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The Third Kind of Knowledge: Memoirs and Selected Writings (review)

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Robert Fitzgerald, *The Third Kind of Knowledge: Memoirs and Selected Writings*. Edited by Penelope Laurans Fitzgerald. New York: New Directions, 1993. Pp. xxiii + 279. ISBN 0-8112-1056-1. \$24.95.

Reviewed by John Kirby, Purdue University.

Two generations of readers have now been indebted to Robert Fitzgerald for his landmark translations of Homer, Sophocles, and Vergil. In fact most readers are far likelier to be familiar with these translations than with F.'s original poetry (published in four collections from 1935 to 1971). But the present volume does much to illuminate the fabric of his whole life, and in that light, the separate personae of poet and translator begin to assume more of a synthetic unity.

One of the literary losses that I regret most from classical antiquity -- and I do not suppose that I am alone in this -- is the virtual totality of information regarding the actual composition of the works. For later literature we are much better served; we have a good variorum edition of Yeats, for example, and hardy souls can inspect the autograph ms of Eliot's "Waste Land." But think what it would be like to have, say, Sophocles' *On the Chorus*, or some insight into the process whereby Sappho's *Phainetai moi* became Catullus' *Ille mi par*.

It is in this respect that this new selection of F.'s *scripta minora* is particularly welcome. The selection itself is what is new: aside from the introduction, and (I imagine) the photographs, everything else has been previously published -- much of it in such places as *The New Yorker*, *Antaeus*, and *The Paris Review*. But it is convenient and compendious to have these disparate items collected between the covers of a single volume.

The selections are disposed under four major headings: autobiographical memoirs; notes on contemporary writers -- Agee, Pound, Flannery O'Connor, Vachel Lindsay, and Randall Jarrell; various reflections on Homer, Vergil, and Dante; and (in interview format) thoughts on "The Art of Translation." As I have suggested, what emerges from a reading of the entire collection (including the valuable introduction by his widow, who appears to have edited the volume according to F.'s plan) is a well-rounded view of the man in various phases of his life: his midwestern childhood; the early death of his mother, and tender memories of his invalid father; his years of study in the two Cambridges; his first job as a city reporter, in New York, for the *Herald Tribune*; his acquaintance with major literary coëvals; the stints of teaching in Bloomington and South Hadley. We learn too of the far-reaching effects of alcoholism in his family and friends (5, 43, 92, 102). En passant, we are

treated to sketches of such philological luminaries as Housman (35-6) and Milman Parry (44-5).

But most fascinating to me is the picture of F. at work, whether in translation

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Early on he had vowed that he would not under any circumstances rush the translation of the *Odyssey*, and he did not. He began by painstakingly writing out the Greek in big ledger notebooks, using the dictionary and making decisions about obscure passages as he went along. After that it was a matter, as he said, "of hurling myself at the expanse of Greek every morning, and maybe writing below the Greek lines tentative versions of the English verse which could later be typed up and worked on as drafts ... there were innumerable drafts." The venture took six years ... (xv; cf. 270-1)

or on his own verse:

In those days what I believed in and conceived, in spite of everything, to be my calling was the making of poems. And I had one underway, a movement that my ear had given me, perhaps under the spell of all the music -- one that demanded a certain length. I had never composed anything remotely of that length. It was possibly the most important thing in the world. (57)

And the plate opposite p. 164 is a photograph of F.'s worksheet for translating *Iliad* 3.1-9.

Another notable aspect of this volume is the way in which it throws into relief F.'s vivid and poetic prose-style:

Sand and rock, burning to the feet or wetted with foaming water, dune grass that seemed to cut and barnacles that did, profusions of seaweed streaming, crabs in the shallows moving in a slantwise silent scuttle -- these took the place of the hot odorous grape arbors, bitter bark, cool roots and loam, the caterpillars and grasshoppers and ants of backyard play in the Midwest. (7)

It was as though the world had been made, or remade, in that instant: space, light, surfaces, bodies, all breathless with coming-to-be. Everything had become pure spectacle, subject to an unformulated but dazzling question: why all this, instead of nothing at all? (28)

The very name of Tiffany's had an expensive sheen or nap: a name of chased silver. (40)

Much water has flowed under the bridge of scholarship since the first appearance of F.'s essays on Homer ("Generations of Leaves" and "Postscript to a Translation of the *Odyssey*"), but they still bear rereading -- not just for his incisive observations on (e.g.) oral composition, archaic performance-practice, the relationship of *Iliad* to *Odyssey*, Penelope's (sub-)conscious awareness of Odysseus' identity, the authorship of *Odyssey* 24, or the status of women in the world of epic, but also - - perhaps especially -- for his remarks on the verbal music of the Greek poetry. This sort of sensitivity, coupled with stylistic felicity in his/her own tongue, is what lends the astute translator the special power to achieve elegance, force, or sublimity in the version, wherever the original evinces such traits. In this regard, F.'s *Odyssey* is comparable to Mandelbaum's.

In all, then, an engaging, sometimes moving, collection of essays, at a price that is (these days) fairly modest for a well-made clothbound book. The page-layout is clear and readable. I noted the following printing errors: on p. xxii, "over the Crete" should read "over to Crete"; 14, "The words <that> concluded"; 14, "triangular" is misspelt; 44, "quick<l>y"; 121, "O'Con<n>or"; 174, "suitsors<>"; 190, "Klytainnestra[s]." On p. 38, "expectance" is an archaic form but should probably be allowed to stand.

A word on the curious title is perhaps in order. Taken from an essay first published in *The Atlantic Monthly* for June 1980, it refers to F.'s attempt, as a philosophy student in England, to bring his own rapturous cognition of the phenomenal universe into some kind of alignment with Spinoza's notion of *scientia intuitiva*:

Beginning in boyhood, on a Sunday walk in winter, I had had to distinguish between ordinary experience, including that of the senses, mind, and imagination -- almost all, in short -- and extraordinary experience, a kind that was rare, unwilled, *sui generis*, and superior. It came without any particular warning or preparation. It was as though everything waked up, as though everything drugged into somnolence by its own memory of being itself suddenly lost that memory and merely incredibly existed. (36)

F. later thought the analogy to Spinoza misbegotten. In fact this sounds to me more like what the psychologist Abraham Maslow has termed the "peak-experience" (see e.g. chapter 6 of his *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Princeton 1962). But no matter, because in the telling of it we get an intimate glimpse of F.'s cognitive processes, and -- if we are lucky enough to be as vigorously, as lustily alive as he was -- a mirror of our own.