

LAURENCE BINYON ON TRANSLATING

By CYRIL CLEMENS

OVER the years, until his death in 1943, it was my pleasure to correspond with the noted English poet and Orientalist, Laurence Binyon. During the final years of his life Binyon undertook the translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and the very year of his death he wrote me the following fascinating and most illuminating account of his methods of translating, wherein he discourses so beautifully of his reasons for making a new translation, although he expresses admiration for the work already done in this field by Henry Francis Cary (who died in 1844) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

A few details about Binyon will be in order. He was born at Lancaster, England, August 10, 1869. He was educated at St. Paul's School and Trinity College, Oxford (Newdigate Prize, 1890; Honorary Fellow, 1933). He married Cicely Margaret Powell in 1904, and had three daughters. He served from 1893 to 1895 as assistant in the department of printed books of the British Museum and then was transferred to the museum's department of prints and drawings where he served most of his life, becoming in 1913 chief of Oriental works. In 1933 he visited the United States as Lowell Lecturer at Harvard University, and remained for a year as Charles Eliot Norton Professor of Poetry. In 1940, he was Byron Professor at the University of Athens, and earlier (1929) delivered a notable series of lectures on English poetry in Japan. In 1933, he was president of the English Association.

In addition to all this activity, he produced many books of poetry which gained him a secure place among the modern English poets. Among his publications are:

Lyric Poems, 1894, *Poems*, 1895, *London Visions*, 1895, 1898, *The Praise of Life*, 1896, *Porphyryion and Other Poems*, 1898, *Odes, 1900*, *The Death of Adam*, 1903, *Penthesilea*, 1905, *Paris and Penone*, 1906, and *Attila*, 1907. He also wrote a number of admirable works on art, including *Painting in the Far East*, 1908, and *The Drawings and Engravings of William Blake*, 1922, compiled a monumental catalogue of English drawings in the British Museum, and of course, published his translation of Dante, in three installments, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. Always adverse to publicity, Laurence Binyon has never received as much recognition as he deserves.

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Dear Cyril Clemens:

More than twenty year ago, at the time of the Dante Sixcentenary, it occurred to me one day to try my hand at translating a piece from the Divine Comedy. I wished to see what I could make of the *terza rima* in English. The difficulty of it fascinated; and after attempting favorite episodes here and there, I was led on to translate the *Inferno* and gradually, though at first I had no such intention, I completed a version of the *Purgatorio*, and finally, in this last summer, of the *Paradiso*.

Why persevere in a task so long and so arduous, when there are several translations already in the field? Why, one might answer, do people go on climbing mountains? and why do the most difficult peaks attract the most? Apart from any question of success or failure, the long labor has been to me both an absorbing pleasure and a fortifying discipline. But also, as has been said, each regeneration requires, or at any rate can bear with, a fresh translation of the great enduring classics, such as Dante and Homer. Cary's version, for instance, which still enjoys no little prestige, probably won all the more readers for Dante in his own time because it was adapted to the taste of that time. It gave a fundamentally false idea of Dante's versification and vocabulary; yet this was a deliberate choice, and no doubt was approved by his audience. A different kind of translation is wanted today.

Here arises one of the cardinal problems of verse translation. Is the translator to observe, or try to observe, a complete fidelity to the text of the original, neither adding nor omitting? Or should he, after mastering the sense of a passage, re-cast it in his own style, or in a style which he thinks will make it more congenial to English readers? Browning's *Agamemnon* is an instance of the first solution, Gilbert Murray's translation from the Greek tragedians of the second. But I am sure that there is no one ideal way; all depends on the character of the original poem. There will be little lost by translating a poet, Byron for instance, whose style is loose and flowing, with considerable freedom. But of all poets Dante is the most precise; his detail is minute, every word counts; he is not rhetorical, he is never merely decorative. Therefore the closer one can get to his wording and to his meaning, the better. But to reproduce the 'sense'; as it is called, is not enough: by no means enough. The full meaning of a poem resides not only in the dictionary sense of the

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words, but in the sound, the cadence, the rhythm. And here we are faced by another problem: the choice of metre.

Cary probably argued that, since the *Commedia* has the rank, if not the character, of an epic, and since Milton is the supreme model for epic in English, the Miltonic style was the one to choose, and the metre should therefore be blank verse. Granted the premise, Cary did his work well. With fine scholarship, with much resource in language, the style is consistent and sustained. But it gives no equivalent to the special beauty of Dante's *terza rima*, one of the supreme metrical inventions in the world of poetry.

Longfellow's version—with Cary's, the best known—keeps the structure of Dante's metre, which consists of closed stanzas of three lines each, peculiarly fitted as a vehicle for Dante's matter, his terseness and often abrupt translations. But Longfellow discards the triple rhyme, which gives the verse its continuity of movement. The ear, or at any rate my ear, is continually balked and disappointed by the absence of the rhymes. Longfellow's version is wonderfully faithful to the sense of the original, it is as close and accurate as a prose translation can be; but as an almost necessary consequence, it is poor in rhythm, monotonous in its movement, and rather flat in its diction.

Longfellow no doubt, and perhaps Cary too, shied at the difficulty of rhyming. It is true that English is poor in rhymes, compared with the abundance in Italian. But this paucity has been exaggerated. Assiduous labor and search are indeed necessary, if one is to avoid contortions of syntax and a strained use of words,—always the danger in any verse-translation—but though, to get the rhymes, some sacrifice is necessary, the discarding of them is, in my view, a greater sacrifice.

One reason which has been given by some translators and critics for not attempting the *terza rima* is that it is held to be an un-English metre. This is a prejudice which has arisen, I think, from the fact that, though quite a number of English poets have used it, they have almost all used it ill. They have neglected the stop or pause at the end of each three-line stanza, and thus broken the contour of the verse and made of it something different and inferior. The metre has been blamed for what is really due to laziness and lack of artistry in the writers.

Of course the metre, as Dante used it, is un-English, though not more so than other metres imitated from Italian or French models. It is un-English in the sense that it demands, for its right and full effect, qualities which are all too rare in English verse. Our poetry is full of splendour, energy, imagination; but,

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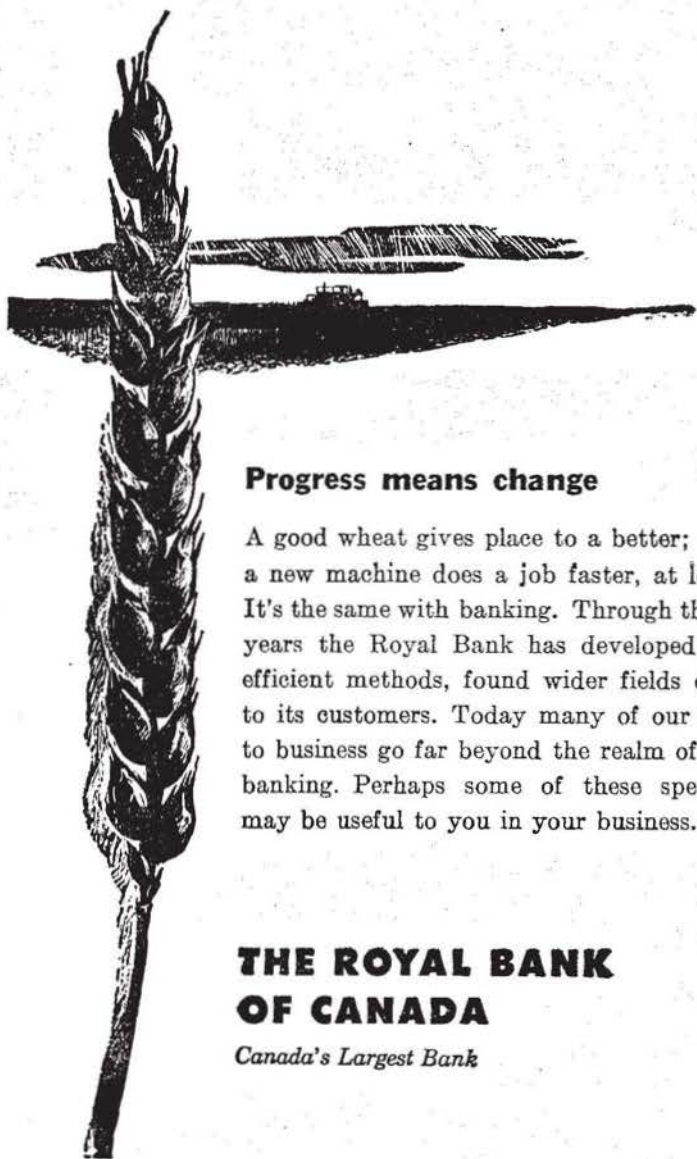
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on the side of art, how indulgent we are to haste and carelessness, to slovenly syntax, to infirmity of structure! It is because Dante is so strong where our poets, especially the great Romantics, are weak; because of the passionate intensity which pervades his masterpiece, combined with the architectural grandeur of the whole; because of a precision alike of thought and of language, which allows of no vagueness anywhere; because of the profound conviction behind every word;—it is because of all this that familiarity with the *Commedia* is for an English poet a corrective discipline and an enriching example, such as no other poetry can give. And though to translate Dante is, in a sense, impossible, yet to attempt it is an inspiring adventure; and I am persuaded that if it be attempted, the only medium that can give some idea, however imperfect, of the formal splendour of his poem is his own superb metre.

The triple rhyme has, of course, been used by several modern translators. If I may say a word about my own version, I might claim to have paid more attention than others to the character of the rhythm. Since in Italian so many words end with a vowel, elision can be very freely employed; and this enables Dante to get more syllables in a line than would otherwise be possible. This produces an effect of *volume*, which I have tried to produce by extending a little further Milton's practice of frequent elision, a practice followed notably by Swinburne in his blank verse. I have also, for the sake of sonority and variety, played rather freely—perhaps, for some tastes, too freely—on the normal 'iambic' movement of the verse, shifting the stresses, as Dante often does, and so varying the metrical pattern. I feel that this question of rhythm is more important than has usually been realized.

Yours sincerely,

LAWRENCE BINYON.



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By FRANKLIN MORRIS

ENGLISH was an almost foreign tongue in the early days of Quebec, before Canada was ceded to the British, and to organize an English-speaking church in the town of Montreal was an innovation. A group of British merchants and military people called the Rev. John Ogilvie to serve as rector of those who desired the services of the Church of England. This was in 1760, and when, four years later, the military garrison at Montreal came to an end, he returned to New York. As successor, a French-speaking Swiss, the Rev. David Chalbrand Delisle, was appointed in the hope of promoting harmony and understanding between the French and British residents of Montreal-town.

A chapel of the Franciscan Recollet Fathers was, with their kind permission, used for a number of years as the home of the English services. Later, by the Royal Proclamation establishing Quebec as a British Province it was enacted that, although the Jesuits and Recollets were to enjoy the benefits of their properties for the remainder of their lives, they were to receive no new members and when the last survivor died their estates were to pass to the Crown. Under this ruling, it happened that the Protestant congregation petitioned the Governor, Lord Dorchester, in 1789, and were granted the chapel. By this time, the number of those desiring English services had greatly increased, for the influx of Loyalists who had left the "United States" because of the Revolution had greatly swelled the little congregation.

Bishop Inglis visited Montreal in 1789 and at his suggestion the name of Christ Church was conferred upon the congregation. His exciting history is of interest, for the early days of America were stormy ones. On his ordination at London in 1758 Charles Inglis was appointed as missionary in Dover, Pennsylvania (now in Delaware). Later he went to Trinity Church, New York, and served there many years. However, his zealous adherence to the Loyalist cause resulted in his being declared guilty of high treason by the New York Assembly of October 1779. His property was seized, and he was banished on pain of death. He returned to England, but it was not long before he set out again, this time for Nova Scotia in 1787 and thus become the first Anglican Bishop of any overseas diocese in the Empire.

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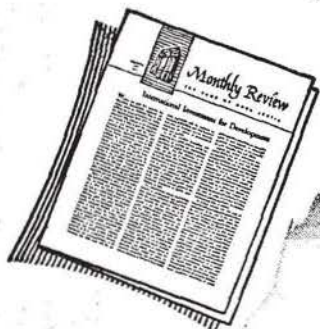
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ed and dedicated, the officiating minister at the time being George Jehosaphat Mountain. Although a Bishop of Montreal was appointed in 1836, the actual Diocese of Montreal did not officially come into existence until 1850. With the creation of the Diocese in that year, Queen Victoria issued Letters Patent naming Francis Fulford as its Bishop. At the same time the Queen proclaimed that the Town of Montreal should henceforth be a City, and "the Parish Church called Christ Church in the said City of Montreal shall henceforth be the Cathedral Church." A handsome stone monument to the memory of Bishop Fulford, Montreal's first bishop, stands on the Cathedral grounds.

On a December night in 1856 the classical cathedral on Notre Dame Street was entirely destroyed by fire and once more the congregation set themselves to the task of building a new church. After lengthy discussion, it was decided to build on the present site, though many objected to a location so far removed into the fields and away from what was then the residential section of the city. The present building was completed in 1859 and with its furnishings and the ground upon which it stands, cost \$205,000, a large sum to be raised in those days. Nonetheless, by 1867 the debt had been entirely paid off, and the edifice was consecrated by the Metropolitan, Bishop Fulford, assisted by American Bishops Johns of Virginia, Whitehouse of Illinois and Neely of Maine, among others. In recent years the building has undergone some rather extensive renovations, and the spire, which is 230 feet in height, was rebuilt of specially cast aluminum in 1940.

The beautiful marble altar and reredos, a memorial to those members who gave their lives in the War of 1914-18, is intricately carved and a delight to worshippers. The mensa of the altar is of marble from Canterbury, and in its center are inlaid nine stones in the form of a cross, including stones from the Anglican Cathedral of St. George the Martyr in Jerusalem, the ancient Church of the Holy Sepulchre built over the garden tomb of St. Joseph of Arimathea, from Calvary, the Mount of Lives, and from the Catacombs in Rome. Also inlaid are stones from the Hill of Armagh, Ireland, where in A.D. 445 St. Patrick built his church and monastery, and from the Island of Iona, where in A.D. 563 St. Columba raised his church, and from the oldest section of the monastery built at Canterbury in A.D. 603 by St. Augustine and his monks.

The figure groups at the base of the reredos portray, from left to right: The Annunciation, the Visit of the Magi, the Baptism of Christ, the Crucifixion, the Entombment, the Resur-



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rection and the Ascension. The seven figures above represent, from left to right: St. George, the patron saint of England; St. Martin of Tours (on whose day in 1918 the Armistice was signed); St. Lawrence (on whose day in 1535 Jacques Cartier entered the St. Lawrence River for the first time); Our Lord in Glory; St. John the Baptist, patron saint of Canada; St. Nicholas of Myra, patron saint of sailors; St. Michael the Archangel, the protector of airmen.

The only chapel in Canada of the world-famed Order of St. John of Jerusalem is found in Christ Church Cathedral, and was installed in 1940 as a memorial, occupying the south transept.

As an example of English Gothic architecture in the parish-church style, Christ Church Cathedral in Montreal is almost unparalleled on the American continent. The "rural" location chosen by her builders nearly a century ago is of course no longer rustic, and the Cathedral today serves a city which is a bustling, modern metropolis, a far cry from the town of the days when Christ Church had its genesis. It is one of the fine ecclesiastical buildings of Canada, and a tribute to the vision of Montreal's founding fathers, both British and American.
