

ON THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE GREEKS.

PART I.

As the mythology of the Greeks is intimately connected with their philosophy and theology, it is not at all wonderful, since the moderns are ignorant of the latter, that they have not genuinely developed the former. Lord Bacon, indeed, has done all, in attempting to unfold this mythology, that great genius, without the assistance of *genuine philosophy*, is able to effect. But the most piercing sagacity, the most brilliant wit, and the most exquisite subtilty of thought, without this assistance, are here of no avail. It is indeed easy for ingenious men to explain an ancient fable, in a way which to the superficial observer shall appear to be the precise meaning which its inventor designed to convey, though it be in reality very far from the truth. This may be easily accounted for, by considering that all fables are images of truths; but those of the Greeks, of truths with which but few are acquainted. Hence, like pictures of unknown persons, they become the subjects of endless conjecture and absurd opinion, from the similitude which every one fancies he discovers in them to objects which are generally known, and with which he is familiar. He who understands the explanations given by the Platonic philosophers, of these fables, will immediately subscribe to the truth of this observation, as he will find that these interpretations are a *scientific* development of their external or apparent meaning.

In order to demonstrate this, I shall present the reader with an elucidation of some of the principal fables of the Greeks, by these philosophers, and particularly of those of Homer: preparatory to which, it will be necessary, in the first place, to consider whence the ancients were induced to devise fables; in the second place, to show what the difference is, between the fables of philosophers and those of poets; and in the third place, to enumerate the different species of fables, and give examples of each.

As to the first particular then, the ancients employed fables,¹ looking to two things, nature and our soul. They employed them by looking to nature, and the fabrication of things, as fol-

¹ Vid. Olympiodor. MS. Schol. in Platonis Gorgiam.

lows.—From things that are visible, we believe in things invisible; and from bodies, in incorporeal natures. For, seeing the orderly arrangement of bodies in the universe, we understand that a certain incorporeal power presides over them. As we therefore see that our body is moved, but is no longer so after death, we conceive that it was a certain incorporeal power which moved it. Hence perceiving that we believe in things incorporeal and invisible from things visible and corporeal, fables came to be adopted, in order that we might arrive from things visible to invisible natures; as for instance, that on hearing the adulteries, bonds, and lacerations, of the Gods, the castrations of heaven, and the like, we may not rest satisfied with the apparent meaning of such particulars, but may proceed to the unapparent, and investigate its true signification. After this manner therefore, looking to the nature of things, were fables employed.¹

But from looking to the human soul, they originated as follows: While we are children we live according to the phantasy; but the phantastic part is conversant with figures, and types, and things of this kind. That the phantastic part in us therefore

¹ The philosopher Sallust likewise, in the following admirable manner, unfolds the reason why fables were employed by the ancients, in his golden treatise *On the Gods and the World*.¹

“The first utility arising from fables is this—that they excite us to inquiry, and do not suffer our reasoning power to remain in indolent rest. That fables therefore are divine, may be shown from those by whom they are employed. For they are used by divinely inspired poets; by the best of philosophers; by those who instituted the mysteries; and by the Gods themselves in oracles. But why fables are divine, it is the province of philosophy to investigate. Since, then, all beings rejoice in similitude, but turn away abhorrent from dissimilitude, it is requisite that assertions about the Gods should be similar to them, in order that they may be adapted to the dignity of their essence, and may render the Gods propitious to those by whom the assertions are made; which can alone be effected through fables. Hence fables imitate the Gods, and the goodness of the Gods, according to the effable and ineffable, the visible and invisible, the perspicuous and the concealed. For as the Gods impart to all men in common the benefits produced by sensibles, but to the wise alone the benefits of intelligibles, thus also fables proclaim to all men that there are Gods; but who they are, and in what their nature consists, they unfold to those who are capable of obtaining this knowledge. They likewise imitate the energies of the Gods. For the world also may be called a fable; bodies, indeed, and sensible things being visibly contained in it, but souls and intellects subsisting in it latently. And besides this, to teach all men the truth concerning the Gods, produces contempt in the stupid, through their inability of understanding it, and indolence in the worthy; but to conceal the truth in fables, prevents the contempt of the former, and compels the latter to philosophise. Why, however, do fables speak of thefts, adulteries, paternal bonds, and other absurd and atrocious deeds? May it not be said, that such narrations are attended with this admirable effect—that the soul, through the apparent absurdity, is immediately led to conceive that these assertions are veils, and that the truth contained in them is arcane?

¹ Vid. Cap. III.

may be preserved, we employ fables, in consequence of this part rejoicing in fables. It may also be said, that *a fable is nothing else than a false discourse,*¹ *adumbrating the truth: for a fable is the image of truth.* But the soul is the image of the natures prior to herself; and hence she rejoices in fables, as an image in an image. As we are therefore from our childhood nourished in fables, it is necessary that they should be introduced. And thus much for the first problem, concerning the origin of fables.

In the second place, let us consider what the difference is between the fables of philosophers and poets. Each, therefore, has something in which it abounds more than, and something in which it is deficient from, the other. Thus for instance, the poetic fable abounds in this—that we must not rest satisfied with the apparent meaning, but pass on to the occult truth. For who, endued with intellect, would believe that Jupiter was desirous of having connexion with Juno, and on the ground, without waiting to go into the bed-chamber? So that the poetic fable abounds, in consequence of asserting such things as do not suffer us to stop at the apparent, but lead us to explore the occult truth. But it is defective in this, *that it deceives those of a juvenile age.*² Plato, therefore, neglects fables of this kind, and banishes Homer from his Republic; because youth, on hearing such fables, will not be able to distinguish what is allegorical from what is not.

Philosophical fables, on the contrary, do not injure those who go no farther than the apparent meaning. Thus for instance, they assert that there are punishments and rivers under the earth: and if we adhere to the literal meaning of these, we shall not be injured. But they are deficient in this, that as their apparent signification does not injure, we often content ourselves with

¹ Conformably to this definition of a fable by Olympiodorus, Timæus the Locrian, in his treatise *περι ψυχας κοσμου και φυσικος*, says: *ως γαρ τα σωματα νοσωδισι ποικι υγιαζομεν, οια μη ικη τοις υγιεινοτατοις ουτω τας ψυχας απιργουμε ψευδεισ λογοις οια μη αγηται αλαθισι.* i. e. "For as we sometimes restore bodies to health by things of a noxious nature, when this is not to be effected by such as are most salubrious; thus also we restrain souls [from evil conduct,] by *false assertions*, when they are incapable of being led by such as are true." So entirely ignorant, however, are many of the present day, even among those that are called learned, of this definition of a fable, that the fables of Homer are continually defamed by these men, as monstrously incongruous, from not perceiving that they have a hidden meaning, and that like the curtains which formerly guarded the adyta of temples from the profane eye, they are the veils of truths the most luminous and divine.

² Hence it follows that those who are deceived by these fables, i. e. who consider them solely according to their literal meaning, are juvenile in understanding.

this, and do not explore the latent truth. We may also say, that philosophic fables look to the energies of the soul. For if we were entirely intellect alone, and had no connexion with the phantasy, we should not require fables, in consequence of always associating with intellectual natures. If, again, we were entirely irrational, and lived according to the phantasy, and had no other energy than this, it would be requisite that the whole of our life should be fabulous. Since, however, we possess intellect, opinion, and phantasy, demonstrations are given with a view to intellect: and hence Plato says, that if any one is willing to energise according to intellect, he will have demonstrations bound with adamant chains; if according to opinion, he will have the testimony of renowned persons; and if according to the phantasy, he will have fables by which it is excited; so that from all these he will derive advantage.

Plato therefore rejects the more tragical mode of mythologising adopted by the ancient poets, who thought proper to establish an arcane theology respecting the Gods, and on this account devised wanderings, castrations, battles, and lacerations, of the Gods, and many other symbols of the truth about divine natures, which this theology conceals;—this mode he rejects, and asserts that it is in every respect most foreign from erudition. But he considers those mythological discourses about the Gods, to be more persuasive and more adapted to truth, which assert that a divine nature is the cause of all good, but of no evil; and that it is void of all mutation, comprehending in itself the fountain of truth, but never becoming the cause of any deception to others. For such types of theology Socrates delivers in the Republic.

Hence, all the fables of Plato, guarding the truth in concealment, have not even their externally apparent apparatus, discordant with our undisciplined and unperverted anticipations of divinity. But they bring with them an image of the mundane composition, in which both the apparent beauty is worthy of divinity, and a beauty more divine than this is established in the unapparent lives and powers of its causes.

In the third place, with respect to the different species of fables, they are five in number, and are beautifully unfolded by the philosopher Sallust, in his treatise on the Gods and the World,¹ as follows: “Of fables, some are theological, others physical, others psychical, (or pertaining to soul,) others mate-

¹ Vid. Cap. IV.

rial, and others are mingled from these. *Theological* fables never employ body, but survey the essences themselves of the Gods; and of this kind, are Saturn's absorptions of his children. For since Saturn is an intellectual¹ God, but every intellect is converted to itself, the fable obscurely indicates the essence of the God. But we may survey fables *physically*,² when they speak of the energies of the Gods about the world. Thus for instance, some conceiving Time to be Saturn, and calling the parts of time the children of the whole of time, say that the children are absorbed by the father. The *psychical* mode of fables consists in surveying the energies of the soul herself; because the intellections of our souls, though they proceed into other things, yet abide in their parents. And the *material* mode, is that which is especially used through inerudition by the Egyptians, who call bodies themselves, and conceive them to be, Gods. According to this mode, earth is denominated Isis, but moisture Osiris, and heat Typhon; or water is called Saturn, but fruits Adonis, and wine Bacchus. And to assert, indeed, that these are dedicated to the Gods, in the same manner as plants, and stones, and animals, is the province of wise men; but it pertains to madmen only to call them Gods; unless after the same manner as when from custom we call the orb of the sun, and the rays emanating from that orb, the sun itself.

"The *mixed* species of fables may be seen in many other examples, and in that in which it is said that Strife at a banquet of the Gods threw a golden apple, and that a contention about it arising among the Goddesses, they were sent by Jupiter to take the judgment of Paris, who, being charmed with the beauty of Venus, gave her the apple in preference to the rest. For here, the banquet manifests the supermundane powers of the Gods; and on this account they subsist in conjunction with each other. But the golden apple is the world, which, as it consists of contraries, is very properly said to be thrown by Strife. As different Gods, however, impart different gifts to the world, they appear to contend for the apple. And a soul living according to sense, (for this is Paris) and not perceiving the other powers in the universe, says that the apple subsists alone through the beauty of Venus. But of fables, the theological

Thus also he is defined by Plato in the Cratylus to be *νοητος νοησις*, a pure intellect. Saturn, according to the fable, not only devoured his children, but afterwards re-founded them, because intellect not only seeks and procreates, but produces into light and profits.

² I refer the reader who wishes to see the physical species of fables largely unfolded, to the allegories of Heraclides or Heraclitus in Gale's *Opuscula Mythologica*.

pertain to philosophers; the physical and psychical to poets; and the mixed, to the mysteries; since the intention of all mysteries is to conjoin us to the world and the Gods." And thus much for the different species of fables according to the excellent Sallust.

Previous to a development of some of the fables of Homer, it will be requisite to observe that this most divine poet, by combining fiction with historical facts, has delivered to us some very occult, mystic, and valuable information, in those two admirable poems, the Iliad and Odyssey. Hence, by those who directed their attention to this recondite information, he was said, according to the tragical mode of speaking, which was usual with the most ancient writers, to have been blind, because, as Proclus¹ observes, he separated himself from sensible beauty, and extended the intellect of his soul to invisible and true harmony. He was said therefore to be blind, because *that* intellectual beauty to which he raised himself, cannot be perceived by corporeal eyes. Thus too Orpheus is tragically said to have been lacerated in an all-various manner, because men of that age *partially* participated of his mystic doctrine. The *principal part* of it however was received by the Lesbians; and on this account his *head*, when separated from his body, is said to have been carried to Lesbos. Hence the Platonic Hērmeas, conformably to this opinion of the hidden meaning of the Iliad, beautifully explains as follows the Trojan war, in his Scholia on the Phædrus of Plato.

"By Ilium we must understand the generated and material place, which is so denominated from *mud* and *matter*, (*παρα την ιλιον και την υλην*) and in which there are war and sedition. But the Trojans are material forms, and all the lives which subsist about bodies. Hence also the Trojans are called *genuine* (*ιθαγενεις*). For all the lives which subsist about bodies, and irrational² souls, are favorable and attentive to their proper matter. On the contrary, the Greeks are rational souls, coming from Greece, i. e. from the intelligible into matter. Hence the Greeks are called *foreigners*, (*επηλυδες*) and vanquish the Trojans, as being of a superior order. But they fight with each other about the image of Helen, as the poet says [about the image of Eneas];

Around the phantom, Greeks and Trojans fight.³

¹ In Plat. Polit. p. 398.

² Instead of *αιρητοι ψυχαι* in this place, it is necessary to read *αιρητοι ψυχαι*.

³ Iliad V. v. 451.

Helen signifying intelligible beauty, being a certain vessel (*ελενη τις ουσια*), attracting to itself intellect. An efflux therefore of this intelligible beauty is imparted to matter through Venus; and about this efflux of beauty the Greeks fight with the Trojans [i. e. rational with irrational lives¹]. And those indeed, that oppose and vanquish matter, return to the intelligible world, which is their true country; but those who do not, as is the case with the multitude, are bound to matter. As therefore the prophet in the tenth book of the Republic, previously to the descent of souls, announces to them how they may return, [to their pristine felicity] according to periods of a thousand and ten thousand years; thus also Calchas predicts to the Greeks their return in ten years, the number ten being a symbol of a perfect period. And as in the lives of souls some are elevated through philosophy, others through the amatory art, and others through the royal and warlike disciplines; so with respect to the Greeks, some act with rectitude through prudence, but others through war or love, and their return is different [according to their different pursuits].”

It may also be said, that by the Greeks and Trojans, Homer adumbrates the twofold orders of mundane natures, arising from a division of the universe into the incorporeal and the corporeal, and from again dividing the incorporeal into the more intellectual and the more material natures; but the corporeal into the heavens and the sublunary region; the heavens into contrary periods; and the sublunary region into opposite powers. And that he also adumbrates through these, the powers of an opposite characteristic, which subsist in the mundane Gods, in dæmons, in souls, and in bodies. “Hence, says Proclus,² Homer when energising enthusiastically, represents Jupiter speaking, and converting to himself the twofold co-ordinations of Gods; becoming himself, as it were, the centre of all the divine genera in the world, and making all things obedient to his intellection. But at one time he conjoins the multitude of Gods to himself without a medium, and at another through *Themis* as the medium :

¹ Conformably to this, Proclus in Plat. Polit. p. 398, says, “that all the beauty subsisting about generation [or the regions of sense] from the fabrication of things, is signified by Helen; about which there is a perpetual battle of souls, till the more intellectual having vanquished the more irrational forms of life, return to the place from whence they originally came.” For the beauty which is in the realms of generation is an efflux of intelligible beauty.

² In Tim. p. 300.

“ But Jove to Themis gives command to call
The Gods to council.”¹

For this Goddess pervading every where collects the divine *number*, and converts it to the demiurgic *monad*. For the Gods are both separate from mundane affairs, and eternally provide for all things, being at the same time exempt from them through the highest transcendency, and extending their providence every where. For their unmingled nature is not without providential energy, nor is their providence mingled with matter. Through transcendency of power, they are not filled with the subjects of their government; and through beneficent will, they make all things similar to themselves; in permanently abiding, proceeding; and in being separated from, being similarly present to, all things. Since, therefore, the Gods that govern the world, and the dæmons the attendants of these, receive after this manner unmingled purity, and providential administration from their father; at one time he converts them to himself without a medium, and illuminates them with a separate, unmingled, and pure form of life. Whence also I think he orders them to be separated from all things, to remain exempt in Olympus,² and neither convert themselves to Greeks nor Barbarians; which is just the same as to say, that they must transcend the twofold orders of mundane natures, and abide immutably in undefiled intellection. But at another time, he converts them to a providential attention to secondary natures, through Themis, calls upon them to direct the mundane battle, and excites different Gods to different works.”

As to the recondite meaning of the *Odyssey*, the opinion of Numenius the Pythagorean appears to me to be highly probable, that Homer in the person of Ulysses represents to us a man who passes in a regular manner over the dark and stormy sea of generation; and thus at length arrives at that region, where tempests and seas are unknown, and finds a nation,

“ Who ne'er knew salt, or heard the billows roar.”

Odys. xi. 122. and xxiii. 270.

“ For indeed,” says Porphyry,³ “ it will not be lawful for any one to depart from this sensible life in a regular way, and in the shortest time, who blinds and irritates his material dæmon; but

¹ *Iliad.* XX. v. 5.

² i. e. In the highest and purest intellectual splendor.

³ *De Antro Nympharum* p. 271.

he who dares to do this will be pursued by the anger of the marine and material Gods, whom it is first requisite to appease by sacrifices, labors, and patient endurance; at one time by contending with perturbations, at another time by employing stratagems of various kinds, by all which he transmutes himself into different forms; so that at length being stripped of the torn garments¹ by which his true person was concealed, he may recover the ruined empire of his soul. Nor will he even then be freed from molestation, till he has entirely passed over the raging sea, and taken a long farewell of its storms; till, though connected with a mortal nature, he becomes, through deep attention to intelligible concerns, so ignorant of marine and material operations, as to mistake an oar for a corn-van." Porphyry adds, "Nor is it proper to believe that interpretations of this kind are forced, and are nothing more than the conjectures of ingenious men; but when we consider the great wisdom of antiquity, and how much Homer excelled in intelligence, and in every kind of virtue, we ought not to doubt, that he has secretly represented the images of divine things under the concealments of fable."

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Walworth.

MISCELLANEA CLASSICA.

NO. XI.

[Continued from No. XLII. p. 280.]

I. Elmsl. Annot. in Eurip. Med. p. 150, not. ad init. "Nihil apud Atticos poëtas rarius vocali *ε* ante particulam *αυ* elisa."² ---

¹ i. e. Becoming purified through the exercise of the cathartic virtues; Porphyry elegantly alludes to this denudation through the exercise of these virtues, in the following passage, in his excellent treatise De Abſtinentia. Lib. I. p. 27. Απολυτεσθαι ερα τους πολλους ημιν χιτωνας, τον τε ορατον τουτον και σαρκινον, και ους ισωθην ημφι-εσμεθα, προσχιεις οντας τους δερματινους γυμνοι δε και ακιςτωνες επι το σταδιον αναβαινωμεν, επι τα της ψυχης Ολυμπια αγωνισομενοι. i. e. "We must therefore divest ourselves of our many garments, both this visible and fleshy garment, and those with which we are inwardly clothed, and which are proximate to the cutaneous vestments. But we must enter the stadium naked, and without the encumbrance of dress, strenuously contending for the Olympia of the soul."