, essayist and translator. His writings have been published domestically and abroad and translated into several languages. Johnson has authored numerous volumes of poetry, the most recent being *St. Paul's Chapel & Selected Shorter Poems* (second edition); the collection's signature poem remains the memento card for the 30,000 weekly visitors to the chapel that survived the 9/11 terrorists' attacks at Ground Zero. Johnson and W. H. Auden were the two poets on the drafting committee for the retranslation of the Psalms, which version is contained in the current edition of *The Book of Common Prayer of The Episcopal Church (USA)*; the retranslation has been adopted for worship books and services by Lutherans in Canada and the United States and by the Anglican Church of Canada. He has also composed works on the American Civil Rights Movement, several of which constitute the **J. Chester Johnson Collection** in the Civil Rights Archives at Queens College (New York City).

J. CHESTER JOHNSON

**St. Paul's Chapel**

It stood. Not a window broken.  
Not a stone dislodged.  
It stood  
when nothing else did.  
It stood  
when terrorists brought September down.  
It stood among myths. It stood among ruins.

To stand was its purpose, long lines prove that.  
It stands, and around it now, a shrine  
of letters, poems, acrostics,  
litter of the heart.  
It is the standing people want:  
to grieve, serve and tend  
celebrate the lasting stone of St. Paul's Chapel.

And deep into its thick breath,  
the largest banner fittingly from Oklahoma  
climbs heavenward  
with hands as stars, hands as stripes, hands as a flag;  
and a rescuer reaches for a stuffed toy  
to collect a touch; and  
George Washington's pew doesn't go unused.  
Charity fills a hole or two.

It stood  
in place of other sorts.  
It stood  
when nothing else could.  
The great had fallen,  
as the brute hardware came down.  
It stood.

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