The Translator of Omar Khayyam.*

Edward FitzGerald's character, as revealed in his letters, turns out to be as charming as his unique translations. He was evidently the simplest, sincerest, most genuine of men. His seclusiveness was almost as extreme as that of Thoreau; but it would be very unjust to him to compare him to that enthusiast, for no man of the world could be freer from all that is strained and eccentric. He honestly enjoyed simplicity in manners, in art, in literature, in character, in daily life; and he accordingly laid out his life upon as simple a plan as is compatible with membership in a highly artificial society. He had no affectation of getting back to a state of hairy quadrumanous nakedness; he simply established himself in a little cottage with an old woman to "do" for him; surrounded himself with the books and pictures and flowers that he loved; saw gladly the few friends who took the trouble to visit him,—and so lived his lonely, meditative life. Luckily he was a great letter-writer, and he had friends worth writing to. Men like James Spedding, Thackeray, Alfred and Frederick Tennyson, were his friends from youth to old age; there were others somewhat less eminent, but scarcely any undistinguished. Yet he courted celebrities as little as he courted celebrity; the men I have mentioned were still young and obscure when he first knew them, and after they became famous they remained his friends in spite of his frank and trenchant criticism, or—what is a still harder test of friendship—of his indifference to their works. With Carlyle and Mrs. Kemble he became somewhat intimate later on; and his acquaintance with Mr. Lowell and Professor Norton was confined to the last ten years of his life. His affection for all these great people was as simple as his affection for many less famous people,—as simple as that for the good captain of his lugger, of whom he said, sincerely enough: "This is altogether the Greatest Man I have known."

The way in which all these men received his honest criticism is extremely creditable to them and to human nature. He made no secret of his preference of the novels of Scott, and even of some by Trollope and Wilkie Collins, to those of Thackeray; yet the friendship remained unbroken and tender to the end. He liked nothing that "Alfred" wrote after the volume of 1842, not even "that accursed Princess," not even "In Memoriam," which "has that air of being evolved by a Poetical Machine of the highest order." Spedding seems to have been the friend to whom he was first and last most tenderly attached; he certainly admired Spedding above all others—the captain of the lugger perhaps excepted,—yet he deprecated Spedding's life-long devotion to Bacon, and ridiculed the laborious attempt "to wash that Blackamoor white." Under cover of his own modesty and unassumingness, he administers to Carlyle the very criticism that worthy most needed. Later on, when the intimacy had strengthened, one finds him saying to Carlyle: "You don't care what one thinks of your books: you know I love so many: I don't care so much for Frederick so far as he's gone: I suppose you don't neither." This is most wholesome by the side of Emerson's panegyrics—surely somewhat forced—in his letters to Carlyle. After the death of his old

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friend Bernard Barton, the Quaker poet, it naturally fell to FitzGerald to edit a book of selections from Barton's letters and poems, and to contribute "a little dapper Memoir." Of this book he says to Frederick Tennyson: "Some of B. B.'s letters are pleasant, I think, and when you come to England I will give you this little book of incredibly small value." After all this, and much more of the same sort, it is amusing to an American to hear him say to Mr. Lowell, apropos of the "Moosehead Journal": "I did not like the style of it at all; all 'too clever by half.' Do you not say so yourself, after Cervantes, Scott, Montaigne, etc.?"

Not that there was anything of the caviller or the grumbler about FitzGerald; on the contrary, he was the most amiable of men. His literary favorites are as various as his literary friends, but his hearty admirations are tempered by just those reserves which made his praise of value to the judicious. Indeed he had, beyond most men of his time, the temper of the true literary critic. Had he chosen to publish book-reviews he would have been a model to the reviewers of an era of puffery, for his faculty of self-detachment, of separating the man from his works, was remarkable. Perhaps his solitary life made him the better able to retain his natural independence of judgment. Taking a fresh survey of whatever is brought under his eye, he is singularly free from prepossession and from cant, whether of party, of school, or of fashion.

In the midst of the consideration of these entertaining letters and beautiful translations, it is a great pity to have to find fault. But the want of a topical index to the letters is something that a reviewer has no right to pass over in silence,—even if it did not waste his time and patience, both scanty. I know of no similar publication that contains a greater number of apt and suggestive remarks upon the books and authors of the Victorian era. Many of these scattered *obiter dicta*, the fruit of ripe meditation, are much more enlightening, because more centrally true, than some lengthy professional critiques on the same subjects. Indeed, it often happens that this solitary reader condenses into a few lines a judgment which has cost him more hours of study and reflection than many a Quarterly Review article costs its author. There are in these letters numberless remarks which, considering their source, no critic can henceforth afford to overlook. But if one desires (as what reader does not?) to look up the exact form of any particular remark or anecdote, one must take counsel of one's bump of locality and search through a volume of five hundred pages. A certain number of repetitions of this experience makes even a tolerant reader wish, in his haste, that Mr. Browning's unpoetical scurrillity had been addressed to the living editor rather than to the innocent dead. But Mr. Wright has been sufficiently punished, one would think, by the knowledge that his unpardonable negligence is alone to blame for bringing this barbarous vengeance upon one who shrank from every form of publicity as other men shrink from death or from obscurity.

FitzGerald lived long enough to read, just before his death, the Carlyle-Emerson Correspondence, as edited by his American friend, Professor Norton. How appropriate and how easy it would have been for FitzGerald to intrust his literary remains to his friend at the American Cambridge! But "this ultra-modest man," as Carlyle termed him, scarcely thought that even his translations would be published after his death; and he would probably have been terrified at the bare idea of the publication of his correspondence. If he be at this moment cognizant of the poor scenes now enacting in a world which he left without regret, one may fancy him more wounded by the indiscretion of his friends than by the insult of Mr. Browning.

Readers of "The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám" will be glad to turn from these strictures to a brief consideration of his other less known but equally masterly translations. Let us begin with a specimen from his free rendering of Calderon's masterpiece, which FitzGerald entitles, "Such Stuff as Dreams are Made of," iii. 1:

> "The sailor dreamed of tossing on the flood:
> The soldier of his laurels grown in blood:
> The lover of the beauty that he knew
> Must yet dissolve to dusty residue:
> The merchant and the miser of his bags
> Of finger'd gold; the beggar of his rags:
> And all this stage of earth on which we seem
> Such busy actors, and the parts we play'd,
> Substantial as the shadow of a shade,
> And Dreaming but a dream within a dream!"

Compare with this Dr. Trench's more literal rendering of the corresponding passage at the end of Act ii. of "Life's a Dream":

> "And the rich man dreams no less
> 'Mid his wealth which brings more cares;
> And the poor man dreams he bears
> All his want and wretchedness;
> Dreams, whom anxious thoughts oppress,
> Dreams, who for high place contends,
> Dreams, who injures and offends;
> * * * *

What is life? a frenzy mere;
What is life? e'en that we deem;
A conceit, a shadow all,
And the greatest good is small:
Nothing is, but all doth seem—
Dreams within dreams, still we dream!"

The stars indicate the omission of seven lines which do not affect this comparison, as they are not rendered by FitzGerald. Readers who prefer patient mediocrity punctually sweating after its author, like Sancho after the Don, will be for the version of Dr. Trench. On the other hand, those who prize poetry above rubies, and who are uncritical enough to be satisfied with a translation which merely gives an impression of the power and beauty of the original, will doubtless find their account in FitzGerald's "free-and-easy" rendering,—as he himself styles it in his humbly apologetic letter to Archbishop Trench. Distrustful as he always was of his own powers, he seems to have set but a slight estimate upon the value of any of his translations; and the satirical lines prefixed to "Such Stuff as Dreams are Made of" are hardly an exaggeration of his habitual tone when mentioning these things, even to his most intimate friends:

"For Calderon's drama sufficient would seem
The title he chose for it—'Life is a Dream';
Two words of the motto now filch'd are enough
For the impudent mixture they label—'Such stuff!'"

It is sadly amusing to know that a man capable of "such stuff" should have gone through life thinking small-beer of himself in comparison with the mob of relatively commonplace people. He has misgivings about letting Dr. Trench see his best versions of Calderon, and he is afraid to send to Milnes his privately and furtively printed quatrains from Omar. He writes to Professor Thompson in 1862:

"Now, I really feel ashamed when you ask about my Persian Translations, though they are all very well: only very little affairs. I really have not the face to send to Milnes direct; but I send you four Copies which I have found in a Drawer here, to do as you will with. This will save Milnes, or anyone else, the bore of writing to me to acknowledge it."

Readers of the quatrains from Omar who have not yet seen the letters, will perhaps thank me for quoting FitzGerald's own "Story of Rubáiyát."

"I had translated them partly for Cowell: young Parker asked me some years ago for something for Fraser, and I gave him the less wicked of these to use if he chose. He kept them for two years without using: and as I saw he didn't want them I printed some copies with Quaritch; and, keeping some for myself, gave him the rest. Cowell, to whom I sent a Copy, was naturally alarmed at it; he being a very religious Man: nor have I given any other Copy but to George Borrow, to whom I had once lent the Persian, and to old Donne when he was down here the other Day, to whom I was showing a Passage in another Book which brought my old Omar up."

As far back as May, 1857, we find him confiding to Professor Cowell his plan of translating Æschylus:

"I think I want to turn his Trilogy into what shall be readable English verse; a thing I have always thought of, but was frightened at the Chorus. So I am now; I can't think them so fine as people talk of: they are terribly maimed; and all such Lyrics require a better Poet than I am to set forth in English. But the better Poets won't do it; and I cannot find one readable translation. I shall (if I make one) make a very free one; not for Scholars, but for those who are ignorant of Greek, and who (so far as I have seen) have never been induced to learn it by any Translations yet made of these Plays. I think I shall become a bore, of the Bowring order, by all this Translation; but it amuses me without any labor, and I really think I have the faculty of making some things readable which others have hitherto left unreadable. But don't be alarmed with the anticipation of another sudden volume of Translations; for I only sketch out the matter, then put it away; and coming on it one day with fresh eyes, trim it up with some natural impulse that I think gives a natural air to all."

He never fully carried out this plan, but some ten years later he completed and printed—privately, as usual—his now famous rendering of the "Agamemnon." This was intended chiefly for the benefit of Mrs. Kemble and one or two other friends who knew no Greek. Mrs. Kemble made this, and the versions of Calderon's two great dramas, known in America; and in 1875 a request on the part of Professor C. E. Norton for a copy of the "Agamemnon" led to the pleasant and somewhat extended correspondence between FitzGerald and Messrs. Lowell and Norton. This correspondence had one result for which we have reason to feel thankful: the completion of the versions from Sophocles entitled by FitzGerald "The Downfall and Death of King Œdipus." He was continually belittling these masterly translations, and reminding all who referred to them that they were by no means intended for scholars. The "Agamemnon" he calls "the most impudent of all"; he will not send a copy to Carlyle, even when requested; he will not send a copy to Mrs. Thompson because she is the wife of a Grecian; and he writes as follows to Professor Wright concerning his "small Escapades in print":

"But I am always a little ashamed of having made my leisure and idleness the means of putting myself forward in print, when really so many much better people keep silent, having other work to do. This is, I know, my sincere feeling on the subject."

FitzGerald is an example of those who, "measuring themselves by themselves, are not wise"; but his unwisdom was not precisely of the kind which the apostle glanced at. His life was so solitary, and his associates, when he went among men, were chiefly men of such transcendent powers, that he never fairly measured himself with the mob of reviewers and able editors and literary men at large, among whom there is such prodigious "knocking about of brains." He felt himself hopelessly inferior to the Tennysons, and apparently also to Carlyle, Spedding, and Thackeray; in point of scholarship, to which he made not the slightest pretension, he felt himself but a child by the side of his friend Thompson, Professor of Greek at Cambridge, and of his friend Cowell, the Orientalist. These, with the painter Laurence, his neighbor the Quaker poet Barton, and his neighbor Parson Crabbe (son of the poet), are the men with whom his life was most closely linked. Comparing himself with some of the first men of his time, whether for scholarship or for genius, the modest recluse reckoned himself a mere Will Wimble, because he fancied that he fell somewhat short of the high standards his friends set for him. Judging from the pure wine of poetry which, in the capacity of a translator, he has added to our literature, and from the sanity, the sense of style, the vigor of intellect, and the large imaginative grasp of his thought everywhere apparent in his versions, one may fairly doubt whether his self-supposed inferiority to the Tennysons and Carlyle and Thackeray was not a matter of ambition rather than of native capacity. At all events, the translator who, by the fine originality and daring creativeness of his renderings of such various poets, has fairly earned a right to the title of prince of translators since old Chapman, may safely be said to have deserved better of his language and of future memory than any secondary poet of his time. It is only when we consider that really great translators are even rarer than poets who can pass awhile for great, that we are capable of doing justice to the modest genius of him who made great Sophocles, mighty Æschylus, sad Omar, and impassioned Calderon, clasp hands across the centuries and speak with living force in English words. He has made these masters speak upon his page, perhaps not just as they would have spoken had they been Englishmen, but with a music and a power scarcely inferior to their own. He has done for them, in short, what Chaucer did for Boccaccio, what Coleridge did for Schiller. The quatrains from Omar seem to be little less original with FitzGerald than is the Elegy with Gray, and perhaps the one poem will live as eternally as the other. If this be true, or even half true, then "dear old Fitz," with his "innocent *fur niente* life," concerning which he was apt to be so remorseful, has after all left his countrymen a legacy which they will prize when the Swinburnes and Morrises and Mrs. Brownings shall be remembered, if at all, like Waller and Marvell and Donne, by a few tuneful lines in old anthologies. Better were it for the fame of some such poets, would they but devote themselves, as FitzGerald did, to rescuing, for the benefit of English readers, the great masterpieces of other literatures from the clutches of dismal pedants, whose versions keep the word of promise to the letter and break it to the spirit. FitzGerald will have the reward he neither sought nor expected. He is one of that company, described by Chaucer, who besought Lady Fame to hide their good works, which they had done for contemplation's sake and for the love of God. But the capricious divinity ordered her Eolian trumpeter, instead, to take his golden clarion and ring out their names so loud and clear

> "That through the worldë went the sound,
> Also keenly and eke so soft,—
> But attë last it was on loft."

MELVILLE B. ANDERSON.