

GRAECO-ROMAN MYTHOLOGY
ITS RE-INTERPRETATION AND RE-VITALIZATION

PART I.

THE GENESIS OF A TRADITION
ITS EUPHORIA AND ITS DECADENCE

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THE GENESIS OF A TRADITION

I

In the third century B.C. the founder of Roman epic poetry and drama, the poet Livius Andronicus rendered Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin for use as a text-book of Greek poetry and legend. Although faultily executed, this book satisfied a real want by introducing the Romans to a knowledge of Greek culture and mythology. This was an attempt at recreating a work of art in the framework of a different language and culture. It was the first of many hundreds of thousands.

In this attempt Livius established the now well known functional correlation between Greek and Roman deities : Aphrodite equalled Venus, Zeus equalled Jupiter and so on. While Homer invoked the Muses, Livius substituted the native Italian spirit of song, the Camenae¹; but their personality was too fragile to survive.

The thematic similarity between Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, written during the last decades of the Pre-Christian era, is only one among many manifestations of the significance Greek mythology had acquired at the time. The main outlines and prominent features of both these two epics are alike. The main outlines and prominent features of both these two epics are alike. The romantic adventures of Aeneas, in his wanderings by land and sea are counterpart of those of Ulysses.

As in the *Iliad* the wrath of Achilles was to the Greeks "the direful spring of woes unnumbered"², so in the *Aeneid* was the

1. The Roman goddesses. They seem, however, to be water-deities, having a grove and spring outside the Porta Capena (Plutarch, Numen, 13).

2. *Iliad*, Bk. I.

never dying enmity¹ of Juno (Hera) to the Trojans.¹ In the *Odyssey* again, Ulysses (Odysseus) pays a visit to the infernal regions, under the guidance of the Sibyl² to hold a converse with his father and learn the fortunes and the fate of posterity.

Besides these, there are very many minor imitations such as the description of the shield of Achilles made by Vulcan, (Hephaestus) at the request of Thetis³ and that of Aeneas by the same master-hand. The adventures of Ulysses with the Cyclop polyphemus suggests that of Aeneas with the same cruel monster. Many of the most splendid incidents in the *Aeneid* are borrowed closely from Homer. Such were the myths of Orpheus and Eurydice, and Hercules and Cacus.

Virgil drew heavily and freely on Greek mythological figures and tales from many sources. In addition to Homer's *Iliad* there were the Alexandrian poet of the second century B.C., Apollonius Rhodius, the author of the *Argonautica*, Hesiod, whose *Theogony* contained a mythical account of the genealogy of the gods; and of a *Catalogue of Women*, who, being beloved by the gods, had become mothers of heroes, as also the cyclic poets who described the return of the Grecian chiefs from Troy and their fortunes.

An evidence of the great importance given to Greek mythology at the time, when Rome was still on its ascendancy, was the painstaking effort made by Ovid in writing his *Metamorphoses*⁴. No doubt the need for a repertory of the Greek legends and of Greek myths was urgent.

The practice of employing exemplars from history and myths to illustrate a moral lesson was a very wide-spread tradition at the time. It had come down from Homer and others where the heroic figures of the still earlier past were taken as paragons and quoted in speeches so that the later generations could copy and imitate their virtues and eschew their errors⁵. It proliferated all throughout classical literature to an unbelievable extent. For instance, Propertius Sextus, (51 B.C) the Roman poet, who composed erotic poetry, felt that his own passion was

1. *The Aeneid* Bk. I.

2. The Sibyls were certain inspired women who flourished in different parts of the ancient world, at Cumae, and Delphi.

3. *The Iliad*, XVIII. This is also the theme of a poem by W.H. Auden.

4. 43 BC — 18 AD. 2

5. See W. Jaeger, *Paideia*, Oxford, 1938.

not sufficient as a theme for a poem unless it was substantiated and exemplified by mythological parallels.

In his poem *Susceptibility*, Le invokes Demophoon whom the goddess Ceres (Demeter) tried to make immortal by placing in the flames in order to purge away his mortal element, and eventually perished in the fire.

The poet feels that he is like the legendary Demophoon, burning in the flames of his unsatisfied erotic impulses. At the same time he is careless of the danger of becoming blind like Thamyrae, the Thracian bard who challenged the Muses to a trial of skill and lost. He insists on his erotic pursuit :

I'll keep my eye for beautiful girls till the very end. ¹

The native Roman literature and Roman culture were rude and simple : so Rome went to school with the Greeks.² Roman literature and thought rose to their noblest when all educated Romans spoke and wrote Greek as well as Latin.

In its topmost development, the Roman empire was not Latin speaking but bilingual, Latin and Greek. The Romans themselves employed Greek as a social and intellectual language. There is ample evidence of this. The last words uttered by Julius Caesar when he was breathing his last, were Greek. When Caesar (44 B.C) saw Brutus attacking him, he is reported to have said to him : *καὶ σὺ τέκνον;* "You too, my boy?"³. The emperor Marcus Aurelius (180 A.D.) himself kept his private spiritual diary in Greek. There was a perfect synthesis which was called Greco-Roman.

However, the two streams of language and culture which had glided along together to create Graeco-Roman civilization diverged and proceeded in different directions in the fourth century A.D.⁴ And in

1. Michael Grant, *Roman Readings*, Penguin, 1967, p. 249

2. Cirero (106—43 B.C) practised speaking in Greek; Horace (65 — 8 B.C) began his career as a poet by writing Greek; Cicero's friend Atticus actually gave up Rome and went to live in Athens. whence his name.

3. Suet. *D. Iul.* 82.2

4. In 364 A.D. When the Roman Empire was divided into Western and Eastern Empires.

spite of the frequent contacts that existed, the gap between west and east widened¹ until it grew into a conflict after the serious discords arising from difference in opinions in the eighth and ninth centuries after which it developed virtually into a war.² The result was that Greek culture was cut off from the western part of Europe during the Dark Ages, except for a few trickles which found access to it through various alien channels.³

An impenetrable darkness fell in the west accompanied by political chaos and intellectual paralysis. Learning languished, ancient texts disappeared and the Graeco-Roman system which had kept alive in the west the ancient studies came abruptly to an end.

However, the task of education was taken up by the Church and profane studies were fostered as a means of fitting ecclesiastics for the discharge of their duties. Monastic schools preserved some elements of ancient learning but it was learning subservient to ecclesiastic ends.

True, Christianity superseded Hellenism; but it did not and could not repudiate the elements of Hellenic culture, which it had previously adopted as instruments for furthering its own original aim of converting the Hellenic world.

Its creeds were formulated in the terminology of pagan Hellenic philosophy and literature. And it picked up and carried along with it a body of pre-Christian Hellenic literature nurtured and sustained by a substratum of legends and myths to serve as models of literary stylistic excellence and as canons of metaphysical reasonings as well as a basis for a new culture.

The quantity and range of the Hellenic pagan literature that the Christian Church took under its aegis was actually much greater than the minimum required for strictly utilitarian purposes. This generous preservation of an Hellenic literary heritage has caused it embarrassment; for like a slain Egyptian fertility god Osiris's dismembered body-these disjecta membra of Hellenism have retained within themselves the latent spark of life which has repeatedly burst into flame after lying

1. In 476 A.D. During the time of Emperor Romulus and "little Augustus"

2. The Christian Church was divided after 1045 A.D., when the Pope excommunicated the Patriarch of Constantinople and the entire eastern Church as heretical

3. And it only returned after the fall of Constantinople.

dormant for centuries. Thus, unintentionally the Christian Church has served as a carrier for un-Christian and even anti-Christian Hellenic ideas and ideals, which have sometimes re-asserted themselves to their Christian purveyors' consternation.

It was under the auspices of the Church that the copying and therefore the preservation of classical texts began. But for the most part its attitude was one of definite hostility. The position adopted was due to certain utterances of the Latin Fathers, made in the first flush of religious enthusiasms and handed on to later ages as final and dogmatic pronouncements.

Thus the Latin Church Father Tertullian Quintus Septimus (150—220 A.D.), the creator of ecclesiastical Latinity was the first to raise the question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"¹ St. Hieronymus or Jerom (c. 340—420) who was much engaged in theological controversy, maintained that poetry is *daemonium cibus*, "the food of devils"² While Gregory the Great (590—604) who sent Augustine to England, held that the praises of Christ could not be uttered by the same lips as the praises of Jove. It might be added, that Boethius³ whose *De Consolatione Philosophiae* was translated by King Alfred and Chaucer, adopted much the same attitude when he represented philosophy as driving from his couch the Muses with their false and comfortable counsels.

These were among the pronouncements which were to furnish arguments for the discrediting of Pagan literature and mythology throughout the Middle Ages; though at no stage in practice was the rejection of secular literature complete.

At the same time there was a deeply rooted consciousness of the value of classical pagan literature; a sense visible in Jerome and Augustine of its aesthetic and humane qualities, and an aliveness even on the part of Tertullian to its uses as a preliminary to theological studies: "*Studia sine divina non possunt*"⁴.

1. *Ad Nationes*, (in Clark's Ante-Nicene Christian Library), ii, 7, Among his many writings his best known is *Apology*. It is a vigorous vindication of the Christians against the attacks and charges of the heathen world.

2. *Epistles*, XXI, 13.

3. 470—475 A.D.

4. *De Idololatria*, 20.

In this moral liberal attitude they were supported by the Greek Fathers of the third and fourth centuries by Origen and Clement of Alexandria; while Basil the Great also wrote an address to young readers, pointing out the positive value of pagan literature.

In his *De Doctrina Christiana*, 18, St. Augustine boldly proclaimed that pagan writings contained useful teachings, even glimpses of God and that their good things belonged to those who could use them, and he held that the best in ancient literature and thought might well be adapted to Christian needs.

Thus far, then it may be said that as time went on, positive values were attached to the Graeco-Roman tradition in pagan literature, the aesthetic merits in classical literature being to some extent appreciated, and still more its usefulness for practice and educational purposes.

However, one fundamental fact remained—that Latin as distinct from Greek culture lay at the root of all subsequent literary development. It was indeed, a parting of the ways, full of significance for later history. Nevertheless, this did not prevent classical Greek writings from being received as the works of great times; they were accepted as authorities whatever topic they treated.

In general, this was a transitional period, a period of gathering and selecting from the classics past, recasting and presenting the antique substance in forms suited to the tastes and capacities of their own. At the same time there was scanty severing of legend and fiction from history and science.

Mythology, however, which was incorporated in Greek culture and language was on the wane and lost much ground. This was due to the strong counteraction to its study within the Church, because it was supposed to be the work of a world which was corrupt, pagan, dead and damned.

The very Church which had made use of Greek culture at the beginning, was now the one that had done a great deal to diminish its value, in order to lay stress on the spiritual significance of the Scriptures when it realized how closely Greek culture was linked with mythology which was considered incompatible with Christianity. Antagonism had reached its peak. Pope Gregory¹ was bitterly opposed to Greek

1. A.D. 590—604.

culture. An obvious evidence of this is the persecution that the famous French Humanist¹ Friar Rabelais Françoise suffered for his addiction to the study of Greek culture when he had been declared an apostate.

The notion that prevailed was that which dismissed mythology as bizarre and chimerical fancies. Nevertheless, mythology did survive, deep seated and ingrown within the interstices of Greek and Roman cultures, in Church libraries, and schools as well as in religion itself which had become a channel for its survival. The existence of the pagan deities, the position of Christianity and such topics were discussed by both assailants and defenders of Christianity on a purely philosophical basis.

Perhaps the most widely used school-book of the times was the *De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii* by Martianus Capella during the first part of the fifth century A.D.²

This was a work of nine books. The first two are dedicated to the allegorical narrative of the wooing and marriage of Mercury (Hermes) with the polymath maid Philology (in a wide sense). Mercury — according to Plotinus is the *λόγος*; hence the propriety of his marriage with Philology (*φιλιτ-λόγος*).

Mercury looks for a bride: Sophia or Mantica or Psyche are excluded; Virtus advises him to ask Apollo who in his turn advises him to marry Philosophy. Under the merry escort of the Muses and encyphred by the music of the Spheres, Virtus, Apollo and the bridegroom wing their way to Jove's residence. A counsel of the gods is summoned; the decision taken is favourable; the bride will be raised to divine rank.

In the second book Philology appears willing to marry but is afraid at the greatness of the honour. Her mater Phronesis prepares her for the wedding; four noble matrons; the cardinal virtues greet her, and the Graces, with three mystic kisses, put heart into her. Athanasia, daughter of Apotheosis comes to escort her to Heaven, but first orders her to deliver that with which her bosom is seen to swell; at this she vomits forth many rolls of papyrus and of linen which are gathered up by the virgins Artes and Discipline, Urania and Calliope helping. The bride now drinks from the cup of immortality and mounts to heaven,

1. Fifteenth century.

2. Zeller, *Phii, der Griechen*, 111, 2, p. 561.

where Juno presents gifts to her. Under the guidance of Juno, she crosses the circles of the planets and reaches the milky way where Jove's residence is.

There, all the Greek gods and celestial beings known to Latin mythology assemble with a deity from Egypt here and there, besides the guards of the elements (elementorum praesides) and a most beautiful company of the angelic folk and souls of blessed ancients.

Now the bride demands a reading of the list of her dowry. Phoebus, with the bridal gifts, presents seven maid servants; these are the seven artes — Ars Grammatica; Ars Dialectica; Rhetorica; Geometrica; Arithmetica; Astronomica and Harmonia. Each one, as Phoebus leads forward, tells her parentage, and then sets forth in details the substance of her art most dryly, laying aside all original allegory.

Each of the seven books is dedicated to one art. They are the allegorical encyclopaedia of the arts of the trivium and quadrivium. This work was highly esteemed in the Middle Ages and became the standard school book. Through it the men of the Middle Ages received their profane education and the larger part of their classical knowledge. It is written in a medley of prose and verse. The author of this book is referred to by Chaucer in the *Merchant's Tale*¹ as well as in *The House of Fame*.²

II

During the Seventh Century A.D. England moved out into the main stream of Western Europe and entered for the first time into the inheritance of Greece and Rome, sadly attenuated though that tradition was. The envoys of the Catholic Church³ took to Britain, in addition to the entire corpus of Ecclesiastical writings, a body of European culture which had its basis on Graeco-Roman civilization.

Ever since that time mythology, being one of the significant accretions of the culture of Greece and its foster child Rome, has worked

1. ll., 488 and seq.

2. l., 985.

3. In 605 A.D. led by St. Augustine who became the first archbishop of Canterbury at the time of king Ethelbert.

itself into English culture and has provided a great deal of its material, particularly in the domain of poetry. Thus Englishmen were enabled for the first time to share in the legacy of the ancient world and to hand on to the later generations the elements of that many-sided culture.

During the Dark Ages some knowledge of Graeco-Roman history and mythology, survived, though often in as curiously disfigured and condensed form. Perhaps most of the people of that time had no sense of historical perspective. So, they mixed up in their minds the near with the distant past and the factual with the fanciful.

Obviously, the writers did not feel the long retreating passage of time, where daring enterprises and hazardous activities of different sources and character had their serial places, one behind another, this near and that remote. They discerned only one single unit, the heroic past; but one part of that past was Graeco-Roman; a melange of history and mythology. This unitary perception grew more orderly and complex as the Dark Ages made its way towards a more civilized state of things.

The strangest synthesis of Greek mythology with the English tradition during this period is in the poem called *Phoenix*¹. It is the most elaborate attempt on the part of an Anglo-Saxon poet to allegorize natural history.

The myth of the *Phoenix* was the creation of Egyptian animal-worship which reached the Greek world through Herodotus's description of Egypt². Here the myth of the self-perpetuating bird is reshaped into a symbol of Christian immortality.³

It is the story of a fabulous bird, of golden red plumage, which, according to a tale reported by Herodotus (ii, 73) came to Heliopolis every five hundred years on the death of its father, and there buried itself in the temple of the sun. According to another version, the Phoenix after living five hundred years built itself a funeral pyre and died upon it. From his remains a fresh phoenix arose.

1. Transl. J.D. Spaeth, *Old English Poetry*, (Princeton, 1922).

2. 2.73. possibly from Hecataeus.

3. On its rich symbolism see J. Hubaux and M. Lergy, *Le Mythe du phoenix dans les littératures Grecque et Latine*, Paris, 1939.

The poem, however, begins with an exotic description of the Eastern paradise where the bird makes its home. It lives for a thousand years, then it flies eastward and builds its own nest in some secret wood land tree. The nest is consumed by the fire caused by the heat of the sun. From its ashes the Pheonix renews its life. Then the poet goes on to draw the allegorical moral.

Although the first half of *Phoenix* is basically a translation of a Latin poem *De Eue Phoenice* attributed to Lactantius (c. 300), a fourth century Ecclesiastical writer, the Anglo-Saxon poet did not hesitate to amplify upon his source with interpretations of his own. He suppresses the remote myth, substitutes the Hebrew biblical storics, and changes Phæthon's fires into lightning and the final fire of Doomsday.

One might conjecture the allegory operates on several levels. The death and rebirth of the Phoenix stand for the resurrection of the soul out of the purgatorial flames of Judgement, as well as for the death and Ascension of Christ. In any event, the Phoenix as a whole represents a graceful adaptation of pagan myth to the uses of Christian doctrine. This kind of symbolizing provided the artistic framework of the old English poem.

The significance of the *Phoenix* however, is that it is the first translation of any poem with mythical contents in the classical literature, into any modern language.

A great deal of the progress of the Middle Ages was educational progress; and one of its main features was the knowledge of Classical thought, language and literature expanded and deepened. This was due to the gradual appearance of the universities, libraries, and organizations which were either established or re-oriented to the study of classics and particularly the Greek philosophy of Aristotle; however deviously acquired.

Another feature of the intellectual activity of the time was also the translation from latin to the vernacular languages. Greek however, remained a close field, and the few islands of Greek that remained was read in latin translations. When Europe was over-run by the barbarians, learning took refuge in monasteries. The Benedictines preserved humane culture, and their schools were in high repute.

During the Middle Ages, the world of the Church and the world of scholarship with its international language of latin was a unity.

Notwithstanding the great linguistic and political differences which existed between the European countries, on the spiritual and cultural plane Western Europe was a unity.

When the Twelfth century drew to its close, France had become the centre of literature and Paris was its academic metropolis. And from it literature, conjointly with mythology radiated outwards warmly to Italy and Britain and the rest of Europe.

The appearance of a large number of verse and prose works on subjects drawn from classical antiquity is a significant aspect of the expansion of Greek and Roman cultures at the time. During this period a number of important Greek and Latin books were translated. Among them, the greatest romance on classical subjects was *Le Roman de Troie*, written by Benoît de Sainte Maure, about A.D. 1160, which starts with the Argonauts sailing eastwards to find the Golden Fleece, and ends with the sack of Troy.

Strangely enough, Homer's *Iliad* is altered in such a way as to make the Trojans innocent and the Greeks aggressors. This shift of perspective is maintained through the poem and after the fall of Troy, the poem ends with the murder of Ulysses by his son Telegonus : Circe's child.

Benoît justified himself by saying that he took the whole story from an eyewitness, who did not commit the foolishness of making gods and goddesses fight in human battles. And states that his source was *De Excidio Troiae Historia, The History of the Destruction of Troy* by Dares Phrygius. This book was also imitated in the *Historia Destructionis Troiae* written in Latin late in the thirteenth century by Guido de Columnis and it narrates the ancient story with the apparatus of Medievalism.

Benoît made use also of another book of the same type. This was the Latin translation of what purported to be a Greek version of *The Diary of the Trojan war* by Dictys of Crete, who assumed to have been the official historian of the war on the Greek side.

Benoît made the most of these sources simply because they were easy to read. And this book became very popular and extremely important. The methods, sentiments, and manners of the characters are all, however, twelfth century. That means that the story, its heroes and heroines were quite real for the readers.

Le Roman de Troie virtually re-introduced classical history and legend into European culture. It was a seminal book which announced and encouraged a whole new school of poetry and imagination. Among other things, it stimulated the tracing of genealogical connexions.

This book was widely translated and even more widely imitated. To the people of the Middle Ages, most of the world and most of history was unknown: therefore they were ready and glad to believe anything as long as it was marvelous and had a substantial backing. As myth and history received equal credence, there was no essential difference between them. The mythico-historical method in verse writing had developed into a common practice.

There were other sources too; These were the *Romance of Aeneas* and *The Romance of Thebes*. *The Romance of Aeneas* in essence was a rewriting of Virgil's *Aeneid* decorating and disguising its original with mythical details taken from the commentaries of the original work. *The Romance of Thebes* and the *Romance of Alexander* by Lambert Le Tort and Alexandre Burnay were two other books which set the imagination in motion at the time.

Another poem of quite a great impact at the time was the *Roman de La Rose*. It was also a source from which so many legends found their way into literature. It is a French verse romance, of which the first 4000 lines were written about the middle of the thirteenth century by Guillaume de Lorris and the remainder, some 16000 lines, about forty years later by Jean de Meung.

The first part is an allegorical love poem. In the second part, which is of a more satirical character, after a vast amount of display of the author's learning, the lover obtains his rose with the intervention of Venus.

This book had an immediate and long-lasting success. And its wide appeal is proved by the existence of hundreds of manuscript copies as well as the fact that it was translated into English by Chaucer

1. It was translated and expanded in Holland by Scher Dieregotgaf and Jacob van Maerlant; It reached Germany in the early 13th Century by *Liet von Troje* of Herbert Von Fritslar; It was turned into Italian, French, German, Danish, Icelandic, Czech, Scots and English.

There is a Scots version attributed to Barbour and *A Troye-boke* by Chaucer's Benedictine pupil, Lydgate, 1420.

and others. Two hundred years after its appearance it was turned into French prose by Moline (1483). Forty years later Clement Marot re-edited it, with moral comments which remind us of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

It was not only the best of the Graeco-Roman world that came down to England from France in modern adaptations, but also the most trivial. Yet still it stirred the imagination.

There were numerous Middle Eastern tales which were woven into Greek and late Latin Romances and they lived on to inspire that untruthful voyager Sir John Mandeville, to make Rabelais vie with them in the journeys of Pantagruel, and finally to help Othello in bewitching Desdemona with tales of

the Anthropophagi, and men whose heads
Do grow beneath their shoulders.¹

The Middle Ages was the period when many of the favourable Greek myths, like Narcissus, Pygmalion and Philomela entered European and from it into English literature.

Despite the fact that some of the stories are tales of Christian chivalry, by far the greater number are tales from Greek and Roman mythology and most of them come from Ovid who represented a synthesis of Greek and Roman cultures. The transformation of human beings into beasts and stones and trees and water found in Greek mythology, afforded a fertile vast area for its exploitation at the time.

The myth of Narcissus was among the first to enter into European literature through Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Narcissus was the handsome son of the Athenian River-god Cephissus and the nymph Thespias, who having rejected the love of Echo the nymph was punished by Nemesis by becoming enamoured of his own image when he saw its reflection in stream. He lay gazing enraptured, into the water. His fruitless attempt to approach this beautiful object drove him to despair and he wasted away.

According to the legend he was changed into a white flower with its red corollary which bears his name. The moral lesson entailed in

1. Shakespeare, *Othello*, 1.3. 144 f.

it is that the realization of the extreme wishes of mankind usually leads to tragedy.¹

Sometime between 1316 and 1328 Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was translated by an unknown author². It was supplied with intellectual and moral commentary. The author first translated the fables as Ovid gave them and then added on an instructive explanation. For instance, when Narcissus pined away for love of his own reflection and was changed into a flower, he became the flower spoken of by the Psalmist in the old Testament, and so, he was the symbol of vanity and the flower of human pride :

Narcissus florete devint
Florete quel ? Tele dont dist
Li Psalmistres c'au main florist
Au soir est cheoite et fletrie³.

Perhaps only the Middle ages could have blended elements so diverse as the brittle, cynical beautiful Greek legend of Ovid and his Christian moralising.

Guillaume de Lorris, who uses myths in an illustrative way in his *Roman de la Rose* rewrites the tale of Narcissus from Ovid. Although he simplifies it he makes the nymph Echo merely Echoë a great lady and omits the metamorphosis of Narcissus into a flower.⁴

In 1922, in *Fragments of Narcissus*, Paul-Ambroise Valery, used the figure of Narcissus to symbolize "the self" which is happiest away from others, meditating and worshipping the "self-sufficing I". As Narcissus stoops lower and lower to enfold his infatuating reflection, as he comes into contact and fractures the fluid looking glass, and crosses the threshold into the cavernous eyes which grow nearer and nearer to him, he reaches the consummation of self-annuling and self absorption. Valery's main dilemma was that of the mind which dechotomized the external and the internal worlds of contemplation.

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1. Homer, *A Hymn to Demeter*, 8, 428.
 2. Also in *Ovide Moralisé*, ed. C. De Boer (Amsterdam, 1915).
 3. Lines — 1886, *Ovide Moralisé*, 3. 1853 f.
 4. *Roman de La Rose*, 11., 1439—1510.
Echo. "une haute dame" appear: in line 1444.

Another equally important myth is that of Pygmalion which Jean de Meun took from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*¹ and used it in his *Roman de Rose*² in the thirteenth century.

Pygmalion was a king and a sculptor in Cyprus. He became enamoured of a beautiful statue that he had made of a woman, and at his request Aphrodite the goddess of beauty, gave it life.

The myth of Pygmalion seemed to be a very successful instrument for the illustration of the poet's contemplative design. Several authors reconnoitered its possibilities and found it serviceable. In the Sixteenth century again the story is told by John Marston (1575—1634) in his erotic poem *The Metamorphoses of Pygmalion's image* (1598). In the Nineteenth century William Morris tackles with the same theme in *Earthly Paradise*, in addition to W.S. Gilbert's³ treatment of it as a subject of comedy in *Pygmalion and Galatea*. The last author to have dealt with the story in the Twentieth Century was B. Shaw⁴ in his drama *Pygmalion*.

The darkness that had fallen on Italy and had begun with the severance of Roman from Greek culture lifted and the real dawn was heralded by the return of Greek culture to the lands which had once known it so well. It was in Italy that Greek culture returned first, and it was there that the first of the stimulating rediscoveries were made during the Renaissance.

The people who did most to recapture Greek and retrieve the rest of Latin culture were two Italians, Petrarch (1304 — 74) and Boccaccio (1313—75) who had a second home in France.

The Renaissance was largely created by many interlacing groups of men who spoke not only their own tongue but Latin too, and sometimes Greek. The synthesis of Graeco-Roman with the modern European culture in the Renaissance produced an age of thought and achievement comparable in magnificence to the earlier synthesis between the spirit of Greece and the energy of Rome. Since then, the culture of the civilized European nations have been largely characterized by the teaching of some other language in schools and by the constant flow of translations, imitations and emulations into their literatures.

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1. 10. 243—87
 2. 11., 20817 — 183.
 3. 1836—1961.
 4. 1867—1930.

The Renaissance was a sudden explosive expansion, in which the frontiers of space and time and thought were broken down with bewildering spell. A great part of classical culture, which had lain hidden untouched and neglected, was being re-discovered as though it were absolutely new. And classical scholarship took a tremendous leap forward. People began really to see through and sympathise with the ancients. Difficulties of interpretation, confusions of persons and traditions, silly legends and misunderstandings began to vanish and immense areas of activities were expanded.

The European languages were still further improved by the influx of new words taken directly from classical latin, and to a smaller but still significant extent, from Greek, some directly, others from adaptations already made by the French.

English also assimilated Greek and Latin words but they combined with the Anglo-Saxon and Norman French to make it far richer. There was a deliberate policy of borrowing during the fourteenth century. This was forced upon them as a solution to the problem of translating from a rich language into a poor one. Soon they began to latinize or hellenize french. The English language too, had not begun its life entirely devoid of Greek and Roman influences. Language was still on the making and writers needed to enrich their composition. Graeco-Roman mythology became a pre-requisite for the poet as it was an evidence of his erudition and culture.

One of the first books to come out of Caxton's press was *The History of Jason* in 1477. One other translation printed by Caxton was ovid's *Metamorphoses*,

However, the first serious attempts at a modern verse rendering were made in France, by Hugues Salel, with his 1545 version of the *Iliad*, 1—10, and Jacque Peletier du Maus, who translated the *Odyssey* in 1547. In England Arthur Hale, translated Salel's version in 1581; but his work was soon outdone by the complete rendering made from the Greek by George Chapman, who produced the *Iliad* in English verse in 1611, *The Odyssey* in 1614 and the *Hymns* in 1616.

During the same period there were other translations from Greek history, philosophy, drama, oratory and what not. The most famous of the Elizabethan translations is *The Lives of the Noble Grecians*

and Romans in 1579. Shakespeare used it, borrowing its very words as well as its stories. It is not Plutarch, it is a new masterpiece on Plutarch's theme and it came into English, not from the Greeks directly but from the French Jacques Amyot.

By the time the Renaissance had reached its acme in England, churchmen as well as the educated classes were having ample recourse to Graeco-Roman myths. Whether this came about through Ovid's *Metamorphoses* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, or other direct sources, one fact remains true that Graeco-Roman myths had begun to work themselves into English literature. Their dissemination however, outside the scholarly circles had been accomplished. This was partly due to the fact that very often the essential art of poetry was to connect Greek and Roman myths with contemporary life. And myths have enabled the poets to sharpen their lessons, to shed fresh light on them and to magnify each present occasion by placing it with high precedents from the past.

Translations and verse renderings from the Greek and Roman literatures and mythology as well as the activity of discovering Greek and Latin manuscripts during the Renaissance were paralleled by the discovery of classical sculptural and architectural works of art, which had been buried in the ground for hundreds of years. The most prominent discovery was that of the statue of Laocoon which the artists studied and began to copy and emulate its special beauties. It drove scholarship into making a tremendous leap forward, for it represented the very beginnings of the history of a nation. People began to understand and sympathise with the ancients particularly their mythic past.

According to the legend, Laocoon was a Trojan priest of Apollo who, when he was offering a sacrifice to Poseidon, saw two serpents issue forth from the sea and attack his sons. He rushed to their help but the serpents wreathed themselves about him and crushed him. This was said to be a punishment because he had warned his countrymen against admitting the wooden horse into Troy.

The rediscovery of the classical world meant much more to Western Europe than an enrichment of vocabulary, or an improvement of the style by poets, or the discovery of literary forms. It meant a

rediscovery of a wealth of material provided by the Classical history and mythology, which stimulated the great production of masterpieces in literature.

In the fourteenth century, after a splendid start, French literature almost faded away, because France was involved in the Hundred Years' War. Italian literature had begun its magnificent motion upward with Dante and kept it up with Petrarch and Boccaccio. But England, after an interminable strife, was coming at last into being. Although it had its plagues and troubles in the fourteenth century, it developed its own character, building it up with the native material as well as with that acquired from the Graeco-Roman culture with its many-sided learning and vigorousness, with mythology playing a prominent part in the development of its literature. This is best exemplified in Chaucer, the father of English poetry and the poets that followed suit.

TRADITION IN FULL FLOURISH

Although the Renaissance uncovered a vast treasury of new material to the Western European writers in the shape of history and mythology, some of it was not unknown in the Middle Ages but was not so fully conceived as real or apprehended clearly. Now writers laid hold of this accumulated wealth and utilized it for their ends so eagerly that they often produced gracefully or stylishly polished lumber stuff. One is apt to get weary of their tedious innumerable allusions — which if ordinary are trite — and if scholarly are indistinct; with their ancient analogical procedures and collations every speaker becomes a Demosthenes or a Cicero, every soldier an Achilles or a Hector; and the mythological tools — Dionysus, the Satyrs and Fauns, Artemis and Diana, the nymphs, titans and cupids, which fill up the literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The best proof that the myths created by the Greek fancy are really durable is the fact that they have, so to speak, had nine lives, and outlasted such usages and still excite the imagination of poets and artists in the twentieth century.

The material provided by Greek and Roman mythologies has been put into a variety of uses. There are many aspects of it. It has taken the form of decorative landscapes as in the case of Chaucer, or provided important ancillary material as in Spencer's work. Shakespeare has also used it as a decorative reference, while Milton, in order to give a supernatural and spiritual background to his religious epics has crowded his poetry with legends and mythological allusions, so as to give it profundity and be able to drive his point home.

In the Renaissance epics mythology is all-pervading. It is not predominant in them all; but it is one of the main pre-suppositions without which they cannot be understood or fully appreciated.

When Greek learning came into the hands of the nations of Western Europe, it was a decadent tradition. They were introduced into a culture in which Greek had been forgotten, but its phantasmal heroic past was still within the range of their sight. The result is that their classical landscapes are strange and bewildering. They are merely, decorative landscapes, and in these decorative scenes, the mythology of Greece as learned from Ovid and others is an important element :

The statue of Venus, glorious for to see,
Was naked fleting in the large see,
And from the navele doun all covered was
with waves grene, and brighte as any glas.¹

This is a glimpse of Greek mythology from Chaucer's *Knights Tale*, the greatest of Canterbury stories. This he took from Boccaccio's *Theseid*² after he had naturalized by omitting much of the mythology and epic machinery and added a great deal of material of his own, to make these stories more expressive of real life. And if we dallied around for a while with the poet's travellers on their way to Canterbury, we would learn many things of ancient history, the history of Troy, and Thebes and about their mythical background.

One May morning Chaucer dreamt that he was awakened by the singing of birds and found himself in a chamber with windows of stained glass in which were depicted the narratives :

1. Chaucer, *The Knights Tale*, 11., 1097—1101.

2. A poem on the story of Theseus, Palamon and Arcite, translated by Chaucer

Of Ector and king Priamus,
Of Achilles and Lamedon,
Of Medea and of Jason,
of Paris Eleyne and Lavyne.
And all the walles with colours fyne
Were peynted, bothe text and glosse,
Of al the Romances of the Rose¹.

Many of Chaucer's poems were derived from Graeco-Roman literature which was inseparable from mythology and this was due to his knowledge of French and Italian. His *Romaunt of the Rose*, a poem of 7700 lines in short couplets is a translation with amplification, of so much of the french *Roman de la Rose*.

The narrative is set into the structure of a dream in which the poet calls at the Garden of Mirth, after he had been invited by Idleness. Here he witnesses different allegorical figures, the God of Love, Gladness, Courtesy and son on. In the water of the fountain of Narcissus, he sees the reflection of a rose-tree and is enamoured of a rose-bud. His attempts to pick it up are helped or hindered by different allegorical figures. The god Eros shoots arrows at the poet and brings him under his spell. He then instructs him as to the means by which the lover achieves his ends. The poem is a vigorous satire on religion, women and the social order of the times.

A gain in the *House of Fame*, he saw the temple of Venus with the stories of the *Aeneid* engraved on its walls. Just so had Aeneas, at the most critical moment of his errancy, his first landing in Italy. He saw the story of Minos and Daedalus and Icarus-an earlier escape from foreign hegemony into exile with an earlier landing in Italy-picture on the doors of Apollo's prophetic temple at Cumae.

The most remarkable classical author Chaucer had read was Valerius Flaccus, the author of an epic on *The Argonauts*. Chaucer is the first English writer who speaks of it in *The Legend of Good Women*, l., 1457; he refers to the list of Argo's crew as "a tale long y-now" and in the same legend Chaucer describes the landing of the Argonauts in Lemnos.

1. Chaucer, *The Dream*, The Book of the Duchesse.

The English Renaissance is very often described as Classical in the field of literature. Through the medium of Latin, Greek myths and legends became widely known in England. Ovid's elements of transformation in *Tales*, in which people could be changed into beasts, plants and stars afforded a useful expediency. The Elizabethan readers could not avoid reading about mythology which, in fact, had crept into all the aspects of their lives. There were painted cloths hanging on the walls, pageantries, tableaux covered with figures and incidents from mythology. And almost all Elizabethan writers wrote on subjects connected with Greek and Roman myths. Edmund Spenser (1552—99) and Christopher Marlow (1563—93) were two poets of the period whose poetry disclose a wide knowledge of mythology .

Spenser depended heavily on two manuals of mythology: Boccaccio's *Genealogia deorum* and *The Mythologiae* of Natalis Comes, using their comments and quotations freely.¹

In his *Shepherd's Calender* (Aprile), Syrinx represents Anne Boleyn. She is an Arcadian nymph who, being pursued by the God Pan, threw herself into the river Ladon, where she was changed into a reed. Of this Pan made his pipe. No one could find any difficulty in understanding the analogy between Syrinx, Anne Boleyn and God Pan, Henry VIII, if he knows a little of history and mythology.

Greek mythology is blended with medieval life and thought in order to provide *ancillary material*. This is done deliberately in the *Fairie Queene* where hell as Spenser describes it is almost entirely the Greek and Roman underworlds. For instance, in U.S Sansloy, the deceased pagan is led down through the identical places and past the same persons, as those mentioned in *The Aeneid* such as Tityas, Tantalus and others. There, he is made well by Aesculapius the Greek Deity of health. Tityas was a giant of Greek mythology who attempted to do violence to Leto Latona but was killed by the arrows of Apollo and Artemis her-children. He was placed in hell, where a serpent continually tormented him.

Tantalus, on the other hand, is the son of Zeus. He is represented as punished in hell with an intense thirst and placed up to the chin in a pool of water which recedes when he attempts to drink, while a bough

1. H.G. Lotspeich, *Classical Mythology in the Poetry of Edmund Spenser*, Princeton studies in English, 9, Princeton, 1932.

laden with fruit hangs above his head but withdraws from his hand. All this because he has stolen nectar and ambrosia from the table of the gods and gave them to mortals.

Again, in the *Fairie Queene*¹ the evil recluse Archimago summons Hecate and Gorgon by magic and sends a fairy to Morpheus for a sham dream. The fairy goes away through an ivory door. This again crops up in Virgil's *Aeneid*². There are a few good comments on Spenser's description of hell and their debt to Vergil in M.Y. Hughe's *Virgil and Spenser*³.

In the *Fairie Queene*⁴, Una is set free from her captor Sansloy by a passing group of fauns and satyrs. Satyrs appear in Spenser's epic and very often embark on satyric activities. When a bad spirit is called in, it is usually a classical spirit. This blend of medieval and Graeco-Roman is a deliberate device all through Spenser's poems.

As for Shakespeare, he dominated the classical material which he had access to, moulded, blended and changed it through his creative imagination and made of it a synthesis which, like a chemical compound of known elements was nevertheless, qualitatively different and genuinely new.

He knew, one would daresay without reservation, the classical myths far better than the Bible. And his favourite classical writer was Ovid. If he had not, like other English schoolboys of the time, learned some of Ovid at school, he definitely read him later in the original latin and certainly in Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses*. His friends knew that he very often imitated Ovid, making him, so to speak, a launching pad for his creative work.

In his book of contemporary literature published in 1598, Francis Meres declared that Shakespeare was a re-incarnation of Ovid himself :

1. I.1., 37f.

2. VI. 894—9.

3. University of California, Publications in English, 2,3. Berkeley ; 1929, p. 371 f.

4. 1., 6.

“As the soul of Euphorbus was thought to live in Pythagoras, so the sweet witty soul of Ovid lives in mellifluous and honey-tongued Shakespeare; witness *Venus And Adonis*¹

This is obvious in the rich interlarding and elaboration of the two Greek myths which he came across in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*²

Venus and Adonis, published in 1593, is a highly sensuous work of art and it was probably Shakespeare's first work. Venus, in love with the youth Adonis, detains him from the chase and woos him, but cannot win his love.³ She begs him to meet her on the morrow, but he is then to hunt the boar. She tries in vain to dissuade him. When the morning comes she hears his hounds at bay, and, filled with terror, goes to look for him, and finds him killed by the boar.

In Ovid's tale, Adonis is not indifferent and unwilling as Shakespeare makes him. Shakespeare appropriated his opposition to the erotic activity and his posture of defence from Ovid's account of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis.³ The two accounts however, merge together entirely in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, 6 where Adonis jumps into a river and Venus cries, O Jove, why was not I a flood ? — for Salmacis jumped in after her beloved. The two joined and both became a flood.⁴

In Shakespeare's early plays references to mythological figures or legends are very frequent. In fact, they are very densely scattered. Mythology apart from being utilized in the nature of decoration, the poet used it in order to show off or make a display of his knowledge. Very often he uses it in order to establish contact with the classically cultured audience or in order to impress the public.

1. Meres, *Palladis Tamia* : Wits Treasury, 280.

2. In Ovid's tale Venus and Adonis — 10. 519 — 59 and 705—39.

3. *Met.* 4. 285—388.

4. See D. Bush for a detailed analysis of the treatment of Adonis; cited in introductory note, p. 139f.

In the middle period of his life Shakespeare used mythology in a functional manner i.e. in comic situations or in order to parody the antiquated style of tragedy.¹ But Shakespeare's most serious use of mythology was when he meant to create the feeling of beauty, passion or power above the ordinary level of mankind or give shape to the invisible powers of nature or bestow dignity or grandeur on natural phenomena.

In his last plays mythological divinities have a more directly relevant function -- they even appear in person, sometimes signifying providence and supernatural intervention e.g. Diana in *Pericles*, Jupiter in *Cymbeline*, or to symbolize the power of regeneration as in the theme of the play in *Winter's Tale*.

Shakespeare's debt to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is visible all through his plays. It was the world of fable which this work of art had opened to him, and which he used as freely as he used the visible humanity around him, now making a narrative of star-crossed lovers into a clownish farce in *Mid-Summer Night's Dream*² and now exalting the myth of Pygmalion to symbolize a higher love in the case of *Winter's Tale*³.

There is an all-pervading use of Greek and Latin mythology in the form of decorative references which is sometimes superficial but more often incomparably effective. This is apparent in the musical announcement of dawn in *Cymbeline* :

Hark, hark, the lark at heaven's gate sings,
and Phoebus gins arise
His steeds to water at those springs
On chaliced flowers that lies.⁴

Or in Perdita's breath :
violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
Or Cytherea's breath⁵

1. Example, the language of Pistol in *Henry IV*.

2. 5.1. 220f.

3. 5. 3. 21f.

4. *Cymbeline*, 2.3. 21f.

5. *The Winter's Tale*. 3.4. 120 f.

Or in Hamlet's father,

See, what a grace was seated on this brow;
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
And eye like Mars, to threaten and command,
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill¹

It is true that Shakespeare felt more sensitively about Rome than about Greece, but with Greek mythology it was otherwise. The images which emerge from the handmade manuscripts to become as real as animals and colours and stars — are used strikingly. This shows that the world of mythology was for him no less vivid, though smaller than life around him.

Waiting for her wedding night, Juliet gazes at the bright sky, sees the sun rushing on towards evening, and urges it to hurry, even at the risk of destroying the world. Apparently she does not say so: but it is implied by the superb image :

Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds
Towards Phoebus' lodging; such a waggoner
As Pheathon would whip you to the west,
And bring in cloudy night immediately.²

Greek mythology provides a great deal of the supernatural element for a poet like Milton. In order to understand all of this poet, one must be a classical scholar. The supernatural is an essential part of his epics and gives the heroic deeds their spiritual background.

However, most of the supernatural element is taken from the medieval fantasies : magic, enchanted objects, fabulous animals such as flying hippogriffs. Many of these things are paralleled in Greek legend : the winged horse Pegasus is like the hippogriff, the ring of Gyges made him invisible and so on. But none of the great classical

1. *Hamlet*, 3.4. 55f.

2. *Romeo and Juliet*, 5.2 1f.

The myth of Pheathon is in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, 1. 748—2. 332; "waggoner" is the Elizabethan translator Golding's word for the young charioteer, and no doubt Shakespeare remembered it.

epics makes such supernatural properties essential in its plot. Nevertheless classical mythology is blended with it to provide significant ancillary material.

In *Paradise Lost* Milton conceives his divinities in the image of the Olympian pantheon. Gods and angels and even their appearances are largely described in mythical terms invented by the classical epic writers. For instance, when Milton's archangel Michael appears to drive out Adam and Eve from Eden, he is in complete uniform; dressed in a military vest of purple painted by the Hellenic deity of the rainbow :

Iris had dipt the woof.¹

And when Raphael descends to caution Adam of the tempter's approach he looks like the scriptural Seraphs, wearing six wings; but two of them are on his feet, like those of Hermes, to whom he is then likened :

Like Maia's son he stood² .

This is a reminiscence of Mercury as he was landing on Mount Atlas :

hic primum paribus nitens Cylindrus alis constitit.³ .

In *Paradise Lost*⁴ there is a dreadful armed conflict between the angels and the devils. This conflict is an imitation of the battle of the gods in the *Iliad*⁵. The subversion of Satan is framed on the subversion and the defeat of Ares when the devils fall for nine days—; and the apex in which the angels break mountains and send them forth with violence onto the devils, 'with ejaculation dire', is modulated from the war of the Titans against the Olympians in Hesiod's *Theogony*.

Milton's God operates in a way quite different from that of Jehovah. He behaves more or less like Zeus. Thus, when Satan comes near Paradise he is ordered by Gabriel and his heavenly host to halt, and there would have been a clash

1. *Paradise Lost*, 11. 244.

2. *Ibid.*, 5. 285.

3. Virgil, *Aeneid*, 4. 252.

4. 6. especially 11., 637 f.

5. 11., 20 — 1.

had not soon
 The Eternal, to prevent such horrid fray,
 Hung forth in Heaven his goldens scales, yet seen
 Betwixt Astraea and the Scorpion sign
 Wherein all things created first he weighted
 In these he put two weights,
 The sequel each, of parting and of fight :
 The latter quick up flew, and kicked the beam.¹

This was never the way Jehovah would have behaved; but it would have been Zeus' who actually behaved in this way for Achilles and Hector in the *Iliad*², and Jupiter for Aeneas and Turnus in the *Aeneid*.³ Milton introduced the reference to the serviceability of the scales in the work of creation.

Whole episodes from Graeco-Roman mythology are imitated and adapted. Some of these adaptations are of the highest artistic and spiritual significance. Such, for instance, are the calling up of the heroic dead and the prophetic utterances of the great who were yet to be born. In the *Fairie Queene*, Spenser makes Merlin foretell the future of Britain to Britomart. And in *Paradise Lost* we meet with the greatest of all apocalypses, where one angel discloses to Adam the whole past and another the whole future⁴. This spectacle is an adaptation from the journey Aeneas had made to the underworld and which gave him his vision into the future of Rome⁵.

Various graphic characters of Renaissance epics are copied from, or partly inspired by the figures of Graeco-Roman legends. For example, the warrior maiden, lovely, swift, powerful and brave, who gives battle on the opposing side and performs acts of bravery, is conquered, but at the same time breathes in strong sympathy and sorrow in one of the antagonistic personages. Britomart in Spenser's *Fairie Queene* is such a heroine. The prototype for such a redoubtable maiden was Hippolyta, whom Theseus defeated and whose virgin girdle he took when she went to the aid of the Trojans after the death of Hector. Hippolyta

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1. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4., 990 f.
 2. Homer, *Iliad*, 8 69—77.
 3. Vergil, *Aeneid*, 12. 725 — 7.
 4. Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 5. 563 — 7, 649., 11., 423 — 12, 551.
 5. Vergil, *Aeneid*., 6. 751—88.

figures also as one of the characters in Shakespeare's *A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*. The other example was the bare-breasted queen of the Amazons, Penthesilia, killed by Achilles, who, moved by her youth and beauty, mourned over her.

Quite a number of poems also invoke one or more of the Greek Muses. Such invocations appear as early as Dante himself, particularly in his *Paradise* (l. 13 f.), where Apollo is invoked with an appeal to his own exploits.¹ Similarly Spenser, in his *Epithalamion* calls on the Muses :

Ye learned sisters which have oftentimes
Beene to me ayding, others to adorne :
Whom ye thought worthy of your gracefull rymes,
That even the greatest did not greatly scorne
To heare theyr names sung in your simple layes,
But joyed in theyr praise . . .²

Ben Jonson too, in his dedicatory poem to the Sweet swan of Avon for what he left us, leaves no doubt as to the power of the Muses and the Myths;

He was not of an age, but for all time.

And all the Muses still were in their prime,
When like Apollo he came forth to warme
Our cares, or like a Mercury to charme.³

The performances of contemporary figures are constantly compared to those of Greek and Roman mythical figures. Thus, in *Paradise Lost* Satan was

in bulk as huge
As whom the fables name of monstrous size,
Titanian, or Earth-born, that warred on Jove,
By ancient Tarsus held . . .⁴

Wonderful spectacles are set in analogy against the splendours emerging from the legendary tales. Even *Paradise* is so shown : the

1. Dante, *Paradise*, 2. 8. 18. 82f.

2. Spenser, *Epithalamion*, 1—19.

3. Ben Jonson, *To The Memory of Mr. W. Shakespeare* 11., 43—46.

4. *Paradise Lost*, 1., 196f.

garden from which Milton could not omit the Greek nature-spirits of mythology :

Pan,

Knit with the Graces and the Hours in dance,
Let on the eternal Spring. Not that fair field
Of Enna, where Proserpine gathering flowers,
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis
Was gathered-which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world-nor that sweet grove
Of Daphne, by Orontes and the inspired
Castalian spring, might with this Paradise
Of Eden strive!

Myths and legendary figures have been employed as a medium of reminiscence and evocation. Thus, in half a sentence, or a word, the poet does not only give pleasure to his readers by inducing them to recollect a phrase, an image or an incident of comparatively marked magnificence, splendour, or nobility, but also evokes all the gorgeousness, richness and grandeur of the object or person or place in question.

The art of mythical evocative quotation is not an easy art. It has been disreputed by either the misuse it was put into by scholarship or by the impairment of the significance of mythology: for readers are not often prepared to believe that, in order to appreciate poetry they themselves ought to have been as much erudite as the poet himself. They also believe, and in this instance they are not in the wrong, that looking for "allusions" and "imitations" spoils the life of poetry, altering it from something throbbing with life into a pseudomorphic spurious fabric of an imitated reproduction of variegated pigments and pilfered patent.

Still, there is no doubt that the reader who can identify these evocations without difficulty gets a fuller understanding of the text than the others. Set against the classically trained reader of Milton-the reader who has never concerned himself with the classics is not different from a child reading a novel for the narrative only without comprehending the greater and ultimate meanings that are obvious to every full-grown person.

1. Ibid., 4. 266f.

It is true that this art has been misused. Many poets have employed "imitation" and "allusion" as props to uphold an unsatisfactory structure of imagination or as a display of erudition made specifically to decorate the commonplace. Yet, when suitably utilized, the art is wonderfully impressive. It is not different from the art of imagery. When a poet presents his allusion he adds something to it, and for the alert reader it evokes a scene more graphically, exhibits more clearly all the power of the incident, and ennobles both the poet and his creation.

Generally speaking, these allusions give profundity to the significance, and add a fresh charm or magic: the charm of recalling the past. They replace poignant utterances, and have the adscititious magic power of reminiscence: for the reader who knows his mythology experiences a novel sentiment. Another chord pulsates in his heart as he identifies the figure or the incident. The significance is also enhanced with variations without any more direct description other than the laconic allusion to the legendary hero. He makes us live in a climate of agony, heart-ache, forboding, failure or success.

In addition to power and richness, the allusion achieves its highest effect with its variagated imagination or deep philosophical content. It extends far back into the bygone and has the future in prospect. It operates on the feelings, makes use of many arts, embraces the achievements of several ages and nations, in order to project the potentialities, vigorousness and complexity of human life.

The poets have recognized this intrinsic power of the old legends and have felt in particular the authority of Graeco-Roman myth. They have known all along the splendour of Graeco-Roman poetry which embodied the art of mythology, and they have realized that the myths of Greece and Rome, so far from being lifeless fossilized palaeontology, are much of a living past throbbing with life, of which the Western world is a continuum and therefore they have enriched their own heritage by emphasizing that continuity.

A PERIOD OF CONTROVERSY

When the famous dispute commonly known as "The Battle of Books" broke out in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries, it created agitation in literature and classical scholarship. The question was this — Ought modern writers to admire and imitate the Greek and Latin works of art with their deeply-rooted mythological paraphernalia ?

One of the arguments against them was that the early history and myths of Greece and Rome, when perused at without historical and imaginative perspective, are found to contain many incongruous or illogical paralogisms and incompatibilities. In an epoch of legends, when an unusually courageous individual or an exceptionally good-looking woman becomes well-known, narratives from the lives of other people are soon spun together with the names of the hero or heroines in question, whether they are in accord with the other facts or not. Local gods and goddesses are, through time, treated with other well-known deities indistinguishably as one, and then they gain variagated paradoxical characteristics. When all the myths are written down some of them are manifestly contradictory. It is not difficult for a clear-headed reasonable individual to reach the conclusion that they are all nonsense. Pierre Bayle, (1696-1764) the critic of religion and legend, was amongst those who took this view.¹

Another argument was that the Greek and Roman writers were silly because one of their dramatic conventions was the introduction of gods into human conflicts. Lucan, the Roman poet, thought so as early as the first century A.D. and composed an epic which made no use of deities.

These were not the only ones to fight the gods of Greece and Rome in literature. It will be remembered that the forger who had brought Dares Phrygius before the public stated that his work of art was genuine because no deities made their appearance or intervened in the actions of men.

Still, it is not easy to write on sublime themes without inserting the supernatural, and in a critical epoch the appearance of tangible and audible divinities can always be made to look ludicrous.

However, William Wotton, an important Cambridge man at the time was one of the authorities concerned with the dispute. In his *Reflections Upon Ancient and Modern Learning* (1694) he opines that it is to the advantage of the Christian creed to utilize the best of heathen mythological literature in order to transform and transcend it. Two of the greatest modern heroic poems are all amalgamations of Pagan and Christian thought and mythology, with an ascendancy of Christian

1. See J.L. Gerig and G. L. van Roosbreck, "Unpublished letters of Pierre Bayle" (section 10). *The Romantic Review*, 24, (1933), 211.

ideas — Dante's *Comedy* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In them all the Christian creed is the indispensable operating element. But in none of them could Christianity have been so well enunciated or so definitely stated without the heathen vehicles of mythology and epic.

Dante hit upon no Christian instructor able to lead him through the terrors of the inferno and the disciplines of 'Purgatory' towards his spiritual love, Beatrice in heaven. He was guided by the pagan Vergil. At the start of his *Paradise Lost* and again later in the poem, Milton summoned the aid of Heavenly Muse, who was really the spirit of Christianity, but embodied in a pagan shape. There are no Muses in the Old Testament. They originally come from mythology.

Greek and Roman mythology as presented by art and literature may act as a restraining force. This was another argument put forward by the upholders of the classical tradition. It is welcomed as such, they stated, because mythology is very rarely as grotesque and ignoble as much medieval art. This becomes apparent if we draw a comparison between the chastiment of the damned souls in the Græco-Roman underworld and the more vulgar and undignified cruel inflictions of the severe bodily pains on the damned souls in Dante's Hell.

Therefore, this paradigm can aid contemporary people to reject or reduce to a minimum the baseness which is deeply rooted in every human nature, at the apparent loss of individuality, in order to achieve nobleness. The psychologists, with their subtle ways of thinking have realized that properly utilized mythology, will purify the heart and raise the soul.

Despite the resistance of the moderns in the works of the various artists during the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries Greek and Roman mythology did play an important part. It supplied themes, which ranged all the way from tragic stories, to small decorative motifs on a vase, a wall, or a cabinet. Racine's greatest heroine was a pre-historic Greek princess 'Iphigenia' who was to be sacrificed to appease the wrath of Diana. The goddess however, moved by her innocence bore her away to Taures and entrusted her with the care of the Temple. The greatest English composer of the Seventeenth Century Purcell composed one of the finest operas about *Dido and Aeneas*, in which Aeneas, by order of the gods, forsakes Dido who eventually kills herself.

However, during the Eighteenth Century the poets had acquired the habit of letting the Greek and Roman legends perform the function of creation for them. Instead of composing something new, instead of directing their eyes to the world with an examining and attentive eye, the poets of the period were very often satisfied with the use of ready-made mythological images already hackneyed. For instance, instead of giving a graphic sketch of a moonlit garden with its nightingales, they would say that the pleasant and nectareous effect of Diana fell over the groves of the semi-divine maidens, who were still and quiet, hearkening at the heart-burning complaint of Philomela.

Now, the mythical nymphs and moon-maidens and the myth of Philomela are strong romantic fancy-led stimuli, and have been inspiring good poetry for nearly three thousand years. But legends, however beautiful, are not sufficient to produce a poetry without fresh imagination; and in that period too many writers were inventive imitators lacking imagination.

Against this bad effect of the influence of mythology in literature, there was a reaction, particularly in England. The reaction was not really against the classics and mythology as such, but against the lack of imagination characteristic of the age, particularly against the conventional practice of utilizing mythological clichés, as bee-lines to fanciful expression.

This is referred to by Lord Macaulay in his essay on 'Frederick the Great' where he speaks of mythology as a frippery and he likens the discarded use of mythical figures and legends to a robe tossed by the genius to mediocre poets. This habit, Macaulay maintained, had been abandoned.

The same idea also occurs in Wordsworth's note on his return to classical mythology in the *Ode to Lycoris*, 1817. "No doubt", Wordsworth states :

the hacknied and lifeless use into which mythology fell towards the close of the seventeenth century, and which continued through the eighteenth century, disgusted the general reader with all allusion to it in modern verse; and though, in deference to this disgust, and also in a measure participating in it; I abstained in my earlier writings from all introduction of pagan fable, surely even in its humble form, it may ally itself with real sentiment.

Obviously this was in line with the poet's own theory expounded in his *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, but he held less closely to it in his later years.

In a poem entitled *The World is too much with Us* written in 1806, and in a mood of hostility towards contemporary materialism, Wordsworth could not refrain from expressing his suppressed enthusiasm for the mythical past.

In the poem he taunts his contemporaries for destroying their own souls. They think of nothing, he says, but making money and spending it; and in exchange for it they have given away their hardened and worthless hearts. They are incapable of feeling the grandeur of nature; the moonlit sea, the winds and the calm. They are out of tune and in a sudden fit of exultation he shouts :

Great God. I'd rather be
A Pagan, suckled, in a creed outworn;
So might I, standing on this pleasant lea . .
Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;
Or hear Old Triton blow his wreathed horn

He would rather be a "Pagan" believing in the deities of Hellas, for the Hellenes not only felt the beauty of the external world but peopled it with spirits.

To wish to be a "Pagan" is however, instantly checked by the realization that, however consoling, the belief in paganism, would be "outworn", credible only for one born to it, and "suckled" in it but of not deep comfort to a man like himself. Yet he goes on to imagine what it might be like to hold such a belief. "Great God" is an utterance of regret and nostalgia rather than a violent protest.

The spot where the poet is standing grows "pleasant" at the thought or vision, though beheld only in "glimpses" and grows on him to a kind of half-belief after all. However, it ends with the reverberating climax which is almost like full-belief in the old deities of the sea, Proteus, and Triton.

1. *The World is too much with us*, ll., 9-14 *Fifteen Poets*, Oxford, 1941.

It is very rare indeed for a poet like Wordsworth to use names of mythical figures in this way, with the kind or resonant rhetoric which had been natural only to poets like Spenser and Milton.

In *Laodamia* Wordsworth treats a mythical subject; the theme of the wife of Protesilaus who was slain by Hector in Troy. Laodamia implores Jove to restore her slaughtered husband to her sight. Her prayers are answered and she is visited, by the Spectre of her dead husband who is led by the winged Hermes:

Forth sprang the impassioned Queen her Lord to clasp:
But unsubstantial Form eludes her grasp.
As often as that eager grasp was made.¹

She prays him to "confirm the vision with a voice". And as she could not part with it for another time, she followed it to the "Shades". This is really one of Wordsworth's rare classical poems. However, the hostile attitude towards mythology was beginning to melt away.

Mythology, the robe of Graeco-Roman imagery, and once the garment of genius was for the time "outworn". But soon, it was revived and resuscitated by the great poets and artists of the Nineteenth Century. The love of Greek and Roman mythologies becomes in some degree a common element in the poets of the period.

Reading the ancients with an awakened imagination, Thomas Love Peacock (1785—1866) found a world of romantic charm that had been hidden from the previous century. He feels nostalgia for the loss of mythology, which he expresses in the following lines :

In Ocean's cave no Nereids dwells :
Nor Oread walks the mountains dwells :
The streams no sedge-crowned Genii roll
From beauteous urn; Great Pan is dead :
The Life, the intellectual soul
Of Vale, and grove and streams, has fled
For ever with the creed sublime
That nursed the muse of earlier time ².

1. *Laodamia*, The English Parnassus, Oxford, 1940.

2. *Rhododaphne*, cant III

The poem *Rhododaphne* is a tale of love and magic in a Greek setting. In it there is abundance of feeling for the picturesque, for the beauties and charms of the ancient mythology and ancient superstition.

The feeling of regret for the silenced voice of mythology found expression in the German poetry of the period. The German writers of the Eighteenth Century admitted the power of Greek myth and poetry. Johann Christoph Friederich Schiller (1759—1809) was profoundly impressed by the vigor and vitality of Greek legends. His ballads *The Ring of Polycrates* and *The Cranes of Ibycus* and several of his odes to hypostatized ethical and emotional principles, are in some degree extracted from Greek thought patterned on the deified abstractions of the Greek Pantheon.

The Gods of Greece, written in 1788, is Schiller's most relevant poem. It is a passionate expression of grief for the dead Hellenic gods and goddesses, who have ceased to live only because something within the soul of man has passed away. Once, nature was throbbing with life and the entire world was corporealized deities. Within the vegetable kingdom there was a living dryad. The bird-song in the bush was the painful cry of Philomela. The sun, which is described to us now as a mass of burning gas, was then an aurate vehicle guided by Phoebus, calm and majestic sovereign of the sky. The world now, exclaims Schiller, is nothing but substance. For the Hellenes it was substance instilled with pneuma. Then it signified something; now it signifies nothing. Then it was both human and humanly divine. Now it is sub-human, an object in a hylic and kinetic energy, as the oscillating pendulum. It has neither life, nor beauty, nor divinity.

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