

## Books and Things

WHEN Mr. A. Edward Newton, a man of various inquiry, first engaged in this work—Doctor Johnson, A Play, The Atlantic Monthly Press, \$3.50—he must have pleased himself with a prospect of the hours he should revel away in the feasts of literature. Solicited by something nobler than the love of precocious fame, he would appear to have kept this piece by him for the full Horatian period, disdaining to drive it forth in a state of immaturity, and thus to intercept the full-blown elegance which longer growth has supplied. Happy is the author who can enrich his work by attentive choice after gradual accumulation, who can delay his publication until he has satisfied the judicious friends of his hero, and who can perceive the conclusion of his labors with an eye of sorrow. From Mr. Newton's play he who knows nothing of Dr. Johnson will acquire a curiosity to know more, and he who knows something will find his knowledge recalled to his mind in a manner highly pleasing.

After these inauguratory gratulations, he who watches every opening for objection, and looks round for every opportunity to detect specious alteration, will consider himself as obliged to offer some proof of his superior abilities. Such opportunities a very small degree of sagacity will enable him to discover. A critic, desirous of exhibiting his familiarity with *The Age of Johnson*, may justly reprehend Mr. Newton for having altered "that which Providence has enabled me to do for myself" into "by myself" (p. 12); for having altered "the full tide of human existence is at Charing Cross" into "high tide" (p. 22); and may thus, at slight expense of research, set up as a formidable scholar. But these minute departures from a dogged veracity will astonish no man whose own experience of life has taught him that sudden fits of inadvertency will surprise vigilance, or that slight avocations will seduce attention.

These two paragraphs, although most of the phrases in them are Dr. Johnson's own, do not make the Johnsonian noise. Not only do the phrases I could find no authority for stick out: they denature the others, for which I could give chapter and verse. The effort of concocting such paragraphs, and my inability to weave the right web, have taught me to wonder more than ever at Mr. Newton's adroitness, at his long patience. For he has not chosen the easiest way. He has not taken from Boswell any of the scenes—the only one I can think of at the moment being the first meeting, at the Messieurs Dillys', between the Doctor and Mr. Wilkes—which he might have put into his play with the minimum of adaptation. The finishing of the Dictionary, Mr. Thrale's death, Mrs. Thrale's engagement to Piozzi, Dr. Johnson's death—each of these events gives Mr. Newton the date and place of an act. Dr. Johnson's death gives him more. It provides the fourth act with a current and with something to flow towards.

Pleasure in meeting old friends, admiration of Mr. Newton as a cunning artificer of pastiche, now and then a query as to whether this change or that was quite necessary, renewed pleasure, gratitude, more queries—something like this my state of mind has been while reading. What I should be glad to know is how the play strikes a reader whose acquaintance with Boswell is as much slighter than mine as mine is than Mr. Newton's. How it strikes a reader, in other words, who doesn't know Boswell at all. He will not be disconcerted, as I am a little, when Mr. Newton takes the following speech away from Mr. Oliver

Edwards and gives it to Mr. Arthur Murphy: "I have tried too in my time to be a philosopher; but, I don't know how, cheerfulness was always breaking in." To deprive Mr. Edwards of these words, the only ones by which he is remembered, is as unkind as it would have been to deprive Demosthenes Taylor of the one word "Richard." And I will go bail that Mr. Murphy could not, except as a joke, have said them. Mr. Murphy was a rather acute man. Didn't he say of Dr. Johnson: "A fallacy could not stand before him; it was sure to be refuted by strength of reasoning, and by a precision both in idea and expression almost unequalled. When he chose by apt illustration to place the argument of his adversary in a ludicrous light, one was almost inclined to think *ridicule the test of truth*. He was surprised to be told, but it is certainly true, that, with great powers of mind, wit and humor were his shining talents."

Another change provokes me to another sort of protest. In Mr. Newton's first act he makes Dr. Johnson say to Boswell, when speaking of Bet Flint: "I am glad that you do not know her: she is habitually a drunkard and a woman of the town, occasionally a thief, needless to say a woman of much effrontery—from the country I think." In Boswell Dr. Johnson expresses himself more forcibly: "I used to say of her that she was generally slut and drunkard; occasionally, whore and thief." I can't guess why Mr. Newton omitted "slut," and as for his other refinement, it is too much like changing the title of Ford's play into 'Tis Pity She's a Woman of the Town, or revising the Authorized Version so as to read: "And there came one of the seven angels which had the seven vials, and talked with me, saying unto me, Come hither; I will shew thee the judgment of the great woman of the town that sitteth upon many waters."

I mention these small blemishes only because they may easily be removed. For the most part Mr. Newman is so workmanlike that one wishes he would attempt the impossible, would imagine those pages of which all readers of Boswell most regret the absence, would show us those two combatants at Auchinleck whom Boswell thought "it would certainly be very unbecoming in me to exhibit . . . for the entertainment of the public."

As for the inner drama of Dr. Johnson's life, it can never be written in dramatic form. He has written it once for all in his meditations and prayers. Such was this great Englishman's savour of character that he has given a dignity even to his struggle against sloth, with most of us the meanest of struggles. He prayed again and again for strength to get up early; at six, when most hopeful; in less credulous seasons at eight: "I purpose to rise at eight, because, though I shall not yet rise early, it will be much earlier than I now rise." These prayers were not answered. The fight was lost every day. But one of his prayers was granted to the full: "O Lord, who hast ordained labour to be the lot of man, and seest the necessities of all Thy creatures, bless my studies and endeavors; feed me with food convenient for me; and if it shall be Thy good pleasure to intrust me with plenty, give me a compassionate heart, that I may be ready to relieve the wants of others." No one was readier. In his sad and stout old heart compassion kept house. He had as much compassion as he had of wit, for which even he did not pray, who made so many odd requests of his Maker; asking among other things, when he was fifty-eight years old, to be enabled "so to pursue the study of tongues, that I may promote Thy glory and my own salvation." P. L.

## Elegance Down the Ages

*The Satyricon, by Petronius, translated by J. M. Mitchell. London: Routledge. 7s. 6d.*

THIS book is called a "Broadway Translation," which may account for everything. It may account for some passages having been left in the original Latin—a craven expedient, but defensible; for at least one having been omitted entirely—which is indefensible; and for the text having been persistently tampered with and toned down to spare the blushes of Broadway—which is vile. Anyone, therefore, who cannot read easily the Latin of Petronius—and it is abominably difficult—and yet is bent on knowing what this curious and much-talked-of book is about, had better procure the translation by Laurent Tailhade (éditions de la Sirène). It is an honest version in excellent, if unconventional, French; and if the ardent seeker after out-of-the-way information finds it hard to follow, all I can say is he would be better employed learning French than in poking his nose into the oddities of antiquity. But if study Petronius in English he must, he will find Mr. Mitchell's paraphrase, at once emasculate and jaunty though it is, at any rate readable. For Mr. Mitchell is manifestly a scholar, a capable writer, and a man of sense, which makes his disastrous, and possibly unwilling, prudery the more deplorable.

The *Satyricon*—to be exact, that fragment of it which has come down to us—is an amusing, realistic, digressive, sarcastic, second-class novel of adventure. I should say it was about as good as *Le Diable Boiteux* and distinctly less good than *Moll Flanders*. At any rate, it makes less depressing reading than most Latin literature, because it is a genuine record of a clever man's observations, instead of having rather the air of a sixth-form "copy." Most of what are called the classical Roman authors had very few ideas or feelings of their own, and none at all of those ideas and feelings which express themselves inevitably in works of art. So, just as the sixth-form boy, with his lack of spiritual experience and scanty reading, goes to a few trusty authors and the classical dictionary for his matter, the Romans went to the Greeks. How to versify, ratiocinate, and compose they knew, because they had been taught; and, like the schoolboy, they wrote poems, plays, and philosophical treatises, because it was their duty. The reason why these productions remind us too often of "proses" and "verses" is that, unlike genuine literature, they are not expressions of personal feelings bubbling up from the depths of intense and passionate life, but "compositions," related hardly at all to aesthetic experience, and arising, not out of an impulse, but out of a notion of what literature should be.

Catullus, Tacitus, and Petronius are three striking exceptions—there are others—to this dreary rule; and not unnaturally those who have to spend their lives reading Latin books in gratitude exaggerate their merits. For the *Satyricon*, though a real book and a good book, is not a great book. It is made out of a mass of clever observations, sifted through an intelligence, but not through a temperament. That is about as much as can be expected of a Roman; people incapable of fine feeling and delicate thought can but observe and record. Roman literature, though it can hardly be said to express anything, is a manifestation of Roman dullness and brutality. For instance, where modern literature would give us romantic love, and Greek Socratic, the Romans can think of nothing but heavy lust;

and even about that they cannot be charmingly indecent, though Horace tried to be. Where an English or French writer (Shakespeare or Lafontaine) would give us a hundred pretty, prurient gallantries, Ovid seems never to guess that a man can have any but one thing to do with a woman. The Romans never flirted. It is significant that the passion of Propertius, generally reckoned the most sentimental and elegiac of Roman poets, was for a drab; compare his Cynthia with the Stella of Sidney, and you will taste in a moment the difference in quality of thought and feeling between the still boyish England of Elizabeth and the mature Rome of Augustus. And if we like to make something subtler of the affair between Caesar and Servilia, that, I suppose, is because we would sprinkle all the garniture we can gather round that delightful story of Caesar being called upon by righteous old Cato to read in full senate a note (treasonable, no doubt) which had just been thrust into his hand—which note turned out to be a love-letter from Cato's own sister, the wife of the consul Silanus.

Exquisiteness was not in the Roman way; and Petronius, though he can be crudely ironical and has a pretty turn for parody, never reaches wit. Wit flies brutality; broad jests, invective, rough satire, and horseplay are more in the high Roman fashion—though Tacitus, as we are not allowed to forget, could be dreadfully cutting. But wit, fine irony, whimsicality, and the choicer kinds of humor can, like taste, conversation, and gallantry, flourish only in a world where brain has definitely got the better of brawn. No one will be at much pains to sharpen an intellectual rapier or feather a shaft in a society where the recognized method of putting down an adversary is to call him "dirty dog" or catch him a clip on the jaw; so Rome was as unpromising a breeding-ground for wit as a football-field or the House of Commons. And Petronius was a Roman. He was arbiter of the elegances, to be sure; but I suspect those elegances consisted mainly in circus-tricks, costumes, and Bithynian boys, and the presentation rather than the cooking of a dinner: and doubtless these were more elegant than the self-conscious exchange of second-hand platitudes on literature and philosophy which seems to have done duty for culture. Certainly Petronius was critical of his surroundings; but I see no reason to suppose that he rose much above them.

Neither is there much reason to suppose that Trimalchio's notorious dinner-party, with its superfluity of expensive things and dearth of good ones (such good things as there were, the food and drink, for instance, spoilt by the ostentatious impropriety of the service), with its buffoonery and din, with its pointless jokes, its imbecile anecdotes, its purse-proud self-satisfaction, its sciolism, and its endless array of threadbare clichés, was not typical of the sort of thing that passed for conviviality at Rome. Becker, at any rate, makes it the basis of his account of a Roman dinner-party. And, though I know it is now the fashion to call Becker old-fashioned, I notice that most modern scholars who attempt to describe Roman life still depend a good deal—sometimes more than they care to admit—on old Becker's industry and erudition. This much, at least, may be said to those who venture to speak of Greek and Roman civilization as if the two were almost identical: Trimalchio's party may have been exceptional in Italy, it would have been utterly impossible at Athens; while Agathon's, exceptional anywhere, would have been out of the question at Rome. For our private comfort we may add that the level of vulgar brutality implied by Trimalchio's entertain-