FOREIGN NOTES AND COMMENT

Translators No Longer Traitors

THE publishers of Hall Caine's "The Woman of Knockaloe" are feckfully advertising the statement that Mr. Caine's "greatest novel" has been translated into nine languages. If the ascription of superlative merit to the latest creation of the most distinguished citizen of the Isle of Man is warranted, there is nothing at all unusual about the tenfold availability that this "convincing and convicting" epic now enjoys. For there are just ten languages into which any really great work has to be translated now if the circle in which and around which it is its right to move is not to resemble the motion picture billboard of Mr. Norris's "Brass".

There is first of all English, which is manifestly destined to become the international language before the steam locomotive sees the end of its run. Then come French and German. Over the relative importance of these two let someone else fight. Then come Italian, Dutch, Dano-Norwegian, Swedish, and Czechish. This makes eight. Russian makes nine, but it is of less concern, for the Russian who can read at all can read at least one of these eight. But lest there be, here, there, or anywhere, some rare Russian who can read none of these nine, we add Polish. This makes ten.

Spanish is thus omitted, but with two thousand students in the freshman class of the University of Texas studying Spanish (which we may take as symbolic of the general situation) preparatory to swooping down on the Portuguese trade of South America, the language of Don Quixote is manifestly looking out for itself. The Japanese always have been able to do that, thanks to the translator; the Chinese are now writhing in the convulsions attendant upon the creation of a new tongue—and for all reasonable purposes this cleans up the world. More cannot be asked.

The most marked contrast in the attitude toward foreign and native languages at present is to be found in Poland and British Africa. In the land where the ultimate *ski* is as familiar as the Jens Jensens are thick in Copenhagen there is, as other writers have pointed out, a veritable and highly gratifying literary revival. But unless my trusted *Hilfsmittel* have for once proved false, the literary revival in Poland is pretty largely a matter of renascence through importation. The leading literary personage in Warsaw this morning is the translator. Poland seems determined to print, publish, sell, buy, and read in her *own* tongue the best the world created throughout those long and humiliating years when her *own* tongue was tied through oppression, split by partition, and excommunicated as an organ of speech unless the Pole was deft enough to use it in a way that would not reveal his real purpose to the police sergeant censor sent over from Moscow, Petrograd, or some other town that should have been minding its own business. Hence it is a Sienkiewicz and not a Maeterlinck who becomes the real symbolist.

The English writers who were known and read and loved in Poland previous to the world war were not nu-

merous. With Shakespeare the Pole was of course familiar. He knew that Byron had exercised a great influence on the Polish romanticists. He knew Oscar Wilde; his jailer had told him about him. He knew Shelley, a little; he had heard of Bernard Shaw. Much further than this his information did not go. It could not go. But all of this is being changed. Under the collective title of "Historical Literary Library", Poland is bringing out a series of translations that would do credit to any country regardless of its unhappy or happy past. Tarnawski's good book on Christopher Marlowe is a case in point. The author explains, in a "preface" which he places at the end of his volume, and which is written in English, that he has endeavored to add a little to the general knowledge of a great Elizabethan dramatist, but that his main purpose is to make Marlowe accessible to his own people. Well, it must be admitted that if his objective is a more intimate familiarity with the outstanding English writers, he is going back far enough. But Tarnawski is a professor by trade, and it is as hard there as it is here to make a professor see that even "scholarly" work may be done on what is being done. Indeed it would require greater ability, and greater scholarship, to pass a sound judgment on a three starred novel of 1924 than it would to write a pamphlet of appalling erudition, seemingly, on "The Readings of the First Quarto of 'Hamlet' ".

Nor is Poland confining her attention to English; she is also bringing out much German in translation. She is now reading a modern rendering of "Werther's Sufferings"; she is doing the same with Franz Werfel's "Not the Murderer, the Murdered is Guilty"; and the same with such varied geniuses as Plato, Hans Heinz Ewers, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Ibsen, the oriental literatures—and Russian.

In the South African Union, however, the reverse of all this is true. The Dutchmen of South Africa, whether they vote in Pretoria or Pietermaritzburg, have suddenly risen to a point of order; they wish to inform the world that the Dutch they speak is not the Dutch of Rotterdam but their own; that they have no connection with the superannuated Hollander; that their tongue is their own, that their literature is their own. They are translating nothing. They are writing their own literature. And like all primitive literatures, theirs is confined pretty largely to native themes. Much of it indeed is based on the Boer War. That it does not throw the spotlight on such virtues as England may have as a colonizer may be taken for granted. That, on the other hand, Longmans (London) have seen fit to bring out an English translation of A. A. Pienaar's beast epic, "Uit Oerwoud en Vlakte" (From Plain and Forest Primæval) shows once again that the English are the best of sports, love fair play, and practise it. The Englishman's attitude toward South Africa's literary resurgence is admirable, for it is altogether intelligent. But that the Boer can raise his patois to the dignity of a real language, and that he can create a living literature in it, would not seem possible at this writing. His *Afrikaans* is too near Dutch; he himself is too close to the English. But his experiment is interesting. And should he ever bring it to the point where, say, Couperus has to be translated into *his* Dutch the world will be provided with a little bit of belletristic irony that will make the British glossary to "Babbitt" seem commonplace.

One thing is certain: the Boer can never hope to have a great body of "national" literature without the aid of translations. The day when that could be done is gone. Hawthorne, to take a single illustration, sells well today in Christiania and Lisbon. Some high school pupil will find this out, sooner or later, in Bloemfontein, and demand that *he* be given "The Scarlet Letter" in *Afrikaans*. You cannot have radio whizzing through the cosmic air, and a reading public that is interested only in the doings of the home town, at the same time. The human mind refuses to be cheated out of its rights.

In this country, the translation campaign is proceeding beautifully. One significant phase of it is that we are reaching out for works that deal with out of the way places. There is Grazia Deledda's "La Madre" adequately translated by Mary G. Steegmann as "The Mother". It is a very brief novel. Before I had read it, my wife read it one evening between late dinner and early retiring, and she stopped once while reading it to nurse the very infant Erik. It is indeed so short that the publisher has had the translator write a "translator's note" and repeat the same material in a "translator's preface".

The first remark my wife made after finishing the book was this: "How strange that that Catholic priest in that little village should have found it unbecoming and improper to have a mirror. He was not supposed to realize that he had a body." This is one real lesson, so far as translations are concerned, to be drawn from this novel: it familiarizes us with the customs of a hamlet in Sardinia and is fascinating to us on this very account. A novel that dealt with an exclusively Catholic theme, and which laid the entire action in Rome, might have a hard road to travel if it wished to reach the goal of success in the United States in 1924; for we know Rome. That we wish to know Nuoro is to our credit, of course, but there is an explanation: the world's writers are making an attempt, and a fairly successful one, to discover the world; and we wish to read the *communiqués*. If flights to the North Pole become feasible and reasonably frequent within five years, within ten years someone will have written a bit of fiction based on life up there. And even if this creation be not wholly "convincing and convicting", it matters not what language it may be written in, it will soon be translated into nine other languages, and possibly into ten, for Hungarian is no mean tongue on its own account.

"The Mother" is a love story in a dual sense: a son who is loved by his mother, and who has been enabled to take a course of study leading to the priesthood, falls in love with a girl. What is he to do? What is to be done? Shall he follow his mother or Agnes? At the end of the book, we have the close of a church service, conducted by Paul. Agnes is present; so is the mother. Overcome with grief, dread, anguish, fear lest Agnes ruin her son at the climax of his career, the mother sinks from her seat and dies in the nave of her son's church. Will they marry now? Paul says not.

The translator states that the book is written "without offence to any creed or opinion". The assurance is so superfluous that it is almost annoying. She states too that the book "touches on no questions of either doctrine or Church government". The observation is not wholly correct. But the novel—*or* rather the short story—is abundantly able to act as its own

defence. It is as deserving and intriguing a bit of writing on this subject as it has been my pleasure to take up since I first became acquainted, in rough outline and through the medium of an old collection of tales, with the affair of Abelard and Heloïse. But in making this statement I am neither trying to show up a source nor draw a comparison.

The American-Scandinavian Foundation, which is doing as much in the interests of good translations as any other body of men and women on the American continent, has now published twenty-two volumes of Scandinavian Classics, "The Poetic Edda" constituting the last two volumes, in one, of this admirable series. It is the greatest, that is, the most pretentious publication they have thus far brought out. Indeed this rendering of the "Edda" is *the* translation of the season so far as fiction in the form of poetry is concerned. Mr. Bellows has not only done his work well; he has done it excellently; he has done what should have been done long ago; he has done what many other men have promised, or threatened, to do but never did; and he has done more than merely translate the "Edda": he has arranged it in readable form, given all the variants, explained the dark if not gloomy passages, set forth its genesis, discussed its relation to similar works in other literatures, supplied it with notes, provided it with introductions, shown how the queer terms should be pronounced, told who the characters are —and in this way and for this reason has at last done what need never be done again. Part translations into English of the "Edda" have existed before. This one is complete: it is scholarly without being dull; thorough without being tedious.

There is one point however regarding it which should be made, for this great work will be read by many folks whose notion as to how this kind of work is done is not so sound as it might be. Had Henry Adams Bellows (his scholarship is so seasoned and his reputation so fixed that what may seem like a slight or even mean poke cannot harm him) gone to the original manuscripts, laid them before him, and then given the work he has given us, unaided, unguided, uninfluenced and uninspired, this would be the most captivating, most impressive, most important bit of scholarship, and the most truly remarkable bit of poetic translation that has ever been done in this country, barring none, from Longfellow and Francis James Childs down to the latest comers.

What Mr. Bellows has done, however, what it has been his rare privilege to do, has been to enjoy the cumulative research of a long line of illustrious scholars who have gone before, and to offer to the English reading world a finished product. And, wise in his own modesty, he consumes two pages at the very outset, and still more pages later on, in listing the men to whom his indebtedness has been extreme. Nor is he afraid to employ strong adjectives. He speaks of the "excellent translation" by Olive Bray (1908); of the "admirable translation" by Hugo Gering (1892); of the "competent translations in both Norwegian and Swedish"; of the "admirable translation" (recent) by Genzmer with the "excellent notes" by Andreas Heusler. He even catalogues the "partial translations" from the French. In one single paragraph he notes twenty three scholars—nearly all Germans—who have labored on various phases of the "Edda" and thereby made his monumental work a

matter of selecting and editing rather than of original interpretation and explanation. But the fact remains that he has gone over all this material and weighed it in his own balance, and he who would claim to find him himself wanting would have to be either a reactionary wiseacre, or a shark for sun spots. Henry Adams Bellows has given us a final and really poetic translation of "The Poetic Edda", and it is the most important body of writing that has been preserved to us from the distant but distinguished past of those mighty peoples whom—in default of a term that might be more pleasing to those Americans whose biting average is a hundred—we call the *Germanic* peoples. Of them we are one. Richard Wagner was another. And had he had Bellows's translation rather than the academic one done by the Grimms and their colleagues he might have made even more out of his "Ring of the Nibelungs".

One stanza—it is from "Alvismol" or "Ballad of Alvis"—has to do with the Ocean, with the Atlantic let us say. A question has arisen as to how it is referred to. The quatrain runs:

"Sea" men call it, gods "The Smooth-Lying",
"The Wave" is it called by the Wanes;
"Eel-Home" the giants, "Drink-Stuff" the elves,
For the dwarfs its name is "The Deep".

Apropos of what has been said of the originality of Mr. Bellows's work, the footnote he writes in this connection is illuminating:

Drink-Stuff: Gering translates the word thus; I doubt it, but can suggest nothing better.

This is to say, Mr. Bellows found it impossible to improve on his predecessor, Herr Gering. To do a piece of work of this kind, it is no longer necessary to be able to read and understand the original, Old Norse or Icelandic in this case. All you have to do is to be able to read German. Point No. 1. This is a great piece of "scholarship" Mr. Bellows has turned out; were he a candidate for a professorship his already appointed and anointed colleagues would secure one for him on the basis of this work. But it requires more scholarly and critical acumen to decide today whether Anker Larsen's prize novel "The Philosopher's Stone" is a work of enduring literature, than it does to do what Mr. Bellows has done here. Yet you will never get the brethren to see it that way; you can't even make trustees see it. Point No. 2. It was only a short while ago that the proverb, "Translators are Traitors" (it was expressed in Italian in which language the two nouns are nearly the same), was accepted at par. It is no longer true. Translators nowadays hunt hard and intelligently for the right word. They are no longer "convicted" traitors; they are, potentially at least, "convincing" treaty makers. Point No. 3.

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The Mother. By Grazia Deledda. Translated from the Italian by Mary G. Steegmann. The Macmillan Co.

The Poetic Edda. Translated from the Icelandic with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Adams Bellows. Two Volumes in One. The American-Scandinavian Foundation.