The Poems of Abraham Cowley by Abraham Cowley; A. R. Waller

Review by: G. C. Macaulay

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pulpit. There is nothing liberal in all this. The reformers offered to tolerate the existence of the stage on condition that it was content to serve a purpose not its own. It rightly refused life upon such terms.

W. W. GREG.

The Poems of Abraham Cowley. Edited by A. R. WALLER (Cambridge English Classics). Cambridge University Press, 1905. 8vo. viii + 467 pp.

The Cambridge University Press is doing a great service to readers of English literature in the publication of this series. We have here in convenient and inexpensive volumes, on good paper and in excellent print, the works of classical English writers faithfully reproduced in the form of their original publication, with no alteration of spelling or punctuation, save in the case of evident misprints, and with every detail of typography—arrangement of title-pages, use of capitals and of italics—carefully preserved. This is the form in which poets should be read, by those at least to whom the original editions themselves are inaccessible. The present volume is one of the most acceptable of the series. Cowley's poems have not hitherto been available in any modern edition except that of Grosart, which can hardly be procured, and in any case is very expensive; and no reader is likely to complain that they are wanting in interest. Moreover Cowley is eminently one whom Cambridge should delight to honour, a genuine student, a true poet, and a faithful lover of his College and of his University, his 'dear Cambridge.' The authors represented in this series of English Classics are not all Cambridge men, but Ascham, Crashaw and Cowley are among those who have already appeared, and Fletcher and Prior among those that are to come. Milton is perhaps forestalled, for Canon Beeching's edition, published by the Oxford Press, is very much upon the same lines as these.

The present volume of Cowley contains all the English poems published in the folio of 1668, except those pieces which are connected with the prose writings; and it is intended to publish in a companion volume the remainder of the contents in prose and verse of the folio of 1668, together with those of Cowley's juvenile writings which were not republished by himself in his collected works, and his English plays. In justice to the author it must be remembered that he protests strongly in his Preface against the republication of the rejected juvenile poems, 'which though they were then looked upon as commendable extravagances in a Boy (men setting a value upon any kind of fruit before the usual season of it), yet I would be loth to be bound now to read them all over my self, and therefore should do ill to expect that patience from others'; and he laments the common fortune of almost all poets, whose works, commonly printed after their deaths, are stuffed

out with worthless additions, 'whether this proceed from the indiscretion of their Friends, who think a vast heap of Stones or Rubbish a better Monument than a little Tomb of Marble, or by the unworthy avarice of some Stationers, who are content to diminish the value of the Author, so may they encrease the price of the Book.'

If we have any fault to find with the arrangement of this edition, it is that it was not found possible to include in the same volume with these poems the *Discourse concerning the Government of Oliver Cromwell* and the *Several Discourses by way of Essays in Verse and Prose*, which form the remainder of the 1668 folio, and in that case the juvenile poems and the plays might perhaps have been left to take care of themselves.

We must not be ungrateful, however. The volume before us is a most charming one, and it may be hoped that it will do something to vindicate the fame of one who has been somewhat unfairly treated by critics. Johnson's *Life of Cowley* is a brilliant piece of criticism, and can hardly be accused of unfairness. He has collected a most amusing list of examples to illustrate the vices of a particular school of poetry. These examples are chiefly taken from Cowley; but they are accompanied by abundant acknowledgment of his excellencies as a poet, and the *Life* concludes with this appreciation: 'It may be affirmed without any encomiastic enthusiasm...that he was the first who imparted to English numbers the enthusiasm of the greater ode and the gaiety of the less; that he was equally qualified for sprightly sallies and for lofty flights; that he was among those who freed translation from servility, and instead of following his author at a distance, walked by his side; and that if he left versification yet improvable, he left likewise from time to time such specimens of excellence as enabled succeeding poets to improve it.' This is much, especially from Johnson: but succeeding writers have usually drawn from the stock of quotations accumulated by Johnson without reproducing his qualifications or his favourable appreciation, and have also failed to notice that the examples are nearly all drawn from one section of Cowley's work, *The Mistress*, with regard to which he himself lets us know that it is not to be regarded as expressing much genuine feeling. His love-poems are, he says, to be regarded as a kind of formality, like that of the pilgrimage to Mecca to which some Mahometans are bound by their order; and we have independent testimony that he was not much given to love-affairs, in spite of his humorous *Chronicle*. Naturally then it is in this department of his work that he is most apt to indulge in frigid conceits and fantastic comparisons, that 'concordia discors' which Addison calls 'mixed wit,' and it is here that he is most markedly under the influence of Donne. Indeed many of the poems in *The Mistress* might well have been written by Donne himself, *The given Heart* for example:

I wonder what those Lovers mean, who say,
They have given their Hearts away.
Some good kind Lover tell me how;
For mine is but a Torment to me now:

(the poem from which Johnson takes his quotation to show that a lover's heart is a hand grenado), and that entitled *The Soul*, beginning 'Some dull Philosopher, when he hears me say.'

Justice has hardly been done in modern times to Cowley's Pindaric Odes. The actual reproductions of Pindar are not called by the author translations; he makes it not so much his aim 'to let the Reader know precisely what he spoke, as what was his way and manner of speaking,' and though Cowley has no doubt sometimes introduced ornaments such as Pindar could not have used, yet at times he has been happy in his additions, as at the beginning of the sixth stanza of the Nemean ode,

How early has young Chromius begun
The Race of Virtue, and how swiftly run,
And born the noble Prize away,
Whilst other youths yet at the Barriere stay!

It is true that by getting rid of the obscurity of connexion he has to some extent altered Pindar's 'way and manner of speaking,' but after all, the lucidity of Cowley's Pindarics is a fault that may well be pardoned. It is manifestly unfair to blame him for not reproducing the strophe and antistrophe, when Milton is not blamed for deliberately rejecting that form in the choruses of *Samson Agonistes*, as 'not essential to the Poem and therefore not material.'

Finally, it may boldly be said that the *Davideis* has been absurdly underrated. It is an unfinished work and therefore cannot be judged as a whole, and the merit of what we have is very unequal; but many portions of it rise to a remarkably high level of excellence: Milton was undoubtedly influenced by it to some extent, and Dryden far more, indeed it was Cowley rather than Waller or Denham who supplied the model of Dryden's heroic couplet, and that not only as regards the occasional use of the alexandrine, as exemplified in the *Davideis* , or of the triplet, as in Cowley's latest work, but still more in the general structure and flow of the verse. We can hardly read any part of the *Davideis* without being reminded of Dryden. Take this passage from near the beginning:

This knew the Tyrant, and this useful thought,
His wounded mind to health and temper brought.
He old kind vows to David did renew,
Swore constancy, and meant his oath for true.
A general joy at this glad news appear'd,
For David all men lov'd, and Saul they fear'd.
Angels and Men did Peace and David love,
But Hell did neither Him nor That approve;
From man's agreement fierce Alarms they take,
And Quiet here does there new Business make.
Beneath the silent chambers of the earth,
Where the Sun's fruitful beams give metals birth,
Beneath the dens where unfletcht Tempests lye,
And infant Winds their tender Voyces try,
Beneath the mighty Ocean's wealthy Caves,
Beneath th' eternal Fountain of all Waves,

Where their vast Court the Mother-waters keep,
 And undisturb'd by Moons in silence sleep,
 There is a place, deep, wondrous deep below,
 Which genuine Night and Horror does o'erflow, &c.

Here we have Dryden's metre and Dryden's rhythm anticipated, both in the more familiar and in the more imaginative style, and Dryden was probably indebted to Cowley ('the darling of my youth') more deeply than in his later age he was quite aware. Cowley in fact was a man of essentially wholesome tastes, with a natural tendency to simplicity and lucidity, who at a certain period contracted the vices of the so-called 'metaphysical' style, but almost wholly shook them off both in his verse and his prose before the end of his career. No other poet serves so well as a link between the first and second halves of the seventeenth century in English literature.

To return to the volume with which the Cambridge Press has presented the public, we will conclude by saying that so far as we have been able to compare it with the original editions it is absolutely accurate, and that it must be a pleasure to every lover of Cowley who does not possess those original editions, to be brought nearer to his author by this scholarly reproduction.

G. C. MACAULAY.

The Poems of John Keats. Edited with an Introduction and Notes by E. DE SÉLINCOURT. London: Methuen and Co., 1905. 8vo. lxxviii + 613 pp.

Mr de Sélincourt's edition of Keats marks an advance in that scientific and faithful treatment of an author's text which is now happily becoming acclimatised in England. It is so good in some ways that we wish it were a perfect edition in all respects, but the failings to which we desire to draw the editor's attention can easily be remedied in the second edition that is certain to be called for.

We are glad to note that Mr de Sélincourt has not followed Mr Buxton Forman 'in altering the spelling of certain words so as to make them fit in with what appears to be Keats's usual form.' Such a procedure is at variance with that absolute fidelity to an author's text which should be an editor's first rule. Why this craze for uniformity? No writer sets forth with a cast-iron rule as to commas and past participles: he often varies his views from year to year; there may be, nay, often is, a historic interest in noticing his inconsistency, and the inconsistency itself may be a part of an author's idiosyncrasy which it is desirable to retain. It is all very well to postulate, as a recent critic has done, that spelling and punctuation are merely matters which the printer's reader has settled for the author from the days of Elizabeth *jusqu'à nos jours*, but, in the absence of any direct evidence to the contrary, we must assume that the author, or his authorised friends,