The World of Letters as Others See It

The Limitations of the Translator.

NEXT to the difficulties of understanding come the difficulties of reproduction. The miracle is but half done; the wine must not be turned into water. Unluckily for us, the art of translation is by necessity deprived of exactly those men who would be its best practitioners. A man who can work miracles prefers to work his own miracles; an artist who could reproduce the passionate simplicity of Homer is pretty certain to spend his time on his own imaginings. Occasionally some genius will break all rules and previsions by being a professor, and will sacrifice himself upon the altar of his adored. Mr. Gilbert Murray with his Euripides is a modern instance; another is Mr. William Ellery Leonard, whose triumphant version of Lucretius is too little known. Such work as Messrs. Murray's and Leonard's is, however, a lucky accident. We have no right to count on anything more than talent. Talent is a vague term, but I mean by it the ability to translate good verse into good prose. Conington had talent, not genius; and his prose Virgil is far superior to his rhetorical verse. Jowett had talent, and Lang, and Jebb; a few recent names might be added from the Loeb Classical Library. Nevertheless, it is pretty clear that we are not being adequately paid in the coin of talent for what we lose through the scarcity of genius. The current translations from Latin and Greek into English are competent enough on the score of scholarship; but they are fatally sleepy; they drag. They render the original, but only after a perceptible pause, during which our attention evaporates. Once more we need to take a lesson from France.—*From "The Art of Translation." By R. K. Hack in the "Freeman."*

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The Fame of Pierre de Ronsard.

THE vicissitudes of Ronsard's reputation through the centuries are of themselves a study in criticism. They interest us chiefly by showing the effect of a great French poet upon succeeding generations of his countrymen, but to some extent also by showing the unhappy results of literary spite and critical bigotry which for nearly two centuries concealed some of the most agreeable and musical of French lyrics. During the sixteenth century Ronsard was taken at his own valuation as the greatest of French poets. Ignoring or attacking their predecessors (as they were afterward attacked or ignored), the Pleiade firmly insisted on their superiority over "barbarians" like Charles d'Orleans and Villon, and agreed that Ronsard was their chief and the prince of French poets. Not even "divine Du Bartas" could shake this acknowledged supremacy. Sovereigns like Francois II., Charles IX., Elizabeth of England and Mary of Scotland flattered Ronsard with praise and rewards. His reputation spread even into critical Italy, for it was when Brantome was buying a grand volume of Petrarch at Venice that a grand magnifique rebuked him, saying that in Ronsard France possessed a poet "twice as great as Petrarch."—*From "Pierre de Ronsard" in the London Times Library Supplement.*

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Herman Melville in First Edition.

I WAS told last week there is a cruel competition to-day in America for the first editions—probably only the American "firsts"—of Herman Melville's works. As for this side, a friend of mine picked up recently two excellent examples of the first English edition of the "Narrative of a Four Months Residence Among the Natives of a Valley of the Marquesas Islands" for a few shillings—though that may be no indication of the market value of a "first" of the "Piazza Tales." I have nothing better than bewildered ignorance in this business of collecting first editions; an ignorance so unforgivable that it has thrown away books and pamphlets because they were dull which afterward I was informed would have covered a little holiday at Monte Carlo. But it is hard to school one's self to believe that something that is bad is good. It is not easy to attach a value to a chance object which has nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the litter.—*From the London "Nation and Athenæum."*

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Henrik Ibsen at Oxford.

SUDDENLY I caught sight of the placarded announcement: "The New Theater, Oxford. (By permission of the Vice-Chancellor and the Right Worshipful the Mayor.) The Oxford University Dramatic Society presents 'The Pretenders,' by Henrik Ibsen." I rubbed my eyes. What feudal times doth this old city still endure that its choice and master spirits must seek worshipful permission to rub intellects with their rightful kin? And then I reflected that perhaps young innocence was not so ingenuous as I had supposed. Had not its choice for this particular year's performance fallen upon "The Pretenders" of all plays! Had it not "twigged" or "rumbled," or whatever the current idiom may be, that this is Ibsen's greatest essay on kingship, his most resolved exploration into the responsibilities of governance? It is his sternest, grimmest glorification of that hard condition, twinborn with greatness, which has irked so many self-centered rulers to no more than a gentle melancholy. "What infinite heart's ease must kings neglect, that private men enjoy!" is a purely selfish lament. "Every one must go who is too dear to the King!' cries Haakon, banishing in a single self-immolatory swoop both mother and mistress. Here, in a nutshell, is the philosophy of kingship. Kings are to consider not how jolly a thing it is "to sit three steps above the floor" but how best they may fulfill their trusteeship and serve the common kinghood. Ibsen blares this nineteenth century thought through a thirteenth century trumpet.—*From "Young Oxford and Old Ibsen" in the "Saturday Review."*

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The Original of Wilkie Cobb of Daudet's "Sapho."

NONE of the newspaper references to Cora Pearl—published in connection with the death of Duval, the millionaire caterer, whom she drove to make an attempt on his life—mentions her distinguished parentage. Cora Pearl's real name was Emma Crouch, her father being the composer of "Kathleen Mavourneen" and "Dermot Asthore." On Mrs. Emily Crawford revealing this fact in an obituary notice published in the *Daily News* a correspondent wrote: "I have read with interest the account of Cora Pearl's death which appears in your paper. She was unquestionably the daughter of Frederick Nicholls Crouch; I knew the whole family and went to school with the younger girls in 1854-5. Emma, the subject of your notice, was then about 17 years of age, and apprenticed to a milliner in Regent street. From thence she disappeared and was never heard of by her mother until about a year before the fall of the Empire. Mrs. Crouch went over to Paris to see if the notorious Cora Pearl was really her long lost daughter, and found her living in great splendor."—*From the "Manchester Guardian."*

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The Peculiarities of Shelley.

IN Shelley politics, atheism, love and poetry were all mixed up together. A touch of neurasthenia added to the confusion. In so far he was only one of the more interesting specimens of humanity. Nevertheless, his eccentricity is a tale that grows in the telling; granted he never could swim, he was a good shot and loved pistol practice all his life, somewhat to the discomfort of those who watched him handle firearms. Hogg says he could fairly glide through a crowd, but would trip over his own feet once he was alone. His absurd dread of disease has been dwelt on again and again, as, for instance, his catching elephantiasis by rubbing knees all day with an absurdly fat woman who sat opposite him in a stage coach. Not till he had been examined and reassured by a physician did he recover. Members of his entourage write vaguely of "spasms"—Trelawny blames laudanum, and implies that he was too constantly haunted by his own thoughts, in spite of incessant reading and writing. Peacock cites the vegetarian diet and concludes with his famous cure—"two mutton chops, well peppered." Hogg thinks he should have been a lawyer, "for he had the most acute intellect of any man I ever knew"—poetry was the evil genius of his life.—*From "A Century of Shelley." By Stewart Mitchell in the "Dial."*

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The Sherwood Anderson Country.

IN fifty years or so, no doubt, a volume called "The Sherwood Anderson Country" will be published, with photogravures of Galesburg and Peoria and Keokuk. The title will be almost as much of a misnomer as "The Shakespeare Country"—almost, but not quite. For Mr. Anderson himself suffers from the delusion that a novelist is not a creator. Evidently, he thinks of himself as first of all a recorder; he calls "Winesburg, Ohio," "a group of tales of Ohio small town life," and "The Triumph of the Egg" "a book of impressions from American life." And hardly a reviewer fails to praise him for the fidelity with which he has depicted the middle West. Both these notions seem to me mistaken. That the Sherwood Anderson country has a connection with the middle West is not to be denied; but that connection is at most a tenuous one—and it doesn't in the least matter, anyhow. Mr. Anderson seems to me, next to Willa Cather, our ablest writer of fiction; on that account I think he deserves consideration, not as something else, but as a novelist. I therefore invite the reader to take a brief survey of the Sherwood Anderson country, forgetting for the time what he knows of Iowa and Illinois and Ohio.—*From "Sherwood Anderson." By T. K. Whipple, in "The Literary Review."*

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William Sharp and Fiona McLeod.

IF you wished to settle upon William Sharp's reason for the jolly little masquerading as Fiona McLeod, you would almost certainly never go back to suppressed infantile desires. For, with the exception of Havelock Ellis and a possible disciple or so, writers of English in both hemispheres did not sound the erotic motif—as that phrase is now understood—in literature until the decadent 1890s had almost waned to the present century. It is scarcely more likely that Fiona came into being as a result of conditions similar to those which cause many of Mr. E. Phillips Oppenheim's minor works to be printed under auctorial designations other than his own name. Rumor has it that the American gentleman who writes of rural pleasures and who is known as David Grayson is not really named that at all; that he formerly put forth works dealing with the colored race or with boys inventions, freely admitting on the title page his identity with Ray Stannard Baker; and that he wished not to confuse his two literary styles, publics and reputations; therefore he adopted a pseudonym. It may well be that Sharp was reluctant to publish his later work under a name of such close association with lives of Shelley, of Heine, and of Rossetti, all heretics or worse.—*From "Dr. Jekyl and Mr. Hyde." By Hansell Baugh in "The Reviewer."*

What You Should Know About American Authors.

II.

Edith Wharton.

IT is given to few authors to create a character that is accepted as a type and admitted into everyday speech as a means swiftly to describe and place a person met in actual life. Mrs. Wharton is one of the authors who has created such a character. Just as one says of a man: He is a Pecksniff, or a Col. Sellers, or a Tartarin; or of a woman, she is a Becky Sharp, one uses the name of Lily Bart, the heroine of "The House of Mirth," to indicate a kind of feminine parasite who does not prey upon society, but who, following the line of least resistance, lives upon it irresponsibly, accepting its hospitalities, sponging upon her friends, with the vague idea of a prosperous marriage somewhere in the indefinite future. Mrs. Wharton has presented many well drawn characters, but so far only one Lily Bart.

Born in New York city, a granddaughter of Gen. Ebenezer Stevens of Revolutionary fame, coming of affluent parentage, Mrs. Wharton's early environment was one that meant much in fitting her eventually to become a novelist of society. In addition a great deal of her youth was spent in traveling. Early familiarity with French, German and Italian gave her the basis for wide reading. In later life she professed herself to be indebted more to Goethe than to any other literary influence. Besides Goethe, George Eliot, Flaubert, Balzac, Thackeray, Dickens and Meredith she reads and rereads.

Her first collection of short stories appeared in 1899 under the title of "The Greater Inclination." At once both the quality of the work and a certain debt to Henry James were recognized. Of the book a contemporary reviewer said: "These eight poignant studies of human heart pangs represent the full development of a talent of unusual magnitude." Insistence upon the debt to James and the James atmosphere was again the keynote of general criticism when the stories that made up "Crucial Instances" appeared in 1901. In 1902 her first long novel, "The Valley of Decision," was published, and in 1904 another volume of short stories, "The Descent of Man." Her attempt in the novel was to sum up the life of Italy in the latter half of the eighteenth century, when, in the period of fallacious calm following the war of the Austrian Succession, beneath the surface the country was seething with undercurrents of discontent against the old established order of things.

In 1905 appeared Mrs. Wharton's "Italian Backgrounds" and her widely read and discussed "The House of Mirth." A big book of its type, "The House of Mirth" was a trenchant satire on the manners and customs of certain social strata of modern New York. From the other personages in the story Lily Bart stood out in sharp relief. "The House of Mirth" was followed in quick succession by "Madame de Treymes," a story of Americans in Paris, and "The Fruit of the Tree," of which the plot deals with the right of the medical profession to shorten suffering where a cure is hopeless.

In 1909 appeared a volume of poems by Mrs. Wharton, "Artemis to Actæon and Other Verses," and in 1911 the little volume that by many is regarded as marking the high water mark of her talent, "Ethan Frome," a story of gray New England and three broken humble lives. Of this book one critic said: "Art for art's sake is the one justification of a piece of work as perfect in technique as it is relentless in substance." This was followed in 1912 by "The Reef," of which the theme is a man caught, through his own folly and weakness, and forced to choose between the loss of the woman he loves and the ruin of the girl who loves him. The heroine of "The Custom of the Country," which appeared in 1913, was Undine Spragg, a woman who, like the heroine of Robert Grant's "Unleavened Bread" and Winston Churchill's "A Modern Chronicle," had the doubtful privilege of being mated in turn to three different husbands.

During the great war Mrs. Wharton worked heart and soul for suffering humanity and the cause of the Allies. In her home in Paris she was one of the leading spirits of the American relief work. She drew a vivid picture of the land in which she was living and its heroic endurance in "Fighting France." Since the war, returning to the field of fiction, she scored one of her most conspicuous successes with "The Age of Innocence," a novel depicting New York society as it was in the eighteen seventies. In addition to the works already mentioned Mrs. Wharton's books include "Xingu and Other Stories," "Tales of Men and Ghosts," "The Hermit and the Wild Woman," "The Touchstone," "The Joy of Living," "Sanctuary" and "In Morocco." Her forthcoming novel, "Glimpses of the Moon," is announced for publication in July.

Edith Wharton.