A New Translation of The Bhagavad-Gita

THE BHAGAVAD GITA. Translated by Arthur W. Ryder. 139 pp. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. $2.

By CHARLES JOHNSTON

AT the beginning of October, 1784, when the cold season was drying up the mists of the greater rains, Warren Hastings was in the ancient towered city of Benares. Though he had already been censured by the House of Commons, he was seeking to extract from Raja Chait Sing of Benares uncounted ransoms to fill the insatiate maw of the tyrannous East India Company. At the same time he was fulfilling a task more spiritual and more enduring. He was commending to his superiors the first translation of the "Bhagavad Gita" by Charles Wilkins in an introduction which is the foundation stone of Oriental studies in the Western world. That excellent version, made nearly a century and a half ago, plays a vital part in the literary history of America. Emerson steeped himself in its soaring thought, recommending it enthusiastically to his readers and friends and, among others, to Thoreau, who took the book with him and studied it on the Sunday and Monday of the "Week" on the two New England rivers—which he did not, however, liken to the Ganges and Jumna, as he did not see in his own Concord meadows a spiritual battlefield such as was Kurukshetra.

When Arthur Ryder undertook to add one to the many versions of the most notable of Indian scriptures, he had first to face the problem of form. The book itself is in verse, and forms a stage of the great war of the "Mahabharata," which has been called the "Iliad of India." In the original there are two forms of verse: the first is a sixteen-syllabled meter, which has a swing something like the meter of the old English ballads:

Of fifteen hundred Englishmen,
Went home but fifty-three:
The rest were slaine in Chevy-Chace
Under the greene wood tree. . . .

an apt enough measure to record the wholesale slaughter of the Indian epic. Indeed, this same meter had commended itself to George Chapman when he was making the version of the "Iliad" which won the love of Shakespeare and of Keats:

Achilles' baneful wrath resound,
O Goddess, that inspired
Infinite sorrows on the Greeks,
And many brave souls loosed
From hearts heroic. . . .

And three generations back Dean Milman translated another part of the great Sanskrit poem, the story of Nala and Damayanti, into ballad verse.

Arthur Ryder had, therefore, excellent precedent in selecting the traditional measure of the English ballad for his version of the "Bhagavad Gita," the greater part of which runs in a similar, though slightly longer and more sonorous rhythm. But at moments of great dignity, beauty and pathos the Sanskrit meter changes, taking the form that may be illustrated by the lines:

Lord, Thou canst help when earthly armour faileth;
Lord, Thou canst save when deadly sin assaileth. . . .

Edwin Arnold, in the days when he was writing "The Light of Asia," still the best history of Buddha, and translating the Upanishad which he called "The Secret of Death," and which, in a yet earlier prose version, was well known to Emerson, made an excellent verse translation of the "Bhagavad Gita," with the title "The Song Celestial," and he consistently follows the changes of meter in his original, with fine results. Let us defy the proverb and make a comparison, taking a famous passage from the first great speech of the divine Krishna, in Book II.

Charles Wilkins renders the passage thus:

Thou grievest for those who are unworthy to be lamented, whilst thy sentiments are those of the wise men. The wise neither grieve for the dead nor the living. I myself never was not, nor thou, nor all the princes of the earth; nor shall we ever hereafter cease to be * * *

This is in the sixteen-syllabled meter. A little later, the rise in dramatic intensity is expressed in the more sonorous measure. Wilkins renders the passage thus:

As a man throweth away old garments, and putteth on new, even so the soul, having quitted its old mortal frames, entereth into others which are new * * *

We get the transition from the shorter to the longer measure in Edwin Arnold:

Who knoweth it exhaustless, self-sustained,
Immortal, indestructible—shall such
Say, "I have killed a man, or caused to kill"?
Nay, but as when one layeth
His worn-out robes away,
And, taking new ones, sayeth,
"These will I wear today!"
So putteth by the spirit
Lightly its garb of flesh,
And passeth to inherit
*A residence afresh * * **

Let us now take a part of the same speech from Arthur Ryder's new version:

If the red slayer think he slays,
The slain think he be slain,
They err: the slayer vainly kills;
*The victim dies in vain * * **
Even as a man will cast aside
His tattered garments, taking
New vesture, so the body's lord,
Old, tattered forms forsaking,
Endues himself with fresh attire
*In forms of newer making * * *.*

Arthur Ryder is in Emerson's debt for the first phrase, by which the sage of Concord rendered a verse that the "Gita" borrowed from "The Secret of Death." Without seeking to hold the scales of absolute justice, one may say that Edwin Arnold marks more clearly the significant swing into the more majestic rhythm, but that Arthur Ryder renders more accurately and consistently the wording of the Sanskrit. Indeed, even for those who know his skillful translation of the "Panchatantra," with its blended prose fables and sententious verse, there is cause for sustained admiration in his close adherence to the text, while writing fluent verse, with the added burden of rhyme from which the original is free.

The "Bhagavad Gita" has an inner complexity which must have tasked the translator to the utmost. It is no mere section of a longer poem of adventure and war, but a subtilely worked out allegory of the spiritual warfare of mankind, comparable, therefore, to Bunyan's "Holy War." The poet, or poets, whose work it is, depicted the aspiration of the soul toward the Oversoul, the human toward the Divine, the exile toward the immemorial Home. The words of the Blessed One represent, first, the whispered intuitions of the inner spirit, the "internal Master," to adopt the phrase of a Christian mystic; these intuitions gather strength and rise to the full voice of inspiration.

But this is not all. In the Sanskrit poem there is complexity within complexity. Three sides of the human spirit, intuition, intellect, devotion, had expressed themselves in India in three great philosophical schools, which, as time passed, had tended to become rivals, sometimes adversaries. The authors of the "Bhagavad Gita" set themselves to reconcile these three schools, seeking thereby to establish a like inner harmony among the three powers of the spiritual man. Arthur Ryder sees these complexities clearly, and it is the great merit of his fine version that, while doing them full justice, he at the same time preserves the even tenor of the poem, and gives full expression to its dramatic unity.