

## HOW HISTORY IS TRANSFIGURED BY MYTH.

BY THE EDITOR.

MR GEORGE W. SHAW'S article "Mythopoeic Erudition" characterises the tendency of modern criticism to resolve legendary traditions and poems into myth as a mental disease of scholarly minds, as "follies of the wise," and I take pleasure in publishing it because it is thoroughly opposed to my own views, for I, too, belong to the class of people censured by Mr. Shaw for believing that Homer did not exist and is to be replaced by a cycle of rhapsodists; "the Trojan war is a solar myth; William Tell did not fight at Morgarten; stout old Judge Samson was not a Jewish Shopet, but the sun,—his hair, the sunbeams." My motive in publishing Mr. Shaw's communication is not merely for the sake of the principle *audiatur et altera pars*, but mainly because it contains a germ of truth which is not always, but frequently, overlooked by scholars of critical tendencies.

When Mr. Shaw characterises the trend of modern analysis of history by the device, "All is illusion: naught is truth," he is mistaken, at least so far as the leading scholars in the domain of higher criticism are concerned. Traditions, be they ever so mythological, if they are genuine are much more conservative than they may appear at first sight. Though the Trojan war may be a tangle of legends reflecting the solar myth, the Homeric narrative is after all based on actual occurrences. Though William Tell never existed in Switzerland, there must have existed many William Tells, not only in Switzerland but all over the world. Though the Biblical account of Samson's deeds, like the twelve labors of Hercules, is the echo of a Babylonian solar epic which glorifies the deeds of Shamash in his migrations through the twelve signs of the zodiac, there may have been a Hebrew hero whose deeds reminded the Israelites of Shamash and so his adventures were told with such modifications which naturally made the solar legends cluster about his personality.

A critical investigation into history teaches us that the actual facts are more saturated with mythology than we are aware of.

Some time ago we republished in *The Open Court*\* an ingenious satire of M. Pérè, who proposed the proof that Napoleon the Great did not exist but was simply a solar myth, and M. Pérè's style is a clever imitation of the arguments employed by the higher critics under whose able investigation many historical figures are seen to be centers for mythical accretions.

Although the ancient traditions, of Rome, of Greece, and also of Israel, are filled with legend, it is remarkable how much of actual fact is recorded in them.

Biblical traditions have in one sense been fully verified by the Babylonian excavations. They show that occurrences such as are recorded in them actually took place, but the statements in the several books of the Old Testament are not simply narratives of the facts but stories of events as they appeared to the children of Israel at the time when they were written. They are onesided and are not historical in the strictest sense of the word; they are historical only in so far as they are echoes of actual events, the narrative being modified by beliefs of their authors.

The same is true of Troy and Homer. The word Homer means "arranger" or "compiler" and anyone who is familiar with the Homeric epics, knows that the several songs are not written by the same hand. They are two great compilations and we must assume that the ancient rhapsodists selected with preference themes more or less closely related to the Siege of Troy and the adventures of Odysseus. They may have composed other songs which are now lost but when in the sixth century they were redacted into two great epics the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the most obvious discrepancies were removed while all those materials that did not fall in with the general plan were doomed to oblivion. Now it is strange that the excavations of Schliemann seem to verify the Homeric stories, for Schliemann discovered ancient ornaments and weapons such as are described in Homer, and believers in the letter of Homer rejoiced at the fact and declared triumphantly that, after all, Homer must be believed in; but, unfortunately for these enthusiasts, Schliemann's excavations prove too much, for he excavated not only one city of Troy, but several cities which are built one upon the top of the other, proving that the siege of Troy and the conquest and burning of the city, had not taken place once but several times; and so we see that history must have repeated itself, and the mythology that overlays

\* "M. Pérè's Proof of the Non-Existence of Napoleon," July, 1903.

the tradition of one tale may have suited all others of the same kind. If a myth embodies a general truth, the myth will find verification in history whenever events of the same kind happen, not once but repeatedly, for the myth stands for the type and the type is realised in every concrete instance.

A little psychological insight into the constitution of the human mind will best explain the situation. Every occurrence which we experience is at once co-related to and associated with former experiences and both are so fused that an unsophisticated person can not easily separate the facts from the opinions which we hold as to their nature. Thus myth creeps into history and miracles are common events to those who believe in the miraculous.

When Napoleon rose into power his heroic dash and his quick success dazzled the minds of his countrymen and he was naturally compared now to Alexander the Great, now to Caesar, or even to the Gods. The fate of former conquerors became, as it were, a prophecy for his career. He himself was induced to imitate his predecessors, and his admirers did not hesitate to see him in the light of mythical heroes. Thus it was but an inevitable result that many incidents were attributed to him simply because they belong to the same type of heroes, mythical as well as historical, with whom he had been classified.

Troy was situated in the north-western corner of Asia Minor in a place favorable in the old times for the development of a large city. It offered excellent opportunities for the exchange of goods that came from both the East and the West,—from the interior of Asia and from Europe. The coast was hospitable for such ships as were built in those days, but the advantages were counterbalanced by the disadvantages which exposed the city to hostile attacks and so the place became unsafe on account of its wealth, proving an attraction to pirates. Homer tells us the history of the capture of Troy not as it really happened, but as it lived in the memory of the Greek nation between the ninth and fifth centuries B. C. It seems a hopeless task to extract from the *Iliad* the historical facts that underlie the story which in spite of its historical background is a tangle of myth and legend. There can be no doubt about it that Helen is a humanised form of *Selene*, the moon; but for all that, some mortal woman named Helen may have been the cause of a war between Greece and Troy! Odysseus is the sun in his migrations, who encounters innumerable adventures and descends into the underworld, whence he returns unscathed to the domain of the living; yet there may have lived an adventurous chief of Ithaca, named Odysseus,

who roamed all over the world and came home after an absence of twenty years, an unknown beggar.

As to Tell, we have to state that no family of that name can be traced in Switzerland at or before the time of the Swiss struggle for independence, and the story of Tell's famous shot at the apple on the head of his child is mentioned for the first time in a chronicle written in 1470, i. e., about two centuries after the alleged occurrence.\* But while there is no foundation in Swiss history for the tale of Tell, we are familiar with similar stories among the Norse, the Danes, and the Saxons.† We can scarcely doubt that the legend is a last reminiscence of human sacrifices which, with the progress of civilisation, were gradually abolished, and one form in which the abolition of human sacrifices was effected consisted in a ritual according to which the victim was consecrated to death but was given a chance of escape.

While we positively know that Tell is not an ancient Swiss name we may boldly say that the stories of Tell did not, but *might* as well have happened as not, for history repeats itself and wherever there is oppression, there we meet with characters such as Tell, who oppose a tyrant's violence.

Mankind will always interpret the facts of life in the light of their convictions and beliefs. Wherever a great personality rises into prominence stories will be told of him which may have happened to characters of the same type of bygone ages. This is the reason why the same anecdotes are told of Caesar, of Charlemagne, of Frederick the Great, and of Grant, and they will be told of great generals of the ages to come.

In our religious literature we find the same mixture of fact and fancy. There is more historical truth in the history of Buddha, and of Jesus, and of Mohammed than may appear at first sight, judging from the miraculous adornments of all religious tradition. As ivy quickly covers an old tree, the mythological accretions almost conceal the real facts of the lives of religious leaders. We can be sure

\*In the so-called *Weisse Buch* of the Archives of Obwalden, 1470; and in the *Chronik* of Melchoir Russ, 1482. There is further a Tell-ballad, and finally in Tschudi's *Chronicon Helveticum*, from which latter the story was utilised by Schiller in his famous drama.

† Saxo Grammaticus tells the Tell story of "Toko," the Edda of "Egil" and an old English ballad of "William of Cloudeslay." It would lead me too far to exhaust the subject, but a traveller's report even of distant Arabia gives us information of a custom in which a person is offered as a sacrifice, until a skilled marksman liberates the victim after the fashion of Tell's shot.

that Jesus, Gotamo Siddhartha, and Mohammed were real persons, but the people who look upon them in faith co-relate the acts related of them with their highest religious ideals of the Buddha, the Christ and of the Prophet. The Christian Gospels are not simply narratives of the life of Jesus but they are the story of Jesus as the Christ, embodying ancient traditions, not only of the Jewish notion of a Messiah but many other kindred hopes. They echo the expectations of the people who were prepared for the coming of a Saviour. The Christ ideal existed before Jesus. The Jewish Messiah conception had been modified and deepened by the Persian doctrine of Mithra, the virgin-born viceroy of God's kingdom on earth, the Babylonian Marduk, the Conqueror of Death and mediator between God the Father, and men, and also the world-resigning Buddha of India. When Jesus was accepted by His disciples as the Messiah, the Christ, all the notions and honors of previous kindred figures in the domain of both history and mythology were transferred and attributed to Him.

The picture of Jesus in the New Testament is not strictly historical, but it contains historical facts. It is the story of Jesus, the Nazarene, as interpreted by those who believed that he was the Christ.