Youth of the Poet and the Painter. [Jan.

not caught, while the note of social life sounds continually. I am out of patience with the tameness of late poetry; it is a feeble imitation of what in its time was good, and suited the age, and I feel that we demand an actual feeling of nature, which poets have lost. Our social life does not admit us into the sanctuary of human nature, but tosses us some chips, some crumbs of feeling or thought, as if the strong, healthy, abundant nature of man had dwindled into a pretty scholar, apt at feeding the birds from the window, while his tasks of courage were forgotten.

It is a good part in Edward's history, that he has courage to make disappointments,—to sing his song to the end, though assured his verses will prove unsatisfactory. Those poets who have halted, and could not stay at the end of life, as Michael did, "anchored impar," to use an old illustration, never went into the depths of the art, never used their powers except as amateurs. I am glad you tell me, Edward cannot be satisfied with any poem he makes, for I am convinced, with his constitution, he will never tire, until he makes verse which shall be much to him, and yet that he will never cease to write. I think it will be long before he finds his true position, and till then he cannot estimate the place of any other person. How it is I cannot say, but there is, in people of his description, a power of misrepresenting the exact capacities of those by whom they are surrounded. It looks impossible for them to address themselves friendly to those with whom they sympathize imperfectly, and they demand from all, character and entertainment, which only a very few can ever yield.

Truly yours,

M. G.

1844.] Translation of Dante. 285

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 unsampled 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-
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 chance 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 grateful of all literary tasks. Yet it it 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 Eschylus 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 knowledge, but seems to possess quite a faculty of giving a proseic 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
Toglievagli animale che sono in terra
Dalle fatiche loro: ed io sol uno
M'apparecchiava a sostener la guerra
Si del cammino, e si della pietate
Che ritirà la mente che non erra.

Cary translates—

Now was the day departing, and the air,
Imbrowned with shades, 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 animali 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 be-
gins, "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 mose il mio alto fattore:
Pecemil la divina potestatte,
La somma sapienza e' primo amore.
Diandai me non fur cose create,
Se non eterno: ed io eterno duro.
Lasciate ogni speranza voich'entrate.

Through me you enter the city of woe:
Through me you pass into eternal pain:
Through me you pass into the people lost for ever.
Justice founded my fabric upon:
To rear me was the task of power divine,
Supreme wisdom, and primordial love.
Before me things create were none, save things
Eternal, and eternal I endure.
All hope abandon, ye who enter here.

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, et anto 'l teno basso
Fis che 'l Poeta mi dianse, che pensavi?
Quando risposi comincial: 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 be-
gan," &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
the 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 Eng-
lish 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.

HOMER. OSSIAN. CHAUCER.

*Extracts from a Lecture on Poetry, Read Before the Concord Lyceum, November 29, 1843, by Henry D. Thoreau.*

**HOMER.**

The wisest definition of poetry the poet will instantly prove false by setting aside its requisitions. We can therefore publish only our advertisement of it.

There is no doubt that the loveliest written wisdom is rhymed or measured, is in form as well as substance poetry; and a volume, which should contain the condensed wisdom of mankind, need not have one rhythmless line. Yet poetry, though the last and finest result, is a natural fruit. As naturally as the oak bears an acorn, and the vine a gourd, man bears a poem, either spoken or done. It is the chief and most memorable success, for history is but a prose narrative of poetic deeds. What else have the Hindoos, the Persians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, done, that can be told? It is the simplest relation of phenomena, and describes the commonest sensations with more truth than science does, and the latter at a distance slowly mimics its style and methods. The poet sings how the blood flows in his veins. He performs his functions, and is so well that he needs such stimulus to sing only as plants to put forth leaves and blossoms. He would strive in vain to modulate the remote and transient music which he sometimes hears, since his song is a vital function like breathing, and an integral result like weight. It is not the overflowing of life but its subsidence rather, and is drawn from under the feet of the poet. It is enough if Homer but say the sun sets. He is as serene as nature, and we can hardly detect the enthusiasm of the bard. He is as if nature spoke. He presents to us the simplest pictures of human life, so that childhood itself can understand them, and the man must not think twice to appreciate his naturalness. Each reader discovers for himself, that succeeding poets have done little else than copy his similes. His more memorable passages are as naturally bright, as gleams of sunlight in misty weather. Nature furnishes him not only with words, but with stereotyped lines and sentences from her mint.

"As from the clouds appears the full moon,
All shining, and then again it goes behind the shadowy clouds,
So Hector, at one time appeared among the foremost.
And at another in the rear, commanding; and all with brass
He shone, like to the lightning ofegis-bearing Zeus."

He conveys the least information, even the hour of the day, with such magnificence, and vast expense of natural imagery, as if it were a message from the gods.

"While it was dawn, and sacred day was advancing,
For that space the weapons of both flew fast, and the people fell:
But when now the woodcutter was preparing his morning meal
In the recesses of the mountain, and had wearied his hands
With cutting lofty trees, and satiety came to his mind,
And the desire of sweet food took possession of his thoughts;
Then the Danaans by their valor broke the phalanxes,
Shouting to their companions from rank to rank."