

World of Ancient Rome

Roman Culture: Weapons and the Man, edited with introductions by Garry Wills, *New York: George Braziller, 1966. 379 pp. 33 illustrations. \$6.95.*

The Erotic Elegies of Albius Tibullus, translated by Hubert Creekmore and illustrated by Edward Melcarth, *New York: Washington Square Press, 1966. xx + 161 pp. \$7.95.*

IN HIS monumental work *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture* the late Werner Jaeger, a classical humanist of the first order who lived and taught both in Europe and the United States, defined culture as "simply the aristocratic ideal of a nation, increasingly intellectualized." He clearly pointed out that in the case of Greek culture the nobility was the prime mover in forming the nation's culture, which involved the creation of a definite idea of human perfection, an ideal toward which the elite, or *aristoi*, was constantly trained. This ideal in Greek terminology was called *arete* and described in an unmistakable way the Greek aspiration of individu-

al excellence, that each man "always be the best and superior to others." This Greek idea of individual excellence and self-fulfillment is one that is still proclaimed as the basis of Western civilization and is particularly and vociferously advertised in the United States by education and government alike. This Greek emphasis on individual achievement is an inheritance that appeals to us as Americans and perhaps is one of the reasons that in our time Greek culture has a greater appeal than Roman culture. In a way it is ironic that this ideal of individual excellence, which is in origin aristocratic, should be a basic premise of our own democratic culture as it was of ancient Greek democracy.

Both Greek and Roman cultures are probably best known to the ordinary person through their art and literature but what is probably little known is the fact that both Greek and Roman literatures are basically aristocratic. Garry Wills of Johns Hopkins University, in his volume on Roman culture in *The Cultures of Mankind* series, patently wants his anthology to be consonant with the general aims of the series, which point to "the heritage of world culture—the men, the movements and the ideas of each period—exemplified in significant landmarks from literature and the arts," and though American education now tends to ignore, and sometimes in gross ignorance even to deny its classical foundations and heritage, still it is appropriate that the series include a volume representing a culture that endured for well over a millennium and provided history with the experience of the *Pax Romana* and the concept of "one world under law." It is a period in history well worth studying and pondering for what it can teach us today.

Garry Wills very quickly informs the reader that what he is presenting him is not a chronological survey of Roman literature and art but an anthology utilizing these materials to depict Roman life. The selections and translations reflect different

periods and different attitudes among English and American writers themselves. Consequently, Wills is not necessarily concerned to present the best of Roman literature and art, nor is he interested in completeness of presentation, but rather his aim is to give us some idea of Roman culture. (The word "culture" he never really defines but seems to equate with "life".) He obviously feels that the Romans have a relevance for us today:

The value of the Romans must be sought precisely in their Romanness—in their stiff, self-conscious grip on known things, their fear of the unknown, their dependence on the family, their Italianate love of children, their extraordinary sympathy with the animal world, their guilty admiration of foreign ways, their uneasy assumption of a more sophisticated role in the world, their puritan pride and nobility and hypocrisy, their vast gift for self-revelation. They are a troubled people who can profitably trouble us. We do not need to spin romances around the edge of their history to make it significant for us.

Obviously Professor Wills wants to avoid "a view of the Romans as soulless imitators of the Greeks; and an overwillfulness to accept either the Romans' assessment of themselves as somewhat unattractive Puritans, or Hollywood's picture of them as sadistic, pleasure-mad indulgers in orgies," as Paul MacKendrick so neatly put it in his book on *The Roman Mind at Work* (Princeton, 1958). The aim is to present the Romans as they were, as human beings, and this is done through the literary selections and illustrations, to the extent possible. There is no point here in quibbling with the particular selections since tastes proverbially differ but they do represent adequately the six themes that Wills has chosen to reflect Roman culture, namely, "The Fields and Their Gods"; "Ages of Man"; "Love's Crucible"; "The Lure of the East"; "Duty, Empire, Reward"; and "The Dark Side." The more

familiar authors like Vergil, Horace, Livy, Catullus, Ovid, Petronius, Lucretius, and Cicero are all here, as are the less familiar but equally noteworthy ones. There is no attempt to gloss over Roman weaknesses and vices nor is there any effort made to exaggerate Roman virtues and accomplishments.

What emerges more than anything else is the humanity of this ancient people, who could live, work, love, fight, and die like anyone else. The subtitle "Weapons and the Man" (*arma virumque*), taken from the first line of Vergil's *Aeneid*, would seem to set the tone for the book. If the Romans were known for anything it was certainly for their success in war and military conquest. They were "practical men," who through no inherent desire were drawn into world conquest. A disciplined, hardy folk who, like Americans, were rooted originally in agrarian principles, puritanically moral, lovers of the simple country life, they found themselves embroiled with older and more sophisticated cultures—Etruscan, Phoenician, Greek, Egyptian—which they militarily and politically conquered but from which they absorbed much. Basically conservative, materialistic, and fond of spectator sports, the Romans to this extent were like modern Americans. In their total involvement in world affairs they reached a point militarily and politically that America is gradually being sucked into, despite her will. Imitative in a creative way culturally, Rome's greatest achievements were in the practical subjects like military science, engineering, and law. Vergil probably better than any other Roman summarized the Roman's view of what he had to do, what Wills calls a "resigned triumphalism":

Let others better mould the running
mass
Of metals, and inform the breathing
brass,
And soften into flesh a marble face;
Plead better at the bar; describe the
skies—

Both when the stars descend and when
they rise.
But Rome, 'tis thine alone with awful
sway
To rule mankind, and make the world
obey.

(*Aeneid* 6.847-52
Dryden translation)

Hubert Creekmore, one of America's important Southern literary critics, has done a magnificent job of rendering Tibullus into English verse in a manner that accurately reflects the Latin original both in language and in spirit. He manages beautifully to reproduce the simplicity and clarity of the original. Tibullus was a love poet whose amatory relations with Delia, Nemesis, and Marathus are as vivid in Creekmore's English as in Tibullus' original. In addition to a critical introduction, helpful notes for the general reader, and a glossary, Creekmore has reproduced on the left hand pages the Latin text of Kirby Flower Smith's *The Elegies of Albius Tibullus* (American Book Company, 1913) so that the book is useful to Latinists as well as to general readers. Creekmore has also included a section called *No Harm to Lovers*, elegies which in my opinion are definitely not Tibullus' but written in response to the epigrams of Sulpicia, a Roman poetess whose six short elegies expressing frankly and warmly her love for Cerinthus, are unique in Latin literature.

There is nothing distinctively Roman in Tibullus' amours; what is remarkable for a Roman is his concern for the *Pax Romana* and *rura* (the country). Tibullus is not a spokesman for the official Augustan imperial policy, but may well be the first poet who joined the idea of *pax* in poetry with the simplicity and peacefulness of the country. He exhibits the traditional Roman love of the country, a plea and nostalgia for the old Roman religion and practices (which would have been approved by the Emperor Augustus), simplicity, and *paupertas* (defined as *contentus vivere parvo*—"content to live on a little"). In brief,

Tibullus speaks out forcefully for the old Roman ideals, within an Italian landscape, not in an Arcadian or Sicilian one. Tibullus is a Roman poet who gives poetic expression to the patriotic feelings of his countrymen, but his own patriotism is natural and not forced, and he remains what the Roman critic Quintilian so perceptively called him "*tersus atque elegans maxime . . . auctor*" ("a most polished and elegant author").

In his volume *The Erotic Elegies of Albius Tibullus* Creekmore has unwittingly placed the emphasis on personal love by his title. Yet Tibullus is also concerned with the issues of peace, the country, old-fashioned religion, and a return to ancestral virtues. Reading Tibullan poetry in translation or in the original, or in both, even though it is "personal poetry," will readily reveal where the Roman placed his values. Together *Roman Culture* and the Creekmore version of Tibullus provide us with substantial looks at the world of ancient Rome and give us the opportunity to examine those features of Roman life and culture that have enduring interest and value and those that do not.

Reviewed by JOHN E. REXINE