

TRANSLATION OF DANTE.*

MANY of us must remember our introduction to the Prince of Tuscan Poets. We had formed perhaps the dim vision of a Miltonic hell, enveloped in smoke and flame, dusky, lurid, indistinct, out of which peered gaunt shapes of horror. The Italians told us how hard he was to read,—how impossible for any but an Italian to understand,—how obscure—enigmatical—allegorical. We heard that no one has ever yet fully and fairly explained him. All conspire to make us approach with awe this dim and tremendous shadow. With how different feeling do we now look back. We tell our good Italian friends that the beautiful explains itself, and may be found by Italians or English alike. The allegory he hides so deeply was temporary, and whether it means this or that, is of little importance to us,—but the poetry, in which it is enveloped, belongs to all time, and can be understood by all men. To his language, at first unusual, we discover in a few cantos the key. His rhyme, which impeded at first, soon seems to us the only medium that could adapt itself to his varied theme. The *Terza Rima* does not flow, but walks,—does not declaim, but converses, philosophizes, reasons,—above all, describes,—and, however difficult to us, in Dante, it seems to be the natural frame of sentences among his interlocutors. Instead of obscurity or vagueness, we find an unexampled clearness, rendered transparent by images that with a single word give the most forcible pictures. The whole scene passes before our eyes. Rightly is the poem called *Commedia*, for it is like a history seen, and not read. The *Inferno* is full of physical horrors,—and we often hear a disgust expressed at them,—but our experience has been that the moral always overcomes the physical, and the dire torments pass away from our minds, while Francesca, Farinata, Ugolino, La Pia, remain fixed forever. Who forgets not the fiery sepulchre when Farinata himself for-

* The first ten Cantos of the *Inferno* of Dante newly translated into English verse. By T. W. PARSONS. Ticknor. 1843.

gets it in his pride and grief for Florence and his friends;— or when the father of Guido forgets it to ask after his son? It is only the mean men in Dante's hell, that are overcome by the torments; the majestic Ulysses speaks with unchanged voice after ages of pain. When we are well acquainted with Dante, the terrible is to us but a background for pictures of such beauty and tenderness as are perhaps without parallel.

So many reviews, books, and magazine articles have of late years been busy with the subject, that now-a-days it is to be hoped students are better prepared what to expect than chanced in our day. Every body has read a few cantos, that has read Italian at all. Many have read the *Inferno*; but to almost all the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* remain unsought mines. Still, from an Italian author, Dante is becoming a world-author; the knowledge of him is no longer confined to Italian scholars,—and it is a fair sign of the times that here we have in Boston a new and good translation.

We took up this book, not a little prejudiced; for who with the deep music of the original ringing in his ears, but must view the best translation with some aversion? And verily were all the world acquainted with originals, translators would stand but a poor chance, if indeed they could under such circumstances exist. A translation is neither more nor less than a paraphrase, only in a different language; and this is the only answer to give to those who insist that if there be any meaning in a poet, it can be translated, that the thought cannot escape if the words are rendered by equivalents. But let any one paraphrase Shakespeare, and see what work he will make of it. Hence is a translator's in one respect the most ungrateful of all literary tasks. Yet it is one of the most honorable and most useful, for few can go to the fountain heads, and none can go to them all; and without the labors of conscientious translators, not the Bible only, but our Plato and Æschylus would be sealed books to most of us. Goethe translated Phèdre, and Benvenuto Cellini, and several other works; and thus much is certain, that to produce good translations, especially of poetical works, requires rare talents.

Cary is faithful, and literal, and has been a very useful translator, so far as we can speak from imperfect knowl-

edge, but seems to possess quite a faculty of giving a prosaic translation of a poetical passage. Mr. Parsons is spirited, often poetical; not always literal enough. A translator is bound to clip nothing, above all, in an author who, like Dante, has never an unnecessary word or line. We take the first lines of the Second Book as an illustration both of the poet and his translators.

Lo giorno se n' andava, e l' aere bruno
Toglieva gli animai che sono in terra
Dalle fatiche loro: ed io sol uno
M'apparechiava a sostener la guerra
Si del cammino, e si della pietate
Che ritrarrà la mente che non erra.

Cary translates—

Now was the day departing, and the air,
Imbrowned with shadows, from their toils released
All animals on earth; and I alone
Prepared myself the conflict to sustain,
Both of sad pity, and that perilous road
Which my unerring memory shall retrace.

Mr. Parsons—

Day was departing, and the dusky light
Freed earthly creatures from their labor's load;
I only rose and girt myself to fight
The struggle with compassion, and my road,
Paint it, my memory, now in truth's own hue!

Literally—

“Day was departing, and the dark air
Took away the animals that are upon the earth
From their labors. And I alone
Prepared myself to sustain the war,
Both of the journey and of pity,
Which my mind that does not err shall retrace.

In the original the picture of departing day is marked, and so beautiful as to arrest attention and fix itself in the memory. Mr. Cary is faithful, and does not injure the picture by adding or taking away a word, and is not unpoetical. In Mr. Parsons “freed earthly creatures from their labor's load” does not sufficiently render “*toglieva gli animai che sono in terra dalle fatiche loro,*” this description cannot be compressed without taking away its individuality and making it commonplace; and although the meaning is sufficiently clear, the rendering is not artistic; it

has missed the points of the original, and does not arrest the attention, nor produce the effect of the original.

In the celebrated lines with which the third canto begins, "Per me si va," &c., Cary is again literal and true, but with a lamentable want of the majesty of Dante's verses, which are unequalled in their solemn impressiveness.

Per me si va nella città dolente :
 Per me si va nell' eterno dolore :
 Per me si va tra la perduta gente :
 Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore :
 Fecemi la divina potestate,
 La somma sapienza, e' l primo amore.
 Dinanzi a me non fur cose create,
 Se non eterne; ed io eterno duro.
 Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch' entrate.

Cary—

"Through me you pass into the city of woe :
 Through me you pass into eternal pain :
 Through me among the people lost for aye.
 Justice the founder of my fabric mov'd ;
 To rear me was the task of power divine,
 Supreme wisdom, and primeval love.
 Before me things create were none, save things
 Eternal, and eternal I endure.
 All hope abandon, ye who enter here."

Parsons—

Through me ye reach the city of despair :
 Through me eternal wretchedness ye find :
 Through me among Perdition's race ye fare :
 Justice inspired my lofty Founder's mind ;
 Power, love and wisdom,—heavenly, first, and most high,
 Framed me ere aught created else had been,
 Save things eternal, and eterne am I.
 Leave here all hope, O ye who enter in.

Mr. Parsons here has evidently the advantage. He keeps sufficiently close to his original, and is at the same time spirited, and his lines give somewhat the feeling of the original, which Mr. Cary's, though literal, do not.

The episode of Francesca and Paolo has been so many times translated, that it must be looked upon as a test passage. Our translator shows both the merits and defects we have noticed above. His translation is spirited, and forms a whole, and reads well together; but there are sins both of omission and commission—for instance—

"Da ch' io intesi quell' anime offense
 "Chinai 'l viso, e tanto l' tenni basso
 "Fin che 'l Poeta mi disse, che pense ?
 "Quando risposi cominciai : Oh lasso, &c.

Literally—

When I heard those troubled souls,
 I bent down my head and held it down
 Until the poet said to me; what are you thinking ?
 When I answered, I began, &c.

All this Mr. Parsons has compressed into two lines :

"During their speech, low down I hung my head,
 "What thinkest thou? inquired my guide, &c.

Now this is really cutting the matter too short. Dante thought it worth while to write four whole lines, full of meaning, in order to express the effect that the hearing of the story had upon him, and these lines in the original give wonderful life and reality to the whole scene. We see Dante's deliberate, grand motion as he inclines his head, heeding nothing till his companion asks to rouse him, what are you thinking? Nor does he even then at once recover, but as he says, "When I answered, I began," &c.

And again the language in the original is as simple as possible. "Francesca! thy sufferings make me weep, sad and pitying,"—any man might say, but "My pitying soul thy martyr throes unman," is hardly simple enough.

We wish not to be over-critical, but rather to represent the difficulty of the undertaking, for in the whole range of literature it would be hard to select a harder book. Dante is so condensed, that not a line, or a thought, or even a word can be spared. A verbose writer may be compressed, but Dante's words are thoughts; you cannot compress, you can only leave out. Because "the fear that had remained all night in the lake of my heart" is hard to render into English verse, the translator has no right to leave it out. On the other hand, a man of fine taste would lie awake half the night with anxiety, if he found himself obliged by the rhyme to say the beasts "were freed from their labor's load," when Dante only said they were freed from their labors.

We believe the time is past, when a distinction can be made between a free and a literal translation of a great work. A translation must be literal, or it is no translation. And if the translator cannot be free and literal at once, if he cannot learn to move freely and gracefully in his irons, he is wanting in a prime requisite. It is in vain to speak of translating in the spirit of an original, without confining one's self too closely to the text. You may thus produce as good a work as Pope's Homer, but no translation.

On the whole, we feel most grateful to Mr. Parsons for undertaking this work. We think he has done well, but he can do much better. We counsel him never to leave a passage, till he is sure that he has united a full and faithful rendering of the *whole* he finds in his author, with that simple and vigorous expression of the original. To avoid, above all, general expressions, where Dante uses individuals; the temptation is often great, but weakness is the sure result. As it is, we have no little pride, that our city should produce a mark of so much devotion to the highest walks of pure literature.
