MYTH IN HISTORY

THESIS

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THESIS
By the casual reader of history, the old myths are often regarded as a collection of fairy tales. Beautiful indeed, but untrustworthy; to be read as the pastime of an idle hour and then forgotten; giving no thought to the fact that behind the story was the perceptive faculty which saw in Nature, Nature's God. But one who strived to look beyond the known into the unknown finds in these same myths problems well worthy of careful consideration although as jealously guarded as was the veiled statue of Isis in the temple of old Egypt.

Although through the careful researches of modern philologists the Indian and Northern myths have been brought more prominently to the consideration of reading people than ever before it is still to the Greek myths that the student turns with greatest interest, for they most strikingly show development in the moral and intellectual nature of man, and a careful study of the Greek myths presents to us a picture of Greek life and
and culture as accurate as any of Thucydides' portrayals.

Concerning the origin of Indian mythology nothing can be stated with certainty, as the early annals are involved in great obscurity. There have been many of learning who have maintained that the religion of the country has, under the control and direction of a priestly caste, who had it arranged in a systematic manner. But in the very earliest literature, the Homeric poems, there exists no trace of such a caste, and the mythology is a loose collection of stories many of which refer to the same object.

The geographical nature of Greece had much to do with its myth development. The inhabitants were divided into a great number of small states, separated from each other in many cases by mountain ranges and other natural barriers. They were, in the majority of cases, surrounded by grand and uplifting scenery, and the climate, unlike that of the countries lying further to the north, was
mild and agreeable. All these influences favored the expansion of the intellect, and in each of these little states there grew up a body of tales of gods and heroes. These were carried from one community to another by wandering minstrels. It is an impossibility to fix upon any one locality as the birthplace of the Hellenic mythology. It was a part of the people, the product of their creative faculty, and existed as a belief long before Herodotus wrote it into history, or Homer immortalized it in song.

The idea which we so often have that mythology consisted of a collection of stories arranged upon a well-defined system which the Greeks accepted as unquestionably as we do our creed, although erasions are in a measure explained by the fact that it is impossible for us to put ourselves into the conditions of mythmaking. We cannot, even in imagination, go back to a time when there was no written language, no recognized system of thought, no
history and science. Yet in the first stage of their intellectual development the Greeks were but children, curious, full of eagerness, impression. Ignorant even of the rudiments of philosophy or natural laws, yet seeking for some explanation of the phenomena all about them, supplying their deficiency in scientific knowledge by a vividity of imagination that gave to every phenomenon of nature a personification, and to every god and stream its morph and divinity. And these personifications were to the Greek realities. In his mind the earth and the sky were endowed with desires, appetites and all other human attributes. Instead of the sun obeying astronomical laws, he saw Helios, the beautiful youth, mount his chariot in the morning, guide his steeds along their appointed path, and reach the western horizon in the evening married and serions of repose. The clouds which floated lazily over the blue vault, or were tossed angrily about by the winds, were his sacred cattle. And the dawn
which one god before the war was Daphne. Instead of
the sea with its constant ebb and flow, he pictured a
worthy old man who drove the white-masted biremes
and sought to escape detection by a constant change of
form. In this stage the oracles presented as many
differences as an ever shifting kaleidoscope for the people
having formed their gods endowed them with every
human attribute the low as well as the high, the low
as well as the god.

While this creative faculty of the Greeks
was busy fashioning gods after their own image there
gradually arose a class of men who were supposed to be
immediately under the divine influence—the poets.
Herodotus says that Homer and Hesiod first arranged
the genealogies of the gods. Although this statement cannot
be accepted literally, yet it is true that these two poets,
coming at a period before the people had begun to
reflect upon and criticize their own creations, took the myths as they found them and warped them together, giving them a more definite shape. With the latter poets the myth was a reality, but it was a divine not a human reality. The poets held within them the deep unconscious faith which pervaded the old gods even though they did not wholly believe in them. Pindar, for instance, could not force himself to believe that the gods were cannibals, nor could he regard some of their recorded quarrels as consistent with the majesty of Deity. Yet he held the spontaneous and uninquiring faith which recognized the divinity within the representation. Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides had this same spontaneous faith although in them there is greater freedom shown as to detail. Their works all tend to exalt rather than to lower the interpretation of the myths and the gods are shown more clearly as moral agents. Sophocles recognized
in Jews the ever watchful Deity, who, although he might delay the course of justice for a time, will not
suffer it to turn aside. Aeschylus, who did not
retain the ideal majesty to such an extent and
ever ventured in song of his writings to depict Jews
as an unLexer, throughout all his writings were lost
sight of his supremacy. Euripides also exhibited an
unquestioning faith in the old myths and diffused
a reverential feeling throughout his writings. In this
stage of development we find that the people having
formed their myths had begun to criticize them.
They had begun to use their reflective powers and
now trying to reconcile the stories which they had
received with the ideas of divinity which was present
in every heart. In a like manner from all these
myths, which at first were only personifications, was
gradually evolved a conception of a great moral agent
which the poets immortalized and philosophers did not scorn.

But as time passed our thinking people could not reconcile to Deity attributes revolting to any refined and cultivated sense. They could not imagine that Zeus, whom they called the Father stooping to an ignoble deed, and as gradually from Zeus the notion has evolved the all pervading Mind. Again Kronos swallowing his own children filled the people with horror and disquiet, and from this coarse conception was evolved the myth of Time which swallows up the years to which it has given birth. There was also something in the myth of Heracles which representing him as sensuous, coarse and brutal, was revolting to the moral sense of the people, but they remedied the god of day who one came the hosts of darkness, and slew the enemies of light with the silver tipped arrows of the
One very noticeable feature of the gods was their nearness to the back minds, and as the mind expanded, the god grew and the myth unfolded. This change in intellectual capacity can be very readily seen by comparing the poems of Homer with the history of Thucydides. Homer speaks of piracy in a matter of course way as a perfectly legitimate business, which even kings did not disdain its follow. Hecules hopes after his return to his rocky island kingdom to take out his delusions in this manner. Thucydides, writing several centuries later, condemns the whole practice as unlawful and an enormity, not to be for an instant contemplated. For a similar cause there was something in the intelligent, thoughtful Greek which caused him to turn with disgust from the battle of the titans, the cruelty of Kronos and the heartlessness of Apollo.
and to feel that if the old myths were to be interpreted literally there was no Greek in whose enemy and love of justice they could trust. Thus was brought about gradually the philosophical stage, which sought to set aside the idea of Person and to substitute in its stead an impersonal Nature. At this stage the reflective Greek saw that the notion of divinity was separate from the person, and thus the myths were criticised by an ideal standard. These reflective and speculative minds, following various lines of thought and bringing forward new theories, tended to react upon the old ideas of mythology and to develop a higher religion which Plato expressed by saying that we ought "to become like God", as far as this is possible; and to become like Him is to become holy, just, and wise. This last stage was of course never fully understood by the mass of the people, and
although time somewhat mitigated their aversion to it, they never fully ceased, to condemn what they could not comprehend.

It was in art, especially sculpture, that the Grecian myths reached their highest development, and exerted the greatest influence upon the people. Sculpture, drawing their inspiration from the old myths, represented the gods as human indeed, in form, but with the human as idealized, so perfect and so grand that it seemed divine. Every figure which left the artist's chisel created a religion for itself, and as few people could look upon it and not feel deep in his heart a reverence for all that was beautiful and good. Not only was the immediate influence of such art elevating and refining, but it has made Greek art the admiration of all ages, and has inspired succeeding generations with a deeper reverence for
Greek in intellect.

Thus we find that the study of Greek mythology teaches us history. Not history, perhaps, as we study it in text books, but intellectual and moral history, and that as we trace the development of the myths, we are tracing the development of the people. That we can follow the successive steps by which they passed from the Real to the Ideal. We likewise find, that just as far as the development of myth into poetry and art is elevating and refining the people and progressing intellectually. Shall we then call these myths which teach us such lessons, but the idle stories of a fertile imagination? Shall we not rather regard them as oracles by which we view orison souls, and look for what is to what is to be?