ROBINSON ELLIS

1834–1913

Robinson Ellis was born at Barming in Kent. His father was a landowner with large interests in the hop trade, and at one time a man of considerable fortune. His mother, whose family name was Robinson, is referred to in Keats's letters as a friend of Fanny Brawne. He was educated at Elizabeth College, Guernsey, and subsequently at Rugby. He gained a Balliol Scholarship and went to Oxford in 1852. In 1854 he obtained a First Class in Moderations; in 1855 the Chancellor's Prize for Latin Verse and the Ireland Scholarship; in 1856 a First Class in Litterae Humaniores; in 1858 the Boden Sanskrit Scholarship and a Fellowship at Trinity. He was given rooms in Trinity on the Common Room staircase, looking out on the Bursary Gardens, which he tenanted for fifty-five years.

Mr. Raper, whose memory goes back to the time when Ellis was a young Fellow, says that he was then chiefly interested in the literary aspect of the classics. He was considered to be a very good lecturer, and was especially skilful as a translator. He was fond of lecturing on Virgil, and used to illustrate the author by apt quotations from English literature. In later life Ellis's interest in literature waned, but he always remained a consummate master of English. He had the gift of choosing the right word and expressing his meaning with the utmost exactitude. He was an admirable letter-writer, and his testimonials were a work of art.

Before any attempt is made to describe the work of Robinson Ellis, it is necessary to mention his life-long infirmity. He was very short-sighted, and refused to wear glasses, which, he said, gave him headache. Also, his eyes were very weak, and he could only read for short periods. At one time he consulted a number of oculists, but did not obtain any permanent relief. Artificial light was always bad for him, and he generally employed a reader in the evenings. He seldom, if ever, saw any one in the street, but he never failed to recognize a voice. His bad sight must always be borne in mind. There is no doubt that he sometimes made errors in his collations, but it is marvellous that he was able to do so much. Also, his absent-mindedness and his tendency to indulge in subtle interpretations were largely due to the fact that he saw so little of the world.

Ellis became famous in connexion with his work upon Catullus. His interest in the author dates from 1859, when he formed the plan

of writing a commentary. He soon, however, became engrossed by a study of the text, and he resolved to produce a critical edition. He seems to have derived his stimulus from Lachmann's investigation into the arrangement of the archetype. Also, he was struck by the fact that no Oxford scholar had as yet edited Catullus. In 1862 he collated the Paris MS. (*G*), and in 1863 six Italian MSS. Also, he collated at Oxford the Bodleian MS. (*O*), the use of which marked a new era in the criticism of Catullus. In 1866 he published a small edition, in which he spoke of the larger work which was shortly to appear. In the preface to this he chiefly dealt with the distribution of the poems in strophes, and in his text prefixed to them a σχῆμα κατ' ἀριθμόν. He published a number of conjectures, some of which exhibit that combination of recondite learning and subtle fancy in which he afterwards excelled. The only MS. which he quotes is Lachmann's *Datanus*.

The larger edition, which appeared in 1867, gave a full collation of *O*. The high merit of this MS. was first seen by Bährens. Ellis had said that it was a fourteenth-century MS., and therefore, if not the oldest MS., next in antiquity to *G* (written in 1375): he did not, however, claim any special importance for it, and spoke highly of some late fifteenth-century MSS. The fact is that, although in the Preface to his *Noctes Manilianae* he dwells upon the great importance of age in a MS., in practice he had a tenderness for late MSS., and was reluctant to surrender them as valueless. Bährens pointed out the great value of *O* in his *Analecta Catulliana* (1874), and himself collated the MS. in May 1876. In the same year he criticized Ellis, in his own edition of Catullus, with some asperity, saying—

'partim neglegentia quadam, partim compendiorum ignoratione, partim aliorum codicum lectiones cum *O* confundens effecit ut fere nulla editionis pagina falsis de *O* testimoniis liber sit.'

Ellis was the gentlest of men, and generally replied to such attacks with studied urbanity. On this occasion he allows that Bährens is *vir sagax crisi codicum*, but with great terseness describes the charge of inexactitude as an 'impudent falsehood'. He did not in later life dispute Bährens's estimate of *O*, and in the Oxford Classical Texts Series based the criticism of Catullus upon three MSS., viz. *G*, *O*, and *R* (a MS. subsequently discovered by Prof. Gardner Hale).

The study of Catullus absorbed Ellis for some years after the appearance of his edition. In 1871 he published a remarkable *tour de force* in the shape of a translation, which reproduced in English the metres of the original poems. His famous commentary, embodying the results of seventeen years' unremitting labour, appeared in 1876. A second edition of the text was published in 1878, and a second edition of the commentary in 1889.

Ellis had been on terms of friendship with H. A. J. Munro, the *vir incomparabilis*, as he calls him, since 1863, and his work upon Catullus established his right to a place beside his Cambridge friend as a leading authority upon the Latin Poets. In 1870 he was appointed Professor of Latin at University College, London, a post which he held for ten years. He did not, however, give up his rooms in Trinity, and was frequently in Oxford. His views at this time may be gathered from a letter which in 1877, when the University Commission was sitting, he wrote to the Commissioners, and from the evidence which he subsequently gave. At a time when most persons were pressing for reforms in administration, he came forward to advocate the claims of research. The reputation of Oxford on the Continent was to him the matter of chief moment and the provision of endowment for workers in the Bodleian Library the most crying need. He said, 'During the last thirty years all, or nearly all, the principal contributions to an enlarged knowledge of Greek and Latin authors have been based on an investigation of MSS. of a minute and laborious kind unknown before. It has been my own aim as a scholar to show that research in this department of Philology is not confined to the Continent, and that Englishmen are able to appreciate the treasures which lurk in their national collections or in the private libraries of individuals.'

The first work which he published after his return to Oxford was his edition of the *Ibis* (1881). His choice of this difficult and obscure poem was due to the accident that he had come across a curious dictionary of mythology, made by Conrad de Mure of Zurich in 1273, in which there are a number of references to the *Ibis*. He proceeded to look for new MSS. and discovered several, two of which belong to the twelfth century. In one of these, and also in a later MS., he found Scholia written in minute characters which he could not read without a magnifying glass. It is to be feared that his eyes must have been sorely tried by the strain to which they were then subjected. Also, he made large use of Tzetzes' scholia to Lycophron. The *Ibis* is on the whole his most esoteric work. It is written wholly in Latin and the notes are full of recondite learning. Obscure legends which repel most readers by their incoherence and aridity were to him a subject of real and lively interest.

In 1883 he was appointed Reader in Latin. At this time he plunged deeply into the most untrodden by-ways of scholarship. Among his publications may be mentioned a volume in the Anecdota Series, containing glosses upon Sidonius (1885); an edition of Avianus (1887); of Orientius (1888): also articles upon Maximianus, an author often found in MSS. with Avianus. He said of these two

writers: 'To both of them I feel grateful for leading me away from the beaten paths of philology to the comparatively neglected literature of the Decline, in a word to that cycle of writers to whom Prof. Freeman has recently called (and not, I trust, vainly) our attention.' The reference which he makes to Freeman is interesting, as showing the influence which led him to his choice of subjects.

Although he never returned to the beaten path, he ceased to wander in this uninviting region. He was attracted by the difficulties of the *Aetna*, a poem which had been edited by Munro. The *Aetna* led him on to the *Opuscula Vergiliana*. Also, he found a fitting subject for his powers of exegesis in the obscure *Astronomicon* of Manilius. In 1887 he examined in Rome several MSS. of the *Aetna*, but without much result: he found, however, in the Corsini Library a valuable MS. of the *Culex*. His first paper on Manilius appeared in 1886. This was followed in 1890 by a number of emendations published in the *Classical Review*. In 1891 his *Noctes Manilianae* appeared. This work ranks with the *Ibis* as one of his most abstruse productions, but it has done much to revive the study of Manilius in this country and elsewhere. In the *Noctes* he referred to a Madrid MS. of the author, which he had not then collated. He went to Madrid in 1892 and afterwards published his collation of the MS. in the *Classical Review*. He did not collate the same MS. for the *Silvae* of Statius, which it also contains, out of respect for the prior rights of Dr. M. Krohn, who had already made a collation and was preparing an edition. His delicacy in this matter was highly characteristic, and was all the more laudable since he was greatly interested in the *Silvae*. It led, however, to one unfortunate result, viz. that he failed to appreciate the full value of the new MS., which is one of the chief authorities for Manilius, and the source from which all other copies of the *Silvae* now known to scholars were drawn. In all probability it was written for Poggio in 1417 by a very ignorant Swiss scribe, to whom he refers in his letters. It was once bound up with another MS. in the same collection which contains other works discovered by Poggio, viz. Asconius and Valerius Flaccus, and appears to have been written by Poggio himself.

Ellis now proceeded to edit a prose author, Velleius Paterculus (1898). The work was discovered in 1515 by Beatus Rhenanus, who had what he terms a 'hasty and unsatisfactory copy' made by a friend. The original MS. is now lost. The *editio princeps*, published by Rhenanus in 1520, was founded on this transcript, but also contains some variants which his amanuensis Burer obtained by a fresh collation of the MS. Bentley couples Velleius with another author based upon a single MS., and says that 'the faults of the scribes are

found so numerous and the defects so beyond all redress that, notwithstanding the learnedest and acutest critics for two whole centuries, these books are still, and are likely to continue, a mere heap of ruins'. Orelli in 1834 discovered at Bale a transcript of the lost MS., made by Amerbach in 1516. Ellis recollated this, and by comparing the readings with Burer's variants endeavoured to get behind the *editio princeps*.

His work upon the *Aetna* has been already mentioned. He published several articles on this poem in the *Journal of Philology*, also a first revision of the text in Postgate's *Corpus* (1896). His edition appeared in 1901. It is difficult to call any of his works popular, especially as the *Aetna* is full of obscurities, but the method of treatment is less severe than usual. Thus, it contains a translation which is a model of terse and scholarly English. Also, unlike his other books, its tendency is polemical. He says, 'It is of importance at this particular juncture to reassert with more than usual emphasis the existence of the trained critical faculty: a faculty which is competent to reject the impossible in language, syntax, or metre, however strongly it may be supported by early manuscript tradition, and however plausibly it may be shown to be quite explicable. There is a growing school of critics, not only in Germany but in England, the central point of whose creed is virtually to deny this.' This attack was chiefly directed against Sudhaus, who considered possible such infractions of metre as *crĕber* (l. 107) or *seu fortĕ flexere caput* (l. 289).

Ellis had long been interested in the minor poems attributed to Virgil. Thus he contributed a series of articles upon them to the *American Journal of Philology*, and had revised the *Ciris* for Postgate's *Corpus*. Also, a number of his emendations were printed in Haigh's duodecimo edition (1893). His labours were concluded by the *Appendix Vergiliana* in the O. C. T. Series (1907), which contains a very elaborate *Apparatus Criticus*.

It is impossible to mention his scattered contributions to learning. Some of them appeared in various journals, while others were delivered as Professorial lectures in the Hall of Corpus or in the New Schools. He generally gave very short notice of his lectures, and consequently the audience was small. Sometimes the treatment was in the main literary: thus in his lecture on 'Catullus in the fourteenth century' he gave a delightful and exhaustive account of the references to Catullus made by various writers at the beginning of the Renaissance. Sometimes he chose a very out-of-the-way subject, e.g. 'The Prosody of Mico the Levite'. He was accustomed to read a few pages himself, and then handed his paper to a friend, referring to the weakness of his

eyes. It is to be remarked that he not infrequently wrote upon Greek authors, e.g. the fragments of the Greek Comic Poets, the fragments of Sophocles, Herondas, and the Oxyrhynchus fragments of Callimachus.

When lecturing to undergraduates upon books, he generally chose the *Silvae* of Statius, Lucan, Propertius, or Catullus. He lectured once a year upon Latin Palaeography, using a set of facsimiles selected by himself. This was probably the lecture which he most enjoyed. He also took a class in Latin Verse, to which the best undergraduate scholars went with eagerness and profit. He was himself a beautiful composer, and specimens of his skill are to be found in the *Anthologia Oxoniensis*, which he edited together with Mr. A. D. Godley. His verses were not so ambitious as those of Munro, but were exquisitely classical. As an example of his original compositions we may take his *Genethliacon Ferruccii*, written in 1877, in which he congratulated Ferrucci, Keeper of the Laurentian Library, upon reaching his eightieth birthday. The closing lines are:—

O salve domus erudita, longis
Custos bibliotheca fida saeclis
Priscorum: tua si Politiano
Non iam limina nec patent Marullis,
At cano venerabilis magistro
Orbi pandis opes, et hospitali
Tantum suscipis in sinu quod usquam est
Doctorum. Mea non levis catervae
Sese gloria miscuit, Catullo
Quod solum potui ferentis, aevi
Sordes ne sinerem. Valete cartae
Et felix tholus: hanc seni salutem
Et multos numerate post Decembres.

Ellis, in addition to his bad sight, had other infirmities. He was often very lame and walked with difficulty, leaning on the arm of a companion. He lived a very simple life, and the only indulgence which he allowed himself was that of listening to music. His dress was eccentric. He wore an old tall hat, set rather on the back of his head, he was never seen out without an overcoat, and his boots were very large. As Vespasiano said of Niccolò Niccoli, *a vederlo così antico come era, era una gentilezza.* He was very absent-minded, and innumerable stories are told of strange responses, which were probably quite innocent, though some found in them a vein of ironic humour. He had much that was childlike in his character, though his opinions on practical matters were often very acute.

His relations with undergraduates call for special comment. At first sight he would not have seemed likely to attract them, but as

a matter of fact few Professors have had so many warm friends among their pupils. The fact was that no one felt shy with one who was so simple, so confiding, and so infirm. He was a faithful friend, and most compassionate to those whom he thought neglected or unfortunate. Although he was always frugal, and in later life became penurious, he practised the virtue of hospitality. He even gave dinner-parties from time to time, at which he was an amiable though absent-minded host. But the real mark of intimacy was when he asked a young friend to a meat-tea in his rooms, or to go with him for a walk round the Parks.

He was exceedingly courteous to foreign scholars, and delighted to receive them. Professor Gildersleeve, of Johns Hopkins University, who visited Oxford in 1880, has recently said of him: 'Of all the classical men whom I met during that summer Robinson Ellis gave me the most cordial welcome, showed the deepest interest in my project, and proved to be the most conspicuous and steadfast contributor to the work that has absorbed so much of my time and energy.'

He was at all times deeply interested in the progress of Sir James Murray's great English Dictionary. He was accustomed to supply quotations from his own reading and also undertook research in various authors, especially in the sixteenth-century translators from Greek and Latin, in order to determine the exact sense of the words by comparison with the original. Sir James Murray writes, 'He spent many hours in his own library and in the Bodleian, identifying passages from Holland's *Livy*, Plutarch's *Morals*, and dozens of other works, and comparing the English with the original Latin or Greek. He helped often also by informing me of the sense-development of the Latin word, and of the first date of a late Latin sense, e.g. from Christian Latin, which has become the primary sense in English. I can say without invidious comparison that no one in Oxford, and only one outside of it, has taken so much practical interest in the Dictionary, or shown so much regard for those engaged in it.'

It is necessary to make a brief reference to a subject which sometimes caused pain to his best friends, and gave rise to misunderstanding among those who did not know the rigid asceticism of his life. It cannot be denied that he showed a want of delicacy, or indeed a certain insensibility, at times both in his choice of subjects and in his annotations on passages in the Latin poets. It must, however, be remembered that the world in which he moved was that of the early Humanists, and, if judged by their standard, he would seem fairly reticent. Thus in the Preface to his Catullus he sharply criticized Alessandro Guarino for the impropriety of his notes.

His attitude towards religion was enigmatic. Some called him a Pagan, while others traced in him a leaning towards the Roman Catholic Church. In his younger days he had passed through a period of Newmanism, and traces of this phase survived at a later date. He was very fond of hearing Latin chants, and once attended the ceremonies of Holy Week in Seville. The late H. D. Grissell, one of the Pope's Chamberlains, was his attached friend. It would, however, appear probable that his interest in Catholicism was mainly aesthetic. He was also attracted by elaborate ritual within the English Church, and in the early eighties used to attend not infrequently the sermons preached by his colleague Dr. Gore, now Bishop of Oxford, at St. Barnabas.

He took little interest in politics, whether academical or national, but generally voted on the advanced side. This was due more to instinct than to conviction. Thus on one occasion, when plied with arguments which he could not answer, he would not promise his vote, but said: 'Quite true! But then, you see, I have been a lifelong Liberal.'

Of late years he aged rapidly. His sight became worse and suddenly failed some two years ago. Also, his lameness increased. He clung to his work with tenacity, and endeavoured to give his lectures, even upon Latin Palaeography, with the help of an assistant.

It was pathetic to see him in the Bodleian, as of old, with books before him which he could not read, or to hear him say that it was necessary for him to exercise his eyes. At last he could struggle on no longer, and a deputy was appointed. His fatal illness followed almost immediately. He underwent an operation in the Acland Home for a painful complaint of long standing, and died shortly afterwards from exhaustion and pulmonary trouble.

The name of Robinson Ellis will live in the annals of classical learning. He was a most exact and finished scholar, who combined literary gifts with immense erudition gathered from wide reading. He delighted to burrow in glossaries and scholia and had a profound knowledge of mythological and literary allusions. In the exuberance of his fancy and the brilliancy of his emendations he resembled that wayward genius, Simon Bosius. He showed wonderful *flair* in his quest for MSS., though he did not always see the value of the material which he amassed. But perhaps the greatest service which he rendered to British scholarship was the persistency with which he preached on all occasions the cardinal truth that the study of MSS. is indispensable for any one who aspires to do original work.

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