It was subtle of God to learn Greek when he wished to become an author, and not to learn it better.

—Friedrich Nietzsche on the New Testament

At last a man comes riding to the rescue of the English Bible. Condemning earlier translations of the New Testament, David Bentley Hart claims that “most of them effectively hide (sometimes forcibly) things of absolutely vital significance.” He does not tell us what “forcibly” means here, but he condemns translations done by committee (even the majestic yet punchy King James Version) and those done by an individual (even the ones who claim to stick close to the Greek). The committees, according to Hart, are bound to strike compromises between the individuals’ contributions. Actually, King James’s panel of translators had the good sense to incorporate William Tyndale’s New Testament almost wholesale. As David Daniell wrote, “Nine-tenths of the Authorised Version’s New Testament is Tyndale’s.” We should change the common view that the KJV and Shakespeare are the most influential shapers of the English language and say that Tyndale and Shakespeare share that honor.

But that will not give the KJV immunity from Hart’s indictment. He says that any translation filtered through one person’s literary sensibility (even Tyndale’s magnificent one) is bound to homogenize the collection of different genres and authors in the New Testament—what Nietzsche claimed is an agglutination of letters, sermons, putative biographies, tendentious histories, and fever-dream revelations. How does Hart escape his own criticism in this, his own single-translator exercise? Does he not have a literary sensibility? Of course he does. But he claims that he has suppressed it here, that he reveals the idiosyncrasies of each element in the collection. He even boasts, in the vein of Dickens and T.S. Eliot, that he can “do the police in different voices” for the different texts.

He clearly agrees with Nietzsche on the quality of the book’s koine Greek. He finds the Gospel of Matthew “rarely better than ponderous,” that of Mark “awkwardly written throughout,” and that of John “syntactically almost childish,” while Paul’s letters are “maladroit, broken, or impenetrable” and Revelation is “almost unremittingly atrocious.” Sometimes he does convey the original’s sheer goofiness: “Fallen, fallen, Babylon the Great who has given all the gentiles to drink from the wine of the vehemence of her whoring” (Rev. 14:8). No wonder Hunter Thompson said he did not have to worry about running out of LSD in a hotel. He could trip on the Gideon Bible’s Revelation.

But is the direct transmission of bad Greek into bad English always as clear as Hart claims? He says he will avoid later theological constructs of the text, but then renders thlipsis megalē as “the great tribulation” (Rev. 7:14), which is an
event in the calendar of the End Time as formulated in late-nineteenth-century premillennial dispensationalism. *Thlipsis* is a common term in the New Testament, from a verb (*thlibo*) for pressing down or squeezing. It can mean anything from “discomfort” to “extinction.” Lampe’s lexicon of early Christian Greek renders it as “affliction”—and so does Hart, most of the time (e.g., Matt. 24:9). Paul uses *thlipsis* for the distress of helping others (2 Cor. 8:13), for the inconveniences of married life (1 Cor. 7:28), and for the anguish of mothers in childbirth (John 16:21). Even in Revelation, where Hart calls *thlipsis megalē* “the great tribulation,” he also translates the same words as “great affliction” (2:22). He does the same for the “great affliction” at Matthew 24:21.

Hart claims that he will not let his own theological views color his translation. But he clearly does not believe in hell—at least not in a permanent hell. Neither do many Christians (including me). They find it hard to think that God could be crueler even than his creatures. As the rough-hewn John Adams of New England wrote in 1813 to the polished Thomas Jefferson of Virginia:

He [God] created this speck of dirt and the human species for his glory; and with the deliberate design of making nine tenths of our species miserable forever, for his glory? This is the doctrine of Christian theologians in general, ten to one. Now, my friend, can prophecies or miracles convince you or me that infinite benevolence, wisdom, and power created and preserves, for a time, innumerable millions to make them miserable forever, for his own glory?

Hart says much the same, repudiating the idea of hell as “the God of love’s perpetual torture chamber.” He agrees with Origen’s third-century view that all mankind will be saved by Jesus. But rather than rely on crusty John Adams’s common sense, he labors to oust hell from the text of the Bible.

This affects his translation in six ways:

1. Rather than call hell’s fires “eternal,” he translates *aiōnios* as “of the Age” (*Aiōn*) (Matt. 18:8, 25:41). That means that *aiōnios* in non-hell contexts will prove puzzling. Instead of “You are a priest forever” (Heb. 5:6, 7:17), part of the formula for the ordination of Catholic priests, we get “You are a priest unto the Age.” When Jesus at the Second Coming (Matt. 25:46) divides the damned from the saved, he says, “These will go to the chastening of that Age, but the just to the life of that Age” (for KJV “everlasting fire…life eternal”).

2. Instead of translating *Gehenna* as “hell,” Hart gives us “Hinnom’s Vale of fire” (Matt. 5:22).

3. Hart transliterates the pagan “Hades” rather than translating it as a Christian word for hell (Rev. 6:8).

4. There can be no predestination without a hell into which to steer sinners for eternal storage. So Hart takes *pro­orizein*, normally translated as “to predestine,” instead to mean “to mark out in advance” (Eph. 1:5, 11), setting up an area in which free will can still operate.

5. The devil, without a hell to tend, is demoted by Hart to “the Slanderer.” Admittedly that is a literal translation of *diabolos*, but it reads more like a kenning than a translation, and it makes the devil play a reduced role like that of the Accuser (*Katēgōr*) in Revelation 12:10. Thus we get at Matthew 25:41: “Go from me, you execrable ones, into the fire of the Age prepared for the Slanderer and his angels” (for Tyndale and KJV, “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels”).

6. Despite all this meticulous exegetical slickery, Hart has to admit that the Letter of Jude (called by him Judas) uses an unequivocal word for “eternal” punishment, *aidios* (Jude 6)—but he dodges this bullet by saying in a footnote that this applies to an imprisonment of angels or daemons, not humans, and he goes back in the next verse to “fire from the Age” (*aiōnios*) for the fate of humans from Sodom and Gomorrah (Jude 7). Why not just affirm the unthinkableness of God making and populating a hell, rather than go through all these maneuvers to oust hell from the Bible, as if that alone will let Hart not believe in hell? If even one of these passages does support the idea of hell, would he be obliged to believe in it? That seems a rather fundamentalist position for one who claims to be so innovative.
Hart rightly says that his book is not for reading out loud in church (though, in an oral culture, the words were first dictated to scribes and then read aloud by a lector to the intended audience). Hart wants to make people finally believe that Jesus told his followers to give up all their belongings (Luke 18:22), make no provision for the morrow (Matt. 6.25–34), yield to harsh treatment or demands (Matt. 5:39–48), and hate their family (Luke 14:26): “Far from teaching ‘family values,’ Christ was remarkably dismissive of the family.” According to Hart, the first Christians would repel us today; we would mock them as “extremists” and fanatics. But those messages are already there in earlier translations. We have failed to recognize them not because of faulty translation but because of our own evasion of what the words mean, no matter how they are translated.

The reason for our obduracy is that we cannot believe that Jesus is coming back in our lifetime—as Paul and the evangelists did. They did not accumulate goods, since they could not be used after the End. When Christians in Thessaly began to worry that some had died before the Second Coming, Paul reassured them that those still living would see the End before they died (1 Thess. 4:13–18). Later church teachings would say that marriage is for the sake of children (proles). Paul does not tell people to marry for the sake of children, since the young cannot be educated to deal with a world that will not be there when they grow up. Instead he says not to marry at all, unless the fires of desire are uncontrollable—“better to marry than to be afire” (1 Cor. 7:8–9). Slaves should obey their masters, knowing they will shortly exchange places with them (Eph. 6:5–9). Every aspect of the New Testament should be read in light of this “good news” that the world will shortly be wiped out.

That certainty even affects Paul’s literary style. He writes traffic-jam sentences, trying to say everything all at once—to cram it in during the short time left. Paul died while rushing from Jerusalem to Rome on the way to Spain. Hart captures some of that breathlessness—though he creates his own obstacles by capitalizing the first letter of each traditional Bible verse. So a single sentence ends up looking like this: “Hence let no one boast in human beings; for all things are yours, Whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or cosmos or life or death or things past or things imminent—all yours—and you the Anointed’s, and the Anointed God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21–23). Paul certainly had a hiccup style, which could veer into the spastic. Consider this account of a showdown in Jerusalem over the freedom of gentle converts from kashruth (here I omit Hart’s capitals for each new verse, which further complicate an already tangled mess):

But because of false brethren secretly brought in, who stole in so as to spy upon our freedom, which we have in the Anointed One Jesus, so that they could enslave us—to whom we did not yield in subordination for even an hour, so that the truth of the good tidings might remain with you…. [Hart interjects in a footnote at this point that “Paul’s syntax here is even more vagrant than usual”] and from those who were esteemed as something—precisely what sort of something at that time does not matter to me (God does not take a man at his face)—for to me these estimable men had nothing to add; rather, to the contrary, seeing that I have been entrusted with the good tidings for those of the foreskin, just as has Peter for those of the circumcision—for he who was operating in Peter for a mission to those of the circumcision was also operating in me for the gentiles—and, recognizing the grace given to me, James and Cephas and John—who appeared to be the pillars—gave their hands in fellowship to me and to bar-Nabas, that we should go to the gentiles and they to the circumcision, if only we should remember the poor—the very thing, indeed, that I was eager to do. (Gal. 2:4–13)

Reading aloud in church might make people think that poor Paul was in need of therapy.

Hart goes on from this clash in Jerusalem to tell of its repetition in Antioch, where Peter seemed to go back on what was settled with that handshake in Jerusalem, prompting Paul to rebuke Peter “because he was being contemptible” (kategnōsmenos—in the KJV, “to be blamed”) and indulging in “theatrical charlatanry” (hypokrisis—in the KJV, “dissimulation”) (Gal. 2:11, 13). Here Hart’s desire to shock makes him exaggerate what was a notoriously disturbing passage in the time of Jerome and Augustine (who fought over the embarrassment of the two main Apostles disagreeing). Hart’s standard is that “in most cases I truly believe that the more unsettling rendering is also the more accurate.” In most cases? Perhaps in many. Or some.
Fresh translations of familiar texts are useful because they make us reexamine what we thought we knew. Hart has certainly made me think more deeply about the centrality of the world’s end to the entirety of the New Testament. I must reconsider Albert Schweitzer’s work on the eschatological Jesus. Hart tells us that he wanted to make this book wild, repellant, “just a bit indecent,” and not what we expected. He succeeds.