

MISCELLANEOUS.

JOHNSTON'S BHAGAVAD GITA.

BY EDWIN W. FAY.

[*Bhagavad Gita*, "*The Songs of the Master*," translated with an Introduction and Commentary by Charles Johnston, Bengal Civil Service, Retired; Indian Civil Service, Sanskrit Prizeman; Dublin University, Sanskrit Prizeman. Published by the author, Flushing, New York, 1908. Professor Lanman would render the title by "The Exalted One's Teachings."]

The general public, so far as the interest of the general public attaches to an ethical poem of the very highest importance, should give a cordial welcome to Mr. Johnston's translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*. No piece of Hindu literature has the same claims on public attention. Historically, Wilkins's translation of this poem (1785) was the first book of Sanskrit literature to be offered to English readers; and the intrinsic merits of "The Lord's Lay" have met with the most competent appreciation. Wilhelm von Humboldt thanked God that he had been permitted to live long enough to meet with this poem, which to his mind satisfied, above every other work, in any language whatsoever, the true and proper conception of a philosophical poem. This praise will not seem exaggerated to careful readers of the present excellent version. As literature, the *Bhagavad Gita* is truly a thing to admire.

The work contains seven hundred stanzas, of the length of our standard Doxology, divided among eighteen cantos of unequal length,—the whole devoted to a discussion of what we of the West feel as the problem of the relation of man to God, of the soul to immortality. The first twenty-seven stanzas paint in the scene, outlining the opposing hosts gathered for fratricidal conflict on the Field-of-Law: Arjuna, leader of the eventually victorious side, turns to Krishna, his charioteer, a Vishnu incarnate, to lament, in the next twenty stanzas, the necessity of any contest at all: why slay, he asks, and why be slain? And for the rest of the poem the talk goes on, touching the deep questions of the soul, but one never loses sight of the stupendous scene of impending battle whereon hangs the fate of dynasties and men. We are held fast as though the dialogue were the still small voice, insistent amid tramp of men, neigh of chargers, clash of arms. The battle can wait, while the hero fights the fight of his soul. It is some broad contrast like this that charms the Western mind. It is as though reflections from the frame threw all their light inward upon the eager, strained face of one at question with his soul,—all unconscious of the illumination, the Correggio-like lime-light—*sit venia verbo*—in which he shines. So real, though, is the dramatic setting that, while we strain toward the drama of the soul—drama still, however quiet—we seem to hear the blasts of the conchs of war.

In the second canto Arjuna again propounds his question, why should I slay, why suffer myself to be slain; and the answer comes in a curiously convincing syllogism: Fear Death? There is no death. Fear Death? All men die. Therefore fight the good fight.

This is not the place to synopsise, book by book, the contents of the Gita, but a word or two on the general problem it presents may not be amiss. Arjuna, with his Hamlet temperament, shrinking from the task and duty that confronts him, cries out in bitterness of soul, "I shrink from the body of this death"; and Krishna gives him, in form fit for an Oriental mind, the comfort of

"Give earth yourself, go up for gain above":—

a comfort somewhat veiled for us folk of the West under the abstractions of "Detachment," "Renunciation," though perhaps not different, in the last analysis, from that other teaching from the East, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world." The means of detachment, or renunciation, is knowledge, soul-vision, consecrated for us in the answer "Only believe." And as an aid to belief, Krishna reveals himself in the eleventh canto as very God, returning afterward to his incarnate form to discourse for the rest of the poem on the practical ethics of renunciation. Renunciation! the alluring aloofness of the Epicurean deities; Renunciation! the dream of the Lotos-Eaters. "There is no joy but calm": it is not this that Krishna teaches, but work and renunciation. "Do the work that is laid on thee, for work is better than ceasing from works. Nor could thy bodily life proceed if thou didst cease from works" (iii. 8). "Giving up attachment to the reward of works, ever content, not seeking boons, though thoroughly wrapped up in work, such a one engages not in work" (iv. 20).

Renunciation! But how elusive is this prescription against wretchedness. Here and there, once or twice in a lifetime, we meet with elect souls that have attained unto calm, and all the world admires, asking if there be a road by which another may travel to that goal. And one answers, "by work for others"; and one says, "by love"; and this one and that one seek to reveal "the Christian's secret of a happy life." And all the recipes are so simple till we come to try them. Best recipe of all, for us, is "Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. . . Take no thought for the morrow." But who can, by willing, cease to take anxious thought for the morrow? And if one look at that whole alien race, that dark flotsam and jetsam eddy in our midst, whom we of another descent call shiftless and improvident and trifling, so regardless are they of the morrow, one may well wonder whether he understands aright that seeming simple direction of our Faith, "Take no thought for the morrow;" or whether,—his understanding being right,—his heart has wandered, with our race ideals, far from God. Krishna, also, in the Bhagavad Gita finds a way to say, "Take no thought": "As the unwise work, attached to their work, so let the wise man work detached, working for the order of mankind" (iii. 25). This too is a path to happiness if we could, after gaining it, maintain the will to follow it to the end. But it is not an essentially different way from the way of Buddhism; and the restless *Intransigents* among us, who would travel by a Hindu path, may well ponder an admonition of Professor Hillebrandt's: "Those, I think, who, unsatisfied with Christianity, are arriving, after long wanderings amid theosophic theories, at the oasis of Buddhism, there to fill

their cups, will, in the long run, be as little refreshed as the people of India have been."

It would be ill treatment of readers of Mr. Johnston's translation not to remind them that what they are reading is a Western interpretation of an Eastern scripture (and the same red light of warning must be placed alongside this comment), but Mr. Johnston's privilege of a long residence in India has given him opportunities for a sympathetic comprehension of the Oriental point of view. We, his readers, may only hope for a faint apprehension, so far is the East from the West in its way of thinking. Yet there is some danger lest our translator has too greatly generalized what is specifically Hindu,—a result attained, among other devices, by rendering the original Sanskrit rather according to the earlier etymological sense of the words, than according to their acquired and semi-technical sense. Taken as it stands, the Gita is an ethico-teleological discussion of sundry tenets of the Sankhya and Yoga philosophies; but our author's interpretation takes the Gita as either prior to the formal development of these tenets, or as an earlier stage in their development. What *yoga* means to him everywhere is union; and union, the re-absorption and involution of the particular "me" in the divine Thou (in Hindu parlance "That"), is an alluring and compelling idea. But the standard interpretation of *yoga*, in consonance with the Yoga philosophy, is rather "preparation" or "devotion"; and the Yogin, the devotee of Yoga, as we historically know him, was one who sought to draw near the divine "That" after the fashion of St. Simeon Stylites. It was from such as he that the Hindu fakir developed. That Mr. Johnston's generalized version means more, and very much more, to us in a spiritual way, there can be no doubt; but it were well for the reader to see how it differs from the current interpretation of Hindu scholars, as exhibited in Telang's translation (*Sacred Books of the East*, Vol. VIII.)

JOHNSTON:

TELANG.

II, 66. "There is no soul-vision for him who is not united, nor is there any divine experience for him; without experience of the divine there is no rest, and what happiness can there be without rest?"

VI, 10. "Let the follower of union, dwelling apart, ever seek union with the Self, standing alone, controlling mind and heart, free from expectation, uncovetous."

"He who is not self-restrained has no steadiness of mind; nor has he who is not self-restrained perseverance in the pursuit of self-knowledge; there is no tranquility for him who does not persevere in the pursuit of self-knowledge; and whence can there be happiness for one who is not tranquil?"

"A devotee should constantly devote his (sic) self to abstraction, remaining in a secret place, alone, with his mind and self restrained, without expectations, and without belongings."

II, 41, Johnston: "The thought whose essence is determination is single. Many-branched and endless are the thoughts of the undetermined."

How different is this rendering, which involves the entire suppression of stanza 39, from either of the following Hindu renderings:

—Dutt: "In this [i. e., the Yoga philosophy?], there is mind's but

one state, consisting of *firm devotion*; whereas undevotional men's minds are many-branched, and attached to endless pursuits."

— Telang: "There is here [i. e., for those who enter on this 'path'], but one state of mind consisting in firm understanding. But the states of mind of those who have no firm understanding are many-branched and endless."

Far be it from this reviewer to assume a knowledge of the Bhagavad Gita equal to Mr. Johnston's. It is clear that the version before us has been very deliberately pondered by a mind competent in point of scholarship as in natural acumen for the task. From the general introduction as well as the special introductions to each book the general reader can but receive illumination. The technical student can but receive stimulus. And if he be, like the reviewer, as touching the special matter of the Bhagavad Gita, but a semi-technical reader, at best, he will reserve for further study the question whether the royal caste of Aryans was, as the author asserts, of Egypto-Chaldee origin, and the farmer-artisan caste a yellow Mongol stock; and he will ask himself whether the explanation of the name of the Sankhya philosophy is as truly, as it is clearly and cleverly, given in the following words (Introd., p. xiii): "First of these great primal powers was that of causation, which we may conceive as the power of number. For, when we count a series of things in number, we imply much more than that they are different. We imply that they are related, and that they follow each other in orderly sequence. The three stages which we call cause, causing, and effect are but one instance of numbering; we think of the second as the result of the first, and the third as the result of the second. . . . From this principle of numbering, the system which sprang from it was called the Sankhya or Number system."

In conclusion, a word to assure the already sore bestead general reader that he may feel every confidence that in perusing this version of the Bhagavad Gita he is getting the best digested and most easily digestible translation accessible. He will be reading a work done into real English, with the help, in the introductions, of a really illuminating commentary; and though he cannot fail to realize the great study and learning on which our author's work is based, he will not find a single pedantic footnote, nor a single citation of authority (alas! for the reviewers), nor any disturbing detritus of unassimilated "apparatus." And though he will find one or two misprints (again for gain, p. 8; Diety for Deity, p. xlvi), the clear and comely print, paper and binding leave nothing to desire.

And for an epilogue, one citation more, as an instance of the universal validity of every great scripture: "Better one's own duty without excellence than the duty of another well followed out" (iii. 35). This aspect of renunciation—a sort of Home-Rule at home—were well worthy of observance (alas! how unobserved) in a government of divided powers like our own.

A VEDANTA CELEBRATION.

The Open Court Publishing Company has in hand the manuscript of Prof. Paul Deussen's voluminous book on the Vedanta, translated from the German original by Charles Johnston, and we hope that it can appear in the course of the coming year. It is the classical exposition of the Brahman Vedanta philosophy, a most painstaking and exhaustive work which will scarcely ever be excelled or antiquated. In our correspondence with Pro-