RUSKIN JOHN

THE QUEEN OF THE AIR: BEING A STUDY OF THE GREEK MYTHS OF CLOUD AND STORM

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Содержание

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PREFACE

My days and strength have lately been much broken; and I never more felt the insufficiency of both than in preparing for the press the following desultory memoranda on a most noble subject. But I leave them now as they stand, for no time nor labor would be enough to complete them to my contentment; and I believe that they contain suggestions which may be followed with safety, by persons who are beginning to take interest in the aspects of mythology, which only recent investigation has removed from the region of conjecture into that of rational inquiry. I have some advantage, also, from my field work, in the interpretation of myths relating to natural phenomena; and I have had always near me, since we were at college together, a sure, and unweariedly kind, guide, in my friend Charles Newton, to whom we owe the finding of more treasure in mines of marble than, were it rightly estimated, all California could buy. I must not, however, permit the chance of his name being in any wise associated with my errors. Much of my work as been done obstinately in my own way; and he is never responsible for me, though he has often kept me right, or at least enabled me to advance in a new direction. Absolutely right no one can be in such matters; nor does a day pass without convincing every honest student of antiquity of some partial error, and showing him better how to think, and where to look. But I knew that there was no hope of my being able to enter with advantage on the fields of history opened by the splendid investigation of recent philologists, though I could qualify myself, by attention and sympathy, to understand, here and there, a verse of Homer's or Hesiod's, as the simple people did for whom they sang.

Even while I correct these sheets for press, a lecture by Professor Tyndall has been put into my hands, which I ought to have heard last 16th January, but was hindered by mischance; and which, I now find, completes, in two important particulars, the evidence of an instinctive truth in ancient symbolism; showing, first, that the Greek conception of an ætherial element pervading space is justified by the closest reasoning of modern physicists; and, secondly, that the blue of the sky, hitherto thought to be caused by watery vapour, is, indeed, reflected from the divided air itself; so that the bright blue of the eyes of Athena, and the deep blue of her ægis, prove to be accurate mythic expressions of natural phenomena which it is an uttermost triumph of recent science to have revealed.

Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine triumph more complete. To form, "within an experimental tube, a bit of more perfect sky than the sky itself!" here is magic of the finest sort! singularly reversed from that of old time, which only asserted its competency to enclose in bottles elemental forces that were—not of the sky.

Let me, in thanking Professor Tyndall for the true wonder of this piece of work, ask his pardon, and that of all masters in physical science, for any words of mine, either in the following pages or elsewhere, that may ever seem to fail in the respect due to their great powers of thought, or in the admiration due to the far scope of their discovery. But I will be judged by themselves, if I have not bitter reason to ask them to teach us more than yet they have taught.

This first day of May, 1869, I am writing where my work was begun thirty-five years ago, within sight of the snows of the higher Alps. In that half of the permitted life of man, I have seen strange evil brought upon every scene that I best loved, or tried to make beloved by others. The light which once flushed those pale summits with its rose at dawn, and purple at sunset, is now umbered and faint; the air which once inlaid the clefts of all their golden crags with azure is now defiled with

languid coils of smoke, belched from worse than volcanic fires; their very glacier waves are ebbing, and their snows fading, as if hell had breathed on them; the waters that once sank at their feet into crystalline rest are now dimmed and foul, from deep to deep, and shore to shore. These are no careless words—they are accurately, horribly, true. I know what the Swiss lakes were; no pool of Alpine fountain at its source was clearer. This morning, on the Lake of Geneva, at half a mile from the beach, I could scarcely see my oar-blade a fathom deep.

The light, the air, the waters, all defiled! How of the earth itself? Take this one fact for type of honour done by the modern Swiss to the earth of his native land. There used to be a little rock at the end of the avenue by the port of Neuchâtel; there, the last marble of the foot of Jura, sloping to the blue water, and (at this time of year) covered with bright pink tufts of Saponaria. I went, three days since, to gather a blossom at the place. The goodly native rock and its flowers were covered with the dust and refuse of the town; but, in the middle of the avenue, was a newly-constructed artificial rockery, with a fountain twisted through a spinning spout, and an inscription on one of its loose-tumbled stones,—

"Aux Botanistes,
Le club Jurassique,"

Ah, masters of modern science, give me back my Athena out of your vials, and seal, if it may be, once more, Asmodeus therein. You have divided the elements, and united them; enslaved them upon the earth, and discerned them in the stars. Teach us now, but this of them, which is all that man need know,—that the Air is given to him for his life; and the Rain to his thirst, and for his baptism; and the Fire for warmth; and the Sun for sight; and the Earth for his Meat—and his Rest.

VEVAY, May 1, 1869.

I.
ATHENA CHALINITIS. [1]

(Athena in the Heavens.)

LECTURE ON THE GREEK MYTHS OF STORM, GIVEN (PARTLY) IN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE, LONDON, MARCH 9, 1869

1. I will not ask your pardon for endeavoring to interest you in the subject of Greek Mythology; but I must ask your permission to approach it in a temper differing from that in which it is frequently treated. We cannot justly interpret the religion of any people, unless we are prepared to admit that we ourselves, as well as they, are liable to error in matters of faith; and that the convictions of others, however singular, may in some points have been well founded, while our own, however reasonable, may be in some particulars mistaken. You must forgive me, therefore, for not always distinctively calling the creeds of the past "superstition," and the creeds of the present day "religion;" as well as for assuming that a faith now confessed may sometimes be superficial, and that a faith long forgotten may once have been sincere. It is the task of the Divine to condemn the errors of antiquity, and of the philologists to account for them; I will only pray you to read, with patience, and human sympathy, the thoughts of men who lived without blame in a darkness they could not dispel; and to remember that, whatever charge of folly may justly attach to the saying, "There is no God," the folly is prouder, deeper, and less pardonable, in saying, "There is no God but for me."

2. A myth, in its simplest definition, is a story with a meaning attached to it other than it seems to have at first; and the fact that it has such a meaning is generally marked by some of its circumstances being extraordinary, or, in the common use of the word, unnatural. Thus if I tell you that Hercules killed a water-serpent in the lake of Lerna, and if I mean, and you understand, nothing more than that fact, the story, whether true or false, is not a myth. But if by telling you this, I mean that Hercules purified the stagnation of many streams from deadly miasmata, my story, however simple, is a true myth; only, as, if I leftit in that simplicity, you would probably look for nothing beyond, it will be wise in me to surprise your attention by adding some singular circumstance; for instance, that the water-snake had several heads, which revived as fast as they were killed, and which poisoned even the foot that trod upon them as they slept. And in proportion to the fulness of intended meaning I shall probably multiply and refine upon these improbabilities; as, suppose, if, instead of desiring only to tell you that Hercules purified a marsh, I wished you to understand that he contended with the venom and vapor of envy and evil ambition, whether in other men's souls or in his own, and choked that malaria only by supreme toil,—I might tell you that this serpent was formed by the goddess whose pride was in the trial of Hercules; and that its place of abode as by a palm-tree; and that for every head of it that was cut off, two rose up with renewed life; and that the hero found at last that he could not kill the creature at all by cutting its heads off or crushing them, but only by burning them down; and that the midmost of them could not be killed even that way, but had to be buried alive. Only in proportion as I mean more, I shall certainly appear more absurd in my statement; and at last when I get unendurably significant, all practical persons will agree that I was talking mere nonsense from the beginning, and never meant anything at all.

[1] "Athena the Restrainer." The name is given to her as having helped Bellerophon to bridle Pegasus, the flying cloud.

3. It is just possible, however, also, that the story-teller may all along have meant nothing but what he said; and that, incredible as the events may appear, he himself literally believed—and expected you also to believe—all this about Hercules, without any latent moral or history whatever. And it is very necessary, in reading traditions of this kind, to determine, first of all, whether you are listening to a simple person, who is relating what, at all events, he believes to be true, (and may, therefore, possibly have been so to some extent), or to a reserved philosopher, who is veiling a theory of the universe under the grotesque of a fairy tale. It is, in general, more likely that the first supposition should be the right one: simple and credulous persons are, perhaps fortunately, more common than philosophers; and it is of the highest importance that you should take their innocent testimony as it was meant, and not efface, under the graceful explanation which your cultivated ingenuity may suggest, either the evidence their story may contain (such as it is worth) of an extraordinary event having really taken place, or the unquestionable light which it will cast upon the character of the person by whom it was frankly believed. And to deal with Greek religion honestly, you must at once understand that this literal belief was, in the mind of the general people, as deeply rooted as ours in the legends of our own sacred book; and that a basis of unmiraculous event was as little suspected, and an explanatory symbolism as rarely traced, by them, as by us.

You must, therefore, observe that I deeply degrade the position which such a myth as that just referred to occupied in the Greek mind, by comparing it (for fear of offending you) to our story of St. George and the Dragon. Still, the analogy is perfect in minor respects; and though it fails to give you any notion of the Greek faith, it will exactly illustrate the manner in which faith laid hold of its objects.

4. This story of Hercules and the Hydra, then, was to the general Greek mind, in its best days, a tale about a real hero and a real monster. Not one in a thousand knew anything of the way in which the story had arisen, any more than the English peasant generally is aware of the plebeian original of St. George; or supposes that there were once alive in the world, with sharp teeth and claws, real, and very ugly, flying dragons. On the other hand, few persons traced any moral or symbolical meaning in the story, and the average Greek was as far from imagining any interpretation like that I have just given you, as an average Englishman is from seeing is St. George the Red Cross Knight of Spenser, or in the Dragon the Spirit of Infidelity. But, for all that, there was a certain undercurrent of consciousness in all minds that the figures meant more than they at first showed; and, according to each man's own faculties of sentiment, he judged and read them; just as a Knight of the Garter reads more in the jewel on his collar than the George and Dragon of a public-house expresses to the host or to his customers. Thus, to the mean person the myth always meant little; to the noble person, much; and the greater their familiarity with it, the more contemptible it became to one, and the more sacred to the other; until vulgar commentators explained it entirely away, while Virgil made the crowning glory of his choral hymn to Hercules.

"Around thee, powerless to infect thy soul,
Rose, in his crested crowd, the Lerna worm."

"Non te rationis egentem
Lernæus turbâ capitum circumstetit anguis."

And although, in any special toil of the hero's life, the moral interpretation was rarely with definiteness attached to the event, yet in the whole course of the life, not only for a symbolical meaning, but the warrant for the existence of a real spiritual power, was apprehended of all men. Hercules was no dead hero, to be remembered only as a victor over monsters of the past—harmless now as slain. He was the perpetual type and mirror of heroism, and its present and living aid against every ravenous form of human trial and pain.

5. But, if we seek to know more than this and to ascertain the manner in which the story first crystallized into its shape, we shall find ourselves led back generally to one or other of two sources—either to actual historical events, represented by the fancy under figures personifying them; or else to natural phenomena similarly endowed with life by the imaginative power usually more or less under the influence of terror. The historical myths we must leave the masters of history to follow; they, and the events they record, being yet involved in great, though attractive and penetrable, mystery. But the stars, and hills, and storms are with us now, as they were with others of old; and it only needs that we look at them with the earnestness of those childish eyes to understand the first words spoken of them by the children of men, and then, in all the most beautiful and enduring myths, we shall find, not only a literal story of a real person, not only a parallel imagery of moral principle, but an underlying worship of natural phenomena, out of which both have sprung, and in which both forever remain rooted. Thus, from the real sun, rising and setting,—from the real atmosphere, calm in its dominion of unfading blue, and fierce in its descent of tempest,—the Greek forms first the idea of two entirely personal and corporal gods, whose limbs are clothes in divine flesh, and whose brows are crowned with divine beauty; yet so real that the quiver rattles at their shoulder, and the chariot bends beneath their weight. And, on the other hand, collaterally with these corporeal images, and never for one instant separated from them, he conceives also two omnipresent spiritual influences, as the sun, with a constant fire, whatever in humanity is skilful and wise; and the other, like the living air, breathes the calm of heavenly fortitude, and strength of righteous anger, into every human breast that is pure and brave.

6. Now, therefore, in nearly every myth of importance, and certainly in every one of those which I shall speak to-night, you have to discern these three structural parts,—the root and the two branches: the root, in physical existence, sun, or sky, or cloud, or sea; then the personal incarnation of that, becoming a trusted and companionable deity, with whom you may walk hand in hand, as a child with its brother or its sister; and, lastly, the moral significance of the image, which is in all the great myths eternally and beneficently true.

7. The great myths; that is to say, myths made by great people. For the first plain fact about myth-making is one which has been most strangely lost sight of,—that you cannot make a myth unless you have something to make it of. You cannot tell a secret which you don't know. If the myth is about the sky, it must have been made by somebody who has looked at the sky. If the myth is about justice and fortitude, it must have been made by someone who knew what it was to be just or patient. According to the quantity of understanding in the person will be the quantity of significance in his fable; and the myth of a simple and ignorant race must necessarily mean little, because a simple and ignorant race have little to mean. So the great question in reading a story is always, not what wild hunter dreamed, or what childish race first dreaded it; but what wise man first perfectly told, and what strong people first perfectly lived by it. And the real meaning of any myth is that which it has at the noblest age of the nation among whom it is current. The farther back you pierce, the less significance you will find, until you come to the first narrow thought, which, indeed, contains the germ of the accomplished tradition; but only as the seed contains the flower. As the intelligence and passion of the race develop, they cling to and nourish their beloved and sacred legend; leaf by leaf it expands under the touch of more pure affections, and more delicate imagination, until at last the perfect fable burgeons out into symmetry of milky stem and honied bell.

8. But through whatever changes it may pass, remember that our right reading of it is wholly dependent on the materials we have in our own minds for an intelligent answering sympathy. If it first arose among a people who dwelt under stainless skies, and measures their journeys by ascending and declining stars, we certainly cannot read their story, if we have never seen anything above us in the day but smoke, nor anything around us in the night but candles. If the tale goes on to change clouds or planets into living creatures,—to invest them with fair forms and inflame them with mighty passions,—we can only understand the story of the human-hearted things, in so far as we ourselves

take pleasure in the perfectness of visible form, or can sympathize, by an effort of imagination, with the strange people who had other loves than those of wealth, and other interests than those of commerce. And, lastly, if the myth complete itself to the fulfilled thoughts of the nation, by attributing to the gods, whom they have carved out of their fantasy, continual presence with their own souls; and their every effort for good is finally guided by the sense of the companionship, the praise, and the pure will of immortals, we shall be able to follow them into this last circle of their faith only in the degree in which the better parts of our own beings have been also stirred by the aspects of nature, or strengthened by her laws. It may be easy to prove that the ascent of Apollo in his chariot signifies nothing but the rising of the sun. But what does the sunrise itself signify to us? If only languid return to frivolous amusement, or fruitless labor, it will, indeed, not be easy for us to conceive the power, over a Greek, of the name of Apollo. But if, fir us also, as for the Greek, the sunrise means daily restoration to the sense of passionate gladness and of perfect life—if it means the thrilling of new strength through every nerve,—the shedding over us of a better peace than the peace of night, in the power of the dawn,—and the purging of evil vision and fear by the baptism of its dew;—if the sun itself is an influence, to us also, of spiritual good—and becomes thus in reality, not in imagination, to us also, a spiritual power,—we may then soon over-pass the narrow limit of conception which kept that power impersonal, and rise with the Greek to the thought of an angel who rejoiced as a strong man to run his course, whose voice calling to life and to labor rang round the earth, and whose going forth was to the ends of heaven.

9. The time, then, at which I shall take up for you, as well as I can decipher it, the traditions of the gods of Greece, shall be near the beginning of its central and formed faith,—about 500 B.C., —a faith of which the character is perfectly represented by Pindar and Æschylus, who are both of them outspokenly religious, and entirely sincere men; while we may always look back to find the less developed thought of the preceding epoch given by Homer, in a more occult, subtle, half-instinctive, and involuntary way.

10. Now, at that culminating period of the Greek religion, we find, under one governing Lord of all things, four subordinate elemental forces, and four spiritual powers living in them and commanding them. The elements are of course the well-known four of the ancient world,– the earth, the waters, the fire, and the air; and the living powers of them are Demeter, the Latin Ceres; Poseidon, the Latin Neptune; Apollo, who has retained always his Greek name; and Athena, the Latin Minerva. Each of these are descended from, or changed from, more ancient, and therefore more mystic, deities of the earth and heaven, and of a finer element of æther supposed to be beyond the heavens;[2] but at this time we find the four quite definite, both in their kingdoms and in their personalities. They are the rulers of the earth that we tread upon, and the air that we breathe; and are with us closely, in their vivid humanity, as the dust that they animate, and the winds that they bridle. I shall briefly define for you the range of their separate dominions, and then follow, as far as we have time, the most interesting of the legends which relate to the queen of the air.

11. The rule of the first spirit, Demeter, the earth mother, is over the earth, first, as the origin of all life,—the dust from whence we were taken; secondly, as the receiver of all things back at last into silence —"Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." And, therefore, as the most tender image of this appearing and fading life, in the birth and fall of flowers, her daughter Proserpine plays in the fields of Sicily, and thence is torn away into darkness, and becomes the Queen of Fate—not merely of death, but of the gloom which closes over and ends, not beauty only, but sin, and chiefly of sins the sin against the life she gave; so that she is, in her highest power, Persephone, the avenger and purifier of blood—"The voice of thy brother's blood cries to me out of the ground." Then, side by side with this queen of the earth, we find a demigod of agriculture by the plough—the lord of grain, or of the thing ground by the mill. And it is a singular proof of the simplicity of Greek character at

[2] And by modern science now also asserted, and with probability argued, to exist.

this noble time, that of all representations left to us of their deities by their art, few are so frequent, and none perhaps so beautiful, as the symbol of this spirit of agriculture.

12. Then the dominant spirit of the element water is Neptune, but subordinate to him are myriads of other water spirits, of whom Nereus is the chief, with Palæmon, and Leucothea, the "white lady" of the sea; and Thetis, and nymphs innumerable who, like her, could "suffer a sea change," while the river deities had each independent power, according to the preciousness of their streams to the cities fed by them,—the "fountain Arethuse, and thou, honoured flood, smooth sliding Mincius, crowned with vocal reeds." And, spiritually, this king of the waters is lord of the strength and daily flow of human life—he gives it material force and victory; which as the meaning of the dedication of the hair, as the sign of the strength of life, to the river or the native land.

13. Demeter, then, over the earth, and its giving and receiving of life. Neptune over the waters, and the flow and force of life,—always among the Greeks typified by the horse, which was to them as a crested sea-wave, animated and bridled. Then the third element, fire, has set over it two powers: over earthly fire, the assistant of human labor, is set Hephæstus, lord of all labor in which is the flush and the sweat of the brow; and over heavenly fire, the source of day, is set Apollo, the spirit of all kindling, purifying, and illuminating intellectual wisdom, each of these gods having also their subordinate or associated powers,– servant, or sister, or companion muse.

14. Then, lastly, we come to the myth which is to be our subject of closer inquiry,—the story of Athena and of the deities subordinate to her. This great goddess, the Neith of the Egyptians, the Athena or Athenaia of the Greeks, and, with broken power, half usurped by Mars, the Minerva of the Latins, is, physically, the queen of the air; having supreme power both over its blessing of calm, and wrath of storm; and, spiritually, she is the queen of the breath of man, first of the bodily breathing which is life to his blood, and strength to his arm in battle; and then of the mental breathing, or inspiration, which is his moral health and habitual wisdom; wisdom of conduct and of the heart, as opposed to the wisdom of imagination and the brain; moral, as distinct from intellectual; inspired, as distinct from illuminated.

15. By a singular and fortunate, though I believe wholly accidental, coincidence, the heart-virtue, of which she is the spirit, was separated by the ancients into four divisions, which have since obtained acceptance from all men as rightly discerned, and have received, as if from the quarters of the four winds of which Athena is the natural queen, the name of "Cardinal" virtues: namely, Prudence (the right seeing, and foreseeing, of events through darkness); Justice (the righteous bestowal of favor and of indignation); Fortitude (patience under trial by pain); and Temperance (patience under trial by pleasure). With respect to these four virtues, the attributes of Athena are all distinct. In her prudence, or sight in darkness, she is "Glaukopis," "owl-eyed."[3] In her justice, which is the dominant virtue, she wears two robes, one of light, and one of darkness; the robe of light, saffron color, or the color of the daybreak, falls to her feet, covering her wholly with favor and love,—the calm of the sky in blessing; it is embroidered along its edge with her victory over the giants (the troublous powers of the earth), and the likeness of it was woven yearly by the Athenian maidens and carried to the temple of their own Athena, not to the Parthenon, that was the temple of all the world's Athena,—but this they carried to the temple of their own only one who loved them, and stayed with them always. Then her robe of indignation is worn on her breast and left arm only, fringed with fatal serpents, and fastened with Gorgonian cold, turning men to stone; physically, the lightning and hail of chastisement by storm. Then in her fortitude she wears the crested and unstooping hemlet;[4] and lastly, in her temperance, she is the queen of maidenhood—stainless as the air of heaven.

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[3] There are many other meanings in the epithet; see farther on, §91, pp. 133, 134.

[4] I am compelled, for clearness' sake, to mark only one meaning at a time. Athena's helmet is sometimes a mask, sometimes a sign of anger, sometimes of the highest light of æther; but I cannot speak of all this at once.

16. But all these virtues mass themselves in the Greek mind into the two main ones,—of Justice, or noble passion, and Fortitude, or noble patience; and of these, the chief powers of Athena, the Greeks have divinely written for them, and for all men after them, two mighty songs, —one, of the Menis,[5] Mens, passion, or zeal, of Athena, breathed into a mortal whose name is "Ache of heart," and whose short life is only the incarnate brooding and burst of storm; and the other is of the foresight and fortitude of Athena, maintained by her in the heart of a mortal whose name is given to him from a longer grief, Odysseus, the full of sorrow, the much enduring, and the long-suffering.

17. The minor expressions by the Greeks in word, in symbol, and in religious service, of this faith, are so many and so beautiful, that I hope some day to gather at least a few of them into a separate body of evidence respecting the power of Athena, and of its relations to the ethical conception of the Homeric poems, or, rather, to their ethical nature; for they are not conceived didactically, but are didactic in their essence, as all good art is. There is an increasing insensibility to this character, and even an open denial of it, among us now which is one of the most curious errors of modernism, —the peculiar and judicial blindness of an age which, having long practised art and poetry for the sake of pleasure only, has become incapable of reading their language when they were both didactic; and also, having been itself accustomed to a professedly didactic teaching, which yet, for private interests, studiously avoids collision with every prevalent vice of its day (and especially with avarice), has become equally dead to the intensely ethical conceptions of a race which habitually divided all men into two broad classes of worthy or worthless,—good, and good for nothing. And even the celebrated passage of Horace about the Iliad is now misread or disbelieved, as if it were impossible that the Iliad could be instructive because it is not like a sermon. Horce does not say that it is like a sermon, and would have been still less likely to say so if he ever had had the advantage of hearing a sermon. "I have been reading that story of Troy again" (thus he writes to a noble youth of Rome whom he cared for), "quietly at Præneste, while you have been busy at Rome; and truly I think that what is base and what is noble, and what useful and useless, may be better learned from that, than from all Chrysippus' and Crantor's talk put together."[6] Which is profoundly true, not of the Iliad only, but of all other great art whatsoever; for all pieces of such art are didactic in the purest way, indirectly and occultly, so that, first, you shall only be bettered by them if you are already hard at work in bettering yourself; and when you are bettered by them, it shall be partly with a general acceptance of their influence, so constant and subtile that you shall be no more conscious of it than of the healthy digestion of food; and partly by a gift of unexpected truth, which you shall only find by slow mining for it,—which is withheld on purpose, and close-locked, that you may not get it till you have forged the key of it in a furnace of your own heating. And this withholding of their meaning is continual, and confessed, in the great poets. Thus Pindar says of himself: "There is many an arrow in my quiver, full of speech to the wise, but, for the many, they need interpreters." And neither Pindar, nor Æschylus, nor Hesiod, nor Homer, nor any of the greater poets or teachers of any nation or time, ever spoke but with intentional reservation; nay, beyond this, there is often a meaning which they themselves cannot interpert [sic],—which it may be for ages long after them to intrepert [sic],—in what they said, so far as it recorded true imaginative vision. For all the greatest myths have been seen by the men who tell them, involuntarily and passively,—seen by them with as great distinctness (and in some respects, though not in all, under conditions as far beyond the control of their will) as a dream sent to any of us by night when we dream clearest; and it is this veracity of vision that could not be refused, and of moral that could not be foreseen, which in modern historical inquiry has been left wholly out of account; being indeed the thing which no merely historical investigator can understand, or even

[5] This first word of the Iliad, Menis, afterwards passes into the Latin Mens; is the root of the Latin name for Athena, "Minerva," and so the root of the English "mind."

[6] Note, once for all, that unless when there is question about some particular expression, I never translate literally, but give the real force of what is said, as I best can, freely.

believe; for it belongs exclusively to the creative or artistic group of men, and can only be interpreted by those of their race, who themselves in some measure also see visions and dream dreams.

So that you may obtain a more truthful idea of the nature of Greek religion and legend from the poems of Keats, and the nearly as beautiful, and, in general grasp of subject, far more powerful, recent work of Morris, than from frigid scholarship, however extensive. Not that the poet's impressions or renderings of things are wholly true, but their truth is vital, not formal. They are like sketches from the life by Reynolds or Gainsborough, which may be demonstrably inaccurate or imaginary in many traits, and indistinct in others, yet will be in the deepest sense like, and true; while the work of historical analysis is too often weak with loss, through the very labor of its miniature touches, or useless in clumsy and vapid veracity of externals, and complacent security of having done all that is required for the portrait, when it has measured the breadth of the forehead and the length of the nose.

18. The first of requirements, then, for the right reading of myths, is the understanding of the nature of all true vision by noble persons; namely, that it is founded on constant laws common to all human nature; that it perceives, however darkly, things which are for all ages true; that we can only understand it so far as we have some perception of the same truth; and that its fulness is developed and manifested more and more by the reverberation of it from minds of the same mirror-temper, in succeeding ages. You will understand Homer better by seeing his reflection in Dante, as you may trace new forms and softer colors in a hillside, redoubled by a lake.

I shall be able partly to show you, even to-night, how much, in the Homeric vision of Athena, has been made clearer by the advance of time, being thus essentially and eternally true; but I must in the outset indicate the relation to that central thought of the imagery of the inferior deities of storm.

19. And first I will take the myth of Æolus (the "sage Hippotades" of Milton), as it is delivered pure by Homer from the early times.

Why do you suppose Milton calls him "sage"? One does not usually think of the winds as very thoughtful or deliberate powers. But hear Homer: "Then we came to the Æolian island, and there dwelt Æolus Hippotades, dear to the deathless gods; there he dwelt in a floating island, and round it was a wall of brass that could not be broken; and the smooth rock of it ran up sheer. To whom twelve children were born in the sacred chambers,—six daughters and six strong sons; and they dwell foreer with their beloved father and their mother, strict in duty; and with them are laid up a thousand benefits; and the misty house around them rings with fluting all the day long." Now, you are to note first, in this description, the wall of brass and the sheer rock. You will find, throughout the fables of the tempest-group, that the brazen wall and the precipice (occurring in another myth as the brazen tower of Danaë) are always connected with the idea of the towering cloud lighted by the sun, here truly described as a floating island. Secondly, you hear that all treasures were laid up in them; therefore, you know this Æolus is lord of the beneficent winds ("he bringeth the wind out of his treasuries"); and presently afterwards Homer calls him the "steward" of the winds, the master of the store-house of them. And this idea of gifts and preciousness in the winds of heaven is carried out in the well-known sequel of the fable: Æolus gives them to Ulysses, all but one, bound in leathern bags, with a glittering cord of silver; and so like bags of treasure that the sailors think they are so, and open them to see. And when Ulysses is thus driven back to Æolus, and prays him again to help him, note the deliberate words of the king's refusal,—"Did I not," says he, "send thee on thy way heartily, that thou mightest reach thy country, thy home, and whatever is dear to thee? It is not lawful for me again to send forth favorably on his journey a man hated by the happy gods." This idea of the beneficence of Æolus remains to the latest times, though Virgil, by adopting the vulgar change of the cloud island into Lipari, has lost it a little; but even when it is finally explained away by Diodorus, Æolus is still a kind-hearted monarch, who lived on the coast of Sorrento, invented the use of sails, and established a system of storm signals.

20. Another beneficent storm-power, Boreas, occupies an important place in early legend, and a singularly principal one in art; and I wish I could read to you a passage of Plato about the legend of

Boreas and Oreithyia,[7] and the breeze and shade of the Ilissus—notwithstannding its severe reflection upon persons who waste their time on mythological studies; but I must go on at once to the fable with which you are all generally familiar, that of the Harpies.

This is always connected with that of Boreas or the north wind, because the two sons of Boreas are enemies of the Harpies, and drive them away into frantic flight. The myth in its first literal form means only the battle between the fair north wind and the foul south one: the two Harpies, "Stormswift" and "Swiftfoot," are the sisters of the rainbow; that is to say, they are the broken drifts of the showery south wind, and the clear north wind drives them back; but they quickly take a deeper and more malignant significance. You know the short, violent, spiral gusts that lift the dust before coming rain: the Harpies get identified first with these, and then with more violent whirlwinds, and so they are called "Harpies," "the Snatchers," and are thought of as entirely destructive; their manner of destroying being twofold,—by snatching away, and by defiling and polluting. This is a month in which you may really see a small Harpy at her work almost whenever you choose. The first time that there is threatening of rain after two or three days of fine weather, leave your window well open to the street, and some books or papers on the table; and if you do not, in a little while, know what the Harpies mean, and how they snatch, and how they defile, I'll give up my Greek myths.

21. That is the physical meaning. It is now easy to find the mental one. You must all have felt the expression of ignoble anger in those fitful gusts of storm. There is a sense of provocation in their thin and senseless fury, wholly different from the nobler anger of the greater tempests. Also, they seem useless and unnatural, and the Greek thinks of them always as vile in malice, and opposed, therefore, to the Sons of Boreas, who are kindly winds, that fill sails, and wave harvests,—full of bracing health and happy impulses. From this lower and merely greater terror, always associated with their whirling motion, which is indeed indicative of the most destructive winds; and they are thus related to the nobler tempests, as Charybdis to the sea; they are devouring and desolating, making all things disappear that come in their grasp; and so, spiritually, they are the gusts of vexatious, fretful, lawless passion, vain and overshadowing, discontented and lamenting, meager and insane,– spirits of wasted energy, and wandering disease, and unappeased famine, and unsatisfied hope. So you have, on the one side, the winds of prosperity and health, on the other, of ruin and sickness. Understand that, once, deeply,—any who have ever known the weariness of vain desires, the pitiful, unconquerable, coiling and recoiling famine and thirst of heart,—and you will know what was in the sound of the Harpy Celæno's shriek from her rock; and why, in the seventh circle of the "Inferno," the Harpies make their nests in the warped branches of the trees that are the souls of suicides.

22. Now you must always be prepared to read Greek legends as you trace threads through figures on a silken damask: the same thread runs through the web, but it makes part of different figures. Joined with other colors you hardly recognize it, and in different lights it is dark or light. Thus the Greek fables blend and cross curiously in different directions, till they knit themselves into an arabesque where sometimes you cannot tell black from purple, nor blue from emerald—they being all the truer for this, because the truths of emotion they represent are interwoven in the same way, but all the more difficult to read, and to explain in any order. Thus the Harpies, as they represent vain desire, are connected with the Sirens, who are the spirits of constant desire; so that it is difficult sometimes in early art to know which are meant, both being represented alike as birds with women's heads; only the Sirens are the great constant desires—the infinite sicknesses of heart—which, rightly placed, give life, and wrongly placed, waste it away; so that there are two groups of Sirens, one noble and saving, as the other is fatal. But there are no animating or saving Harpies; their nature is always vexing and full of weariness, and thus they are curiously connected with the whole group of legends about Tantalus.

[7] Translated by Max Müller in the opening of his essay on "Comparative Mythology."—Chips from a German Workshop, vol. ii.

33.[8] We all know what it is to be tantalized; but we do not often think of asking what Tantalus was tantalized for—what he had done, to be forever kept hungry in sight of food. Well; he had not been condemned to this merely for being a glutton. By Dante the same punishment is assigned to simple gluttony, to purge it away; but the sins of Tantalus were of a much wider and more mysterious kind. There are four great sins attributed to him: one, stealing the food of the gods to give it to men; another, sacrificing his son to feed the gods themselves (it may remind you for a moment of what I was telling you of the earthly character of Demeter, that, while the other gods all refuse, she, dreaming about her lost daughter, eats part of the shoulder of Pelops before she knows what she is doing); another sin is, telling the secrets of the gods; and only the fourth—stealing the golden dog of Pandareos—is connected with gluttony. The special sense of this myth is marked by Pandareos receiving the happy privilege of never being troubled with indigestion; the dog, in general, however mythically represents all utter senseless and carnal desires; mainly that of gluttony; and in the mythic sense of Hades—that is to say, so far as it represents spiritual ruin in this life, and not a literal hell —the dog Cerberus as its gatekeeper—with this special marking of his character of sensual passion, that he fawns on all those who descend, but rages against all who would return (the Virgilian "facilis descendus" being a later recognition of this mythic character of Hades); the last labor of Hercules is the dragging him up to the light; and in some sort he represents the voracity or devouring of Hades itself; and the mediæval representation of the mouth of hell perpetuates the same thought. Then, also, the power of evil passion is partly associated with the red and scorching light of Sirius, as opposed to the pure light of the sun: he is the dog-star of ruin; and hence the continual Homeric dwelling upon him, and comparison of the flame of anger to his swarthy light; only, in his scorching, it is thirst, not hunger, over which he rules physically; so that the fable of Icarius, his first master, corresponds, among the Greeks, to the legend of the drunkenness of Noah.

The story of Actæon, the raging death of Hecuba, and the tradition of the white dog which ate part of Hercules' first sacrifice, and so gave name to the Cynosarges, are all various phases of the same thought,—the Greek notion of the dog being throughout confused between its serviceable fidelity, its watchfulness, its foul voracity, shamelessness, and deadly madness, while with the curious reversal or recoil of the meaning which attaches itself to nearly every great myth,—and which we shall presently see notably exemplified in the relations of the serpent to Athena,—the dog becomes in philosophy a type of severity and abstinence.

24. It would carry us too far aside were I to tell you the story of Pandareos' dog—or rather of Jupiter's dog, for Pandareos was its guardian only; all that bears on our present purpose is that the guardian of this golden dog had three daughters, one of whom was subject to the power of the Sirens, and is turned into a nightingale; and the other two were subject to the power of the Harpies, and this was what happened to them: They were very beautiful, and they were beloved by the gods in their youth, and all the great goddesses were anxious to bring them up rightly. Of all types of young ladies' education, there is nothing so splendid as that of the younger daughters of Pandareos. They have literally the four greatest goddesses for their governesses. Athena teaches them domestic accomplishments, how to weave, and sew, and the like; Artemis teaches them to hold themselves up straight; Hera, how to behave proudly and oppressively to company; and Aphrodite, delightful governess, feeds them with cakes and honey all day long. All goes well, until just the time when they are going to be brought out; then there is a great dispute whom they are to marry, and in the midst of it they are carried off by the Harpies, given by them to be slaves to the Furies, and never seen more. But of course there is nothing in Greek myths; and one never heard of such things as vain desires, and empty hopes, and clouded passions, defiling and snatching away the souls of maidens, in a London season.

[8] Printer's error: should be 23.

I have no time to trace for you any more harpy legends, though they are full of the most curious interest; but I may confirm for you my interpretation of this one, and prove its importance in the Greek mind, by noting that Polygnotus painted these maidens, in his great religious series of paintings at Delphi, crowned with flowers, and playing at dice; and that Penelope remembers them in her last fit of despair, just before the return of Ulysses, and prays bitterly that she may be snatched away at once into nothingness by the Harpies, like Pandareos' daughters, rather than be tormented longer by her deferred hope, and anguish of disappointed love.

25. I have hitherto spoken only of deities of the winds. We pass now to a far more important group, the deities of cloud. Both of these are subordinate to the ruling power of the air, as the demigods of the fountains and minor seas are to the great deep; but, as the cloud-firmament detaches itself more from the air, and has a wider range of ministry than the minor streams and seas, the highest cloud deity, Hermes, has a rank more equal with Athena than Nereus or Proteus with Neptune; and there is greater difficulty in tracing his character, because his physical dominion over the clouds can, of course, be asserted only where clouds are; and, therefore, scarcely at all in Egypt;[9] so that the changes which Hermes undergoes in becoming a Greek from an Egyptian and Phnician god, are greater than in any other case of adopted tradition In Egypt Hermes is a deity of historical record, and a conductor of the dead to judgment; the Greeks take away much of this historical function, assigning it to the Muses; but, in investing him with the physical power over clouds, they give him that which the Muses disdain,—the power of concealment and of theft. The snatching away by the Harpies is with brute force; but the snatching away by the clouds is connected with the thought of hiding, and of making things seem to be what they are not; so that Hermes is the god of lying, as he is of mist; and yet with this ignoble function of making things vanish and disappear is connected the remnant of his grand Egyptian authority of leading away souls in the cloud of death (the actual dimness of sight caused by mortal wounds physically suggesting the darkness and descent of clouds, and continually being so described in the Iliad); while the sense of the need of guidance on the untrodden road follows necessarily. You cannot but remember how this thought of cloud guidance, and cloud receiving souls at death, has been elsewhere ratified.

26. Without following that higher clue, I will pass to the lovely group of myths connected with the birth of Hermes on the Greek mountains. You know that the valley of Sparta is one of the noblest mountain ravines in the world, and that the western flank of it is formed by an unbroken chain of crags, forty miles long, rising, opposite Sparta, to a height of 8,000 feet, and known as the chain of Taygetus. Now, the nymph from whom that mountain ridge is named was the mother of Lacedæmon; therefore the mythic ancestress of the Spartan race. She is the nymph Taygeta, and one of the seven stars of spring; one of those Pleiades of whom is the question to Job,—"Canst thou bind the sweet influences of Pleiades, or loose the bands of Orion?" "The sweet influences of Pleiades," of the stars of spring,—nowhere sweeter than among the pine-clad slopes of the hills of Sparta and Arcadia, when he snows of their higher summits, beneath the sunshine of April, fell into fountains, and rose into clouds; and in every ravine was a newly awakened voice of waters,—soft increase of whisper among its sacred stones; and on every crag its forming and fading veil of radiant cloud; temple above temple, of the divine marble that no tool can pollute, nor ruin undermine. And, therefore, beyond this central valley, this great Greek vase of Arcadia, on the "hollow" mountain, Cyllene, or "pregnant" mountain, called also "cold," because there the vapors rest,[10] and born of the eldest of those stars of spring, that Maia, from whom your own month of May has its name, bringing to you, in the green

[9] I believe that the conclusions of recent scholarship are generally opposed to the Herodotean ideas of any direct acceptance by the Greeks of Egyptian myths: and very certainly, Greek art is developed by giving the veracity and simplicity of real life to Eastern savage grotesque; and not by softening the severity of pure Egyptian design. But it is of no consequence whether one conception was, or was not, in this case, derived from the other; my object is only to mark the essential difference between them.

[10] On the altar of Hermes on its summit, as on that of the Lacinian Hera, no wind ever stirred the ashes. By those altars, the Gods of Heaven were appeased, and all their storms at rest.

of her garlands, and the white of her hawthorn, the unrecognized symbols of the pastures and the wreathed snows of Arcadia, where long ago she was queen of stars: there, first cradled and wrapt in swaddling-clothes; then raised, in a moment of surprise, into his wandering power,—is born the shepherd of the clouds, winged-footed and deceiving,—blinding the eyes of Argus,—escaping from the grasp of Apollo—restless messenger between the highest sky and topmost earth— "the herald Mercury, new lighted on a heaven-kissing hill."

27. Now, it will be wholly impossible, at present, to trace for you any of the minor Greek expressions of this thought, except only that Mercury, as the cloud shepherd, is especially called Eriophoros, the wool-bearer. You will recollect the name from the common woolly rush "eriophorum" which has a cloud of silky seed; and note also that he wears distinctively the flap cap, petasos, named from a word meaning "to expand;" which shaded from the sun, and is worn on journeys. You have the epithet of mountains "cloud-capped" as an established form with every poet, and the Mont Pilate of Lucerne is named from a Latin word signifying specially a woollen cap; but Mercury has, besides, a general Homeric epithet, curiously and intensely concentrated in meaning, "the profitable or serviceable by wool,"[11] that is to say, by shepherd wealth; hence, "pecuniarily," rich or serviceable, and so he passes at last into a general mercantile deity; while yet the cloud sense of the wool is retained by Homer always, so that he gives him this epithet when it would otherwise have been quite meaningless (in Iliad, xxiv. 440), when he drives Priam's chariot, and breathes force into his horses, precisely as we shall find Athena drive Diomed; and yet the serviceable and profitable sense—and something also of gentle and soothing character in the mere wool-softness, as used for dress, and religious rites—is retained also in the epithet, and thus the gentle and serviceable Hermes is opposed to the deceitful one.

28. In connection with this driving of Priam's chariot, remember that as Autolycus is the son of Hermes the Deceiver, Myrtilus (the Auriga of the Stars) is the son of Hermes the Guide. The name Hermes itself means impulse; and he is especially the shepherd of the flocks of the sky, in driving, or guiding, or stealing them; and yet his great name, Argeiphontes, not only—as in different passages of the olden poets—means "Shining White," which is said of him as being himself the silver cloud lighted by the sun; but "Argus-killer," the killer of rightness, which is said of him as he veils the sky, and especially the stars, which are the eyes of Argus; or, literally, eyes of brightness, which Juno, who is, with Jupiter, part of the type of highest heaven, keeps in her peacock's train. We know that this interpretation is right, from a passage in which Euripides describes the shield of Hippomedon, which bore for his sign, "Argus the all-seeing, covered with eyes; open towards the rising of the stars and closed towards their setting."

And thus Hermes becomes the spirit of the movement of the sky or firmament; not merely the fast flying of the transitory cloud, but the great motion of the heavens and stars themselves. Thus, in his highest power, he corresponds to the "primo mobile" of the later Italian philosophy, and, in his simplest, is the guide of all mysterious and cloudy movement, and of all successful subtleties. Perhaps the prettiest minor recognition of his character is when, on the night foray of Ulysses and Diomed, Ulysses wear the helmet stolen by Autolycus, the son of Hermes.

29. The position in the Greek mind of Hermes as the lord of cloud is, however, more mystic and ideal than that of any other deity, just on account of the constant and real presence of the cloud itself under different forms, giving rise to all kinds of minor fables. The play of the Greek imagination in this direction is so wide and complex, that I cannot give you an outline of its range in my present limits. There is first a great series of storm-legends connected with the family of the historic Æolus centralized by the story of Athamas, with his two wives, "the Cloud," and the "White Goddess,"

[11] I am convinced that the 'eri' in 'eriounios' is not intensitive, but retained from 'erion'; but even if I am wrong in thinking this, the mistake is of no consequence with respect to the general force of the term as meaning the profitableness of Hermes. Athena's epithet of 'ageleia' has a parallel significance. [Transcriber's note: words inside single apostrophes are Greek, and use the Greek alphabet.]

ending in that of Phrixus and Helle, and of the golden fleece (which is only the cloud-burden of Hermes Eriophoros). With this, there is the fate of Salmoneus, and the destruction of the Glaucus by his own horses; all these minor myths of storm concentrating themselves darkly into the legend of Bellerophon and the Chimæra, in which there is an under story about the vain subduing of passion and treachery, and the end of life in fading melancholy,—which, I hope, not many of you could understand even were I to show it you (the merely physical meaning of the Chimæra is the cloud of volcanic lightning connected wholly with earth-fire, but resembling the heavenly cloud in its height and its thunder). Finally, in the Æolic group, there is the legend of Sisypus, which I mean to work out thoroughly by itself; its root is in the position of Corinth as ruling the isthmus and the two seas —the Corinthean Acropolis, two thousand feet high, being the centre of the crossing currents of the winds, and of the commerce of Greece. Therefore, Athena, and the fountain-cloud Pegasus, are more closely connected with Corinth than even with Athens in their material, though not in their moral, power; and Sisyphus founds the Isthmian games in connection with a melancholy story about the sea gods; but he himself is 'kerdotos andron', the most "gaining" and subtle of men; who having the key of the Isthmus, becomes the type of transit, transfer, or trade, as such; and of the apparent gain from it, which is not gain; and this is the real meaning of his punishment in hell—eternal toil and recoil (the modern idol of capital being, indeed, the stone of Sisyphus with a vengeance, crushing in its recoil). But, throughout, the old ideas of the cloud power and cloud feebleness,—the deceit of its hiding,—and the emptiness of its banishing,—the Autolycus enchantment of making black seem white,—and the disappointed fury of Ixion (taking shadow for power), mingle in the moral meaning of this and its collateral legends; and give an aspect, at last, not only of foolish cunning, but of impiety or literal "idolatry," "imagination worship," to the dreams of avarice and injustice, until this notion of atheism and insolent blindness becomes principal; and the "Clouds" of Aristophanes, with the personified "just" and "unjust" sayings in the latter part of the play, foreshadow, almost feature by feature, in all that they were written to mock and to chastise, the worst elements of the impious "'dinos'" and tumult in men's thoughts, which have followed on their avarice in the present day, making them alike forsake the laws of their ancient gods, and misapprehended or reject the true words of their existing teachers.

30. All this we have from the legends of the historic Æolus only; but, besides these, there is the beautiful story of Semele, the mother of Bacchus. She is the cloud with the strength of the vine in its bosom, consumed by the light which matures the fruit; the melting away of the cloud into the clean air at the fringe of its edges being exquisitely rendered by Pindar's epithet for her, Semele, "with the stretched-out hair" ('tauuetheira'.) Then there is the entire tradition of the Danaides, and of the tower of Danaë and golden shower; the birth of Perseus connecting this legend with that of the Gorgons and Graiæ, who are the true clouds of thunderous ruin and tempest. I must, in passing, mark for you that the form of the sword or sickle of Perseus, with which he kills Medusa, is another image of the whirling harpy vortex, and belongs especially to the sword of destruction or annihilation; whence it is given to the two angels who gather for destruction the evil harvest and evil vintage of the earth (Rev. xiv. 15). I will collect afterwards and complete what I have already written respecting the Pegasean and Gorgonian legends, noting here only what is necessary to explain the central myth of Athena herself, who represents the ambient air, which included all cloud, and rain, and dew, and darkness, and peace, and wrath of heaven. Let me now try to give you, however briefly, some distinct idea of the several agencies of this great goddess.

31. I. She is the air giving life and health to all animals.

II. She is the air giving vegetative power to the earth.

III. She is the air giving motion to the sea, and rendering navigation possible.

IV. She is the air nourishing artificial light, torch or lamplight; as opposed to that of the sun, on one hand, and of consuming[12] fire on the other.

[12] Not a scientific, but a very practical and expressive distinction.

V. She is the air conveying vibration of sound.

I will give you instances of her agency in all these functions.

32. First, and chiefly, she is air as the spirit of life, giving vitality to the blood. Her psychic relation to the vital force in matter lies deeper, and we will examine it afterwards; but a great number of the most interesting passages in Homer regard her as flying over the earth in local and transitory strength, simply and merely the goddess of fresh air.

It is curious that the British city which has somewhat saucily styled itself the Modern Athens is indeed more under her especial tutelage and favor in this respect than perhaps any other town in the island. Athena is first simply what in the Modern Athens you practically find her, the breeze of the mountain and the sea; and wherever she comes, there is purification, and health, and power. The sea-beach round this isle of ours is the frieze of our Parthenon; every wave that breaks on it thunders with Athena's voice; nay, wherever you throw your window wide open in the morning, you let in Athena, as wisdom and fresh air at the same instant; and whenever you draw a pure, long, full breath of right heaven, you take Athena into your heart, through your blood; and, with the blood, into the thoughts of your brain.

Now, this giving of strength by the air, observe, is mechanical as well as chemical. You cannot strike a good blow but with your chest full; and, in hand to hand fighting, it is not the muscle that fails first, it is the breath; the longest-breathed will, on the average, be the victor, —not the strongest. Note how Shakespeare always leans on this. Of Mortimer, in "changing hardiment with great Glendower":

"Three times they breathed, and three times did they drink,
Upon agreement, of swift Severn's flood."

And again, Hotspur, sending challenge to Prince Harry:

"That none might draw short breath to-day
But I and Harry Monmouth."

Again, of Hamlet, before he receives his wound:

"He's fat, and scant of breath."

Again, Orlando in the wrestling:

"Yes; I beseech your grace
I am not yet well breathed."

Now, of all the people that ever lived, the Greeks knew best what breath meant, both in exercise and in battle, and therefore the queen of the air becomes to them at once the queen of bodily strength in war; not mere brutal muscular strength,—that belongs to Ares,—but the strength of young lives passed in pure air and swift exercise,—Camilla's virginal force, that "flies o'er the unbending corn, and skims along the main."

33. Now I will rapidly give you two or three instances of her direct agency in this function. First, when she wants to make Penelope bright and beautiful; and to do away with the signs of her waiting and her grief. "Then Athena thought of another thing; she laid her into a deep sleep, and loosed all her limbs, and made her taller, and made her smoother, and fatter, and whiter than sawn ivory; and breathed ambrosial brightness over her face; and so she left her and went up to heaven." Fresh air and sound sleep at night, young ladies! You see you may have Athena for lady's maid whenever you choose. Next, hark how she gives strength to Achilles when he is broken with fasting and grief. Jupiter pities him and says to her, "'Daughter mine, are you forsaking your own soldier, and don't you care for Achilles any more? See how hungry and weak he is,—go and feed him with ambrosia.' So he urged the eager Athena; and she leaped down out of heaven like a harpy falcon, shrill-voiced; and she poured nectar and ambrosia, full of delight, into the breast of Achilles, that his limbs might

not fail with famine; then she returned to the solid dome of her strong father." And then comes the great passage about Achilles arming—for which we have no time. But here is again Athena giving strength to the whole Greek army. She came as a falcon to Achilles, straight at him, a sudden drift of breeze; but to the army she must come widely, she sweeps around them all. "As when Jupiter spreads the purple rainbow over heaven, portending battle or cold storm, so Athena, wrapping herself round with a purple cloud, stooped to the Greek soldiers, and raised up each of them." Note that purple, in Homer's use of it, nearly always means "fiery," "full of light." It is the light of the rainbow, not the color of it, which Homer means you to think of.

34. But the most curious passage of all, and fullest of meaning, is when she gives strength to Menelaus, that he may stand unwearied against Hector. He prays to her: "And blue-eyed Athena was glad that he prayed to her, first; and she gave him strength in his shoulders, and in his limbs, an she gave him the courage"—of what animal, do you suppose? Had it been Neptune or Mars, they would have given him the courage of a bull, or a lion; but Athena gives him the courage of the most fearless in attack of all creatures, small or great, and very small it is, but wholly incapable of terror,—she gives him the courage of a fly.

35. Now this simile of Homer's is one of the best instances I can give you of the way in which great writers seize truths unconsciously which are for all time. It is only recent science which has completely shown the perfectness of this minute symbol of the power of Athena; proving that the insect's flight and breath are co-ordinated; that its wings are actually forcing-pumps, of which the stroke compels the thoracic respiration; and that it thus breathes and flies simultaneously by the action of the same muscles, so that respiration is carried on most vigorously during flight, "while the air-vessels, supplied by many pairs of lungs instead of one, traverse the organs of flight in far greater numbers than the capillary blood-vessels of our own system, and give enormous and untiring muscular power, a rapidity of action measured by thousands of strokes in the minute, and an endurance, by miles and hours of flight."[13]

Homer could not have known this; neither that the buzzing of the fly was produced, as in a wind instrument, by a constant current of air through the trachea. But he had seen, and, doubtless, meant us to remember, the marvellous strength and swiftness of the insect's flight (the glance of the swallow itself is clumsy and slow compared to the darting of common house-flies at play); he probably attributed its murmur to the wings, but in this also there was a type of what we shall presently find recognized in the name of Pallas,—the vibratory power of the air to convey sound, while, as a purifying creature, the fly holds its place beside the old symbol of Athena in Egypt, the vulture; and as a venomous and tormenting creature has more than the strength of the serpent in proportion to its size, being thus entirely representative of the influence of the air both in purification and pestilence; and its courage is so notable that, strangely enough, forgetting Homer's simile, I happened to take the fly for an expression of the audacity of freedom in speaking of quite another subject.[14] Whether it should be called courage, or mere mechanical instinct, may be questioned, but assuredly no other animal, exposed to continual danger, is so absolutely without sign of fear.

36. You will, perhaps, have still patience to hear two instances, not of the communication as strength, but of the personal agency of Athena as the air. When she comes down to help Diomed against Ares, she does not come to fight instead of him, but she takes his charioteer's place.

> "She snatched the reins, she lashed with all her force,
> And full on Mars impelled the foaming horse."

Ares is the first to cast his spear; then—note this—Pope says:

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[13] Ormerod: "Natural History of Wasps."

[14] See farther on, §148, pp. 154-156.

"Pallas opposed her hand, and caused to glance,
Far from the car, the strong immortal lance."

She does not oppose her hand in the Greek—the wind could not meet the lance straight—she catches it in her hand, and throws it off. There is no instance in which a lance is so parried by a mortal hand in all the Iliad, and it is exactly the way the wind would parry it, catching it, and turning it aside. If there are any good rifleshots here, they know something about Athena's parrying; and in old times the English masters of feathered artillery knew more yet. Compare also the turning of Hector's lance from Achilles: Iliad, xx. 439.

37. The last instance I will give you is as lovely as it is subtile. Throughout the Iliad, Athena is herself the will or Menis of Achilles. If he is to be calmed, it is she who calms him; if angered, it is she who inflames him. In the first quarrel with Atreides, when he stands at pause, with the great sword half drawn, "Athena came from heaven, and stood behind him and caught him by the yellow hair." Another god would have stayed his hand upon the hilt, but Athena only lifts his hair. "And he turned and knew her, and her dreadful eyes shone upon him." There is an exquisite tenderness in this laying her hand upon his hair, for it is the talisman of his life, vowed to his own Thessalian river if he ever returned to its shore, and cast upon Patroclus' pile, so ordaining that there should be no return.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.