

Books and Things

ABOUT twelve years ago Gilbert Murray published his first translations from Euripides—the “Hippolytus” and the “Bacchae.” From time to time he has added others—the “Medea,” the “Trojan Women,” the “Electra,” the “Iphigenia in Tauris,” the “Rhesus.” Now we have the “Alcestis,” which has just been published in New York by the Oxford University Press, and may be bought for seventy-five cents. Rossetti has said, in the preface to his “Early Italian Poets”: “The lifeblood of rhymed translation is this—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one. The only true motive for putting poetry into a fresh language must be to endow a fresh nation with one more possession of beauty.” From these words it is easy to compile a description of Professor Murray’s translations from Euripides. He has not turned good poems into bad ones. He has endowed English-speaking nations with one more possession of beauty. When he deals with Aristophanes’ “Frogs” or with Sophocles’ “Oedipus the King” the result is not nearly so happy. His sympathy with Euripides is special. It enables him to disturb us his readers. We are excited by the beauty of Euripides and by his thought, we are eager to understand him and his world and his way of looking at his world and judging its beliefs. We feel both the poetry and the excitingness. While Professor Murray thus does his age a noble service he also leaves, upon at least one of his readers, an impression that he would not have been a considerable poet if he had taken to writing what we call original verse.

In the saga which was familiar to fifth century Athens, and upon which Euripides worked his will, it was taken for granted that any prosperous man would let his wife save his life by dying for him if she were willing, and if the thing could be arranged. By the fifth century this saga had taken shape in two forms. Wilamowitz has reconstructed one of these—a lost poem which was once attributed to Hesiod. Pelias of Iolchos would give his daughter Alcestis in marriage to no man who could not yoke wild boars and lions to his car and make them draw it. Apollo, whose son Asclepius had taken to restoring the dead to life, and had been killed by Zeus, had killed the Cyclops who forged the thunderbolt. For this he was condemned to serve a mortal, Admetus of Phærae. Apollo helped Admetus to fulfil the conditions imposed by Pelias and thus to win Alcestis. Artemis, to whom Admetus had forgotten to sacrifice, required his death. Apollo persuaded her to let Admetus live if he could find a substitute. His parents refusing to die for him, Alcestis offered herself, died on the wedding day, and was sent back to life by the gods of the lower world. In a play by Phrynichus, an older contemporary of Aeschylus, Euripides had before him another form of the Alcestis story. It was by making the Three Fates drunk that Apollo obtained for Admetus freedom to live if a substitute could be found. Persephone did not of her own accord send Alcestis back to life. Heracles obtained this favor by going to the lower world, wrestling with Death and overcoming him.

Euripides treated this material freely. Asclepius disappears, except for one reference in the prologue, spoken by Apollo, and another in the first chorus. Of the struggle between Heracles and Death Euripides says only so much as is necessary to explain the restoration of Alcestis to life. The most significant change in the events themselves, according to Wilamowitz, was this: Alcestis, instead of

dying on her wedding day, has lived long enough thereafter to bear Admetus two children, of whom the boy is old enough to feel the pain of losing her. She has lived for years knowing that she must die on the appointed day. After she has renounced life, time has been given her to learn the value of life. Euripides, says Wilamowitz, always tried to give his heroes an inner credibility. He therefore could not ignore the question of Admetus’s conduct. On the contrary, he deliberately raised this question. Admetus is a representative of a landed aristocracy in the grand style. His position in Phærae encouraged him to regard his own life as one exceptionally worth saving. He has many likable traits. He is liked by such different characters as Heracles and Apollo. Wilamowitz says Euripides intended us to like Admetus well enough to think he deserved to have Alcestis brought him from the grave. Admitting that not everybody will agree with him, Wilamowitz believes Euripides has succeeded. Even Wilamowitz, however, doubts whether Admetus would have kept his promise not to marry again, and wishes he had said less, when he is hesitating to enter his empty house after the funeral, about the dust and disorder the loss of Alcestis will cause him, and more about their intimate life together. Upon the whole, Wilamowitz is easy on Admetus.

Professor Murray’s comment is this: “Euripides seems to have taken positive pleasure in Admetus, much as Meredith did in his famous Egoist; but Euripides all through is kinder to his victim than Meredith is. True, Admetus is put to obvious shame, publicly and helplessly. The chorus make discreet comments upon him. The Handmaid is outspoken about him. One feels that Alcestis herself, for all her tender kindness, has seen through him. Finally, to make things quite clear, his old father fights him openly, tells him home-truth upon home-truth, tears away all his protective screens, and leaves his self-respect in tatters. It is a fearful ordeal for Admetus, and, after his first fury, he takes it well.” With regard to this scene between Admetus and his father Wilamowitz’s opinion is not very different. “I think that a careful reading of the play,” Professor Murray goes on, “will show an almost continuous process of self-discovery and self-judgment in the mind of Admetus. He was a man who blinded himself with words and beautiful sentiments; but he was not thick-skinned or thick-witted. He was not a brute or a cynic. And I think he did learn his lesson . . . not completely and forever, but as well as most of us learn such lessons.”

This comment, too, strikes me as a little overkind to Admetus. One of the first things he says, after he has “learned his lesson,” is this:

Behold, I count my wife’s fate happier,

Though all gainsay me, than mine own.

The Comic Spirit was visiting Euripides when he wrote those lines. Indeed, what I wonder at most of all, when I’ve finished this “Alcestis,” is that the presence of so much poetry should have left the Comic Spirit so free a hand. I wonder, too, that the play has not suggested a comedy to some modern writer. A man who invites other people to die for him, who allows his wife to do so, and who returns from her funeral saying her lot is happier than his, is only an exaggeration of that egotism which is one of comedy’s main subjects. Few egotists are ever shut up to just this sharp choice, but many of us do choose to let other people die, here a little and there a little, for our ego’s sake.

P. L.

Mr. Fletcher's Verse

Irradiations: Sand and Spray, by John Gould Fletcher.
(*The New Poetry Series.*) Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. \$.75 net.

THE extraordinary variety of flowering in the poetry of the moment is one of the strongest reasons for believing that we are just crossing the threshold into a new poetic era. The close relation of a great deal of modern poetry to life has been much written about. The work in this direction of Masfield, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson, Robert Frost, and Edgar Lee Masters has received illuminating and sympathetic attention, but this is not the only, nor perhaps the most important, of present day poetic tendencies. Side by side with it goes another less easily understood, for which reason, undoubtedly, it has not been so immediately popular. I refer to the great awakening of the imaginative faculty as evidenced by some of our younger poets. After all, the final test of imaginative writing must be the vigor and scope of the imaginative force in it.

Poetry, luckily, is a realm of many mansions. But usually only one has seemed worthy of occupation at any given period. The odd thing about to-day is that two kinds of poetry are flourishing at the same moment. Not in the same men, it would be ridiculous to expect that; but in the same country and at the same time.

The country is America. Here on the one hand we have Mr. Masters, writing his "Spoon River Anthology" in a stark verse, so concentrated and held to its theme that many people refuse to consider it as verse at all. "It is prose," they declare, "ordinary prose, written in short lines." They are wrong. It is not prose. Write any of these poems down in prose and then read them aloud and they will instantly fall back into lines. What these critics miss in "Spoon River" is a sort of imaginative burgeoning over the theme, as it were. With all its excellent irony, all its courageous psychology, "Spoon River" has not that, neither have Robert Frost's poems that. For this burgeoning one must look to another group of American poets. To this group John Gould Fletcher belongs.

Mr. Fletcher's publishers tell us that his work is better known in England than in America. And the bibliography at the back of "Irradiations" puts five books to his credit. Literary wild-oats? Perhaps. But whatever these five volumes were which have not drifted across the Atlantic, "Irradiations" is the work of a mature poet, and one with a highly original style.

It is very difficult to classify these poems, even to describe them. Here is imagination only, the quintessence of it. Mr. Fletcher has a fertility and vigor which is wholly remarkable.

I can conceive of an unimaginative person saying that they can make neither head nor tail of these poems. I say that I can conceive of such a thing. But for me, and for many like me, they must stand as inspiring interpretations of moods. Possibly that is their best analysis: Mr. Fletcher's poems are moods, expressed in the terms of nature, plus a highly fanciful point of view. I admit that that confuses rather than explains, but Mr. Fletcher's poems have an organic quality which defies explanation. They are as refreshing as an October wind, and as elusive.

That is it. Go out on a windy autumn morning and try to describe the wind. It will slap you and push you, it will flap away in front of you, and scurry over the sky above you. You can feel all this, you can *experience* the wind, so to speak, but describe it you cannot. Well, Mr. Fletcher can. Does he do so by analogy? A little. Does he name things directly? Seldom. How does he do it? I do not

know. I can show you, but I cannot define. This is a description of rain. "Description" is not the right word, of course; it is really an expressing of the effect of a rainy day upon him.

Flickering of incessant rain
On flashing pavements:
Sudden scurry of umbrellas:
Bending, recurved blossoms of the storm.

an absolutely original one, for the effect is got in a new
The winds come clanging and clattering
From long white highroads whipping in ribbons up
summits:
They strew upon the city gusty wafts of apple-
blossom,
And the rustling of innumerable translucent leaves.

Uneven tinkling, the lazy rain
Dripping from the eaves.

Could anything be better? We see the rain, we feel it, and we smell the earthiness which all spring rain has. The first three lines, with the flickering rain on the pavements and the scurrying umbrellas, are exact description, of course. But the "bending, recurved blossoms of the storm" is a wild imaginative flight. And how well it makes us see those round, shining umbrella-tops! The next line is straightforward poetry; "clanging" and "clattering" are good words for the wind. But what about it coming "whipping in ribbons up summits?" That is certainly not descriptive, unless we assume that the city is built upon a series of hilltops. No, it is another imaginative leap, and way. The "bending, recurved blossoms" is a new figure, but it is a figure, managed in the usual way. "Whipping in ribbons up summits" is not only a new figure, but a figure brought in in a perfectly new and startling manner.

The same thing is true of the next two lines, for obviously no apple-blossoms are really blown into the city from the distant orchards, but in this way the poet has got the earthy smell into his wind. The last two lines are a marvel of exact description, with the only adjective "lazy" to unite them to the imaginative treatment of the middle of the poem.

I have said enough, I think, to show Mr. Fletcher's unusual technique. But let us make no mistake, this is more than technique; it is a manner of seeing and feeling. I chose the rain poem because it was a simple one to use for illustration, but there are others which have a greater imaginative intensity. This is a day of whirling cloud-shadows:

Over the roof-tops race the shadows of clouds;
Like horses the shadows of clouds charge down the street.

Whirlpools of purple and gold,
Winds from the mountains of cinnebar,
Lacquered mandarin moments, palanquins swaying and
balancing
Amid the vermilion pavilions, against the jade balustrades.

Glint of the glittering wings of dragon-flies in the light:
Silver filaments, golden flakes settling downwards,
Rippling, quivering flutters, repulse and surrender,
The sun brodered upon the rain,
The rain rustling with the sun.

Over the roof-tops race the shadows of clouds;
Like horses the shadows of clouds charge down the street.