

THE LYRICAL POEMS OF HUGO VON HOFMANNSTHAL. Translated from the German, with an introduction, by Charles Wharton Stork. Yale University Press; \$1.25.

Those who have long known the work of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and have admired in him the most distinguished poet of the German language writing in this generation, will naturally be intrigued by this translation of his lyric poems. Their curiosity, however, as to how much of the original elixir can be transferred to new bottles will perhaps be greater than any hope of testing in their own tongue, or of sharing with friends unversed in the German, those delights which have intoxicated them. For this Austrian poet shares with William Butler Yeats a style which is so elaborately elusive and in which, as is of course the case with all unrealistic writers, the sound is so infinitely more important than the sense, that to translate his verses is clearly a work in which scholarship and even real literary ability cannot avail much. More than ever will the easy sounding word "translation" strike one as ironic when "re-creation" is so obviously the task set. With some hesitation, therefore, we open this English version by Charles Wharton Stork. Turning to perhaps the most striking stanza of one of Hofmannsthal's most powerful poems, we read:

From the weariness of forgotten peoples
Vainly would I liberate mine eyelids,
Or would keep my startled soul at distance
From the silent fall of far-off planets.

and to the closing stanza of another characteristic piece:

What boots it much to have seen the while we roam?—
And yet he sayeth much, who "Evening" saith.
A word whence deep and solemn meanings run
Like heavy honey from the hollow comb.

Mr. Stork here shows himself to be a poet and not unworthy the high task he has essayed. Of course all the verses in this book are not equally well rendered, and to those who know the original there must often be in these tortured English words a ridiculous anticlimax. But Hofmannsthal himself, like Homer, is not without his bare spots and to even so gifted a translator we must pardon some failures.

The volume contains an introduction by Mr. Stork, in which he analyzes Hofmannsthal and

his work. With a large part of this analysis one is not able to agree. For the chief point which Mr. Stork makes, and which indeed he recurs to again and again, is that Hofmannsthal is essentially a philosophical poet, indeed primarily a philosopher. "His interest in a given idea, scene, or personality is only for the purpose of arriving at some philosophical conclusion." Mr. Stork even goes so far as to deny Hofmannsthal any emotional intensity whatever. This theory would make of our poet a mere retailer of what Mr. Stork calls "universal truths," a retailer whose talent it is to swathe these nude entities in the flowered damask of sensuous charm. All this strikes one as the exact opposite of the case. If we find philosophical ideas in Hofmannsthal—as indeed where do we not find them?—we perceive that he uses them precisely as he does his dolphins and his Tritons; that is, as tools with which to get an artistic effect. Ideas, as they always should be in art, are a means, not an end. If we do not get "the ring of ordinary human feeling," that is because, as Hofmannsthal himself said to Mr. Stork, he writes for those very few whom only the intensely refined can satisfy.