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The Lords of the Ghostland: A History of the Ideal



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Содержание

I	6
II	12
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	16

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The Lords of the Ghostland: A History of the Ideal

*"Errons, les doigts unis, dans
l'Alhambra du songe."*

Renée Vivien

I

BRAHMA

THE ideal is the essence of poetry. In the virginal innocence of the world, poetry was a term that meant discourse of the gods. A world grown grey has learned to regard the gods as diseases of language. Conceived, it may be, in fevers of fancy, perhaps, originally, they were but deified words. Yet, it is as children of beauty and of dream that they remain.

"Mortal has made the immortal," the *Rig-Veda* explicitly declares. The making was surely slow. In tracing the genealogy of the divine, it has been found that its root was fear. The root, dispersed by light, ultimately dissolved. But, meanwhile, it founded religion, which, revealed in storm and panic, for prophets had ignorance and dread. The gods were not then. There were demons only, more exactly there were diabolized expressions invented to denominate natural phenomena and whatever else perturbed. It was in the evolution of the demoniac that the divine appeared. Through one of time's unmeasurable gaps there floated the idea that perhaps the phenomena that alarmed were but the unconscious agents of superior minds. At the suggestion, irresistibly a dramatization of nature began in which the gods were born, swarms of them, nebulous, wayward, uncertain, that, through further gaps, became concrete, became occasionally reducible to two great divinities, earth and sky, whose union was imagined – a hymen which the rain suggested – and from which broader conceptions proceeded and grander gods emerged.

The most poetic of these are perhaps the Hindu. At the heraldings of newer gods, the lords of other ghostlands have, after battling violently, swooned utterly away. But though many a fresher faith has been brandished at them, apathetically, in serene indifference, the princes of the Aryan sky endure.

It is their poetry that has preserved them. To their creators poetry was abundantly dispensed. To no other people have myths been as frankly transparent. To none other, save only their cousins the Persians, have fancies more luminous occurred. The Persians so polished their dreams that they entranced the world that was. Poets can do no more. The Hindus too were poets. They were children as well. Their first lisp, the first recorded stammer of Indo-European speech, is audible still in the *Rig-Veda*, a bundle of hymns tied together, four thousand years ago, for the greater glory of Fire. The worship of the latter led to that of the Sun and ignited the antique altars. It flamed in Persia, lit perhaps the shrine of Vesta, afterward dazzled the Incas, igniting, meanwhile, not altars merely, but purgatory itself.

In Persia, where it illuminated the face of Ormuzd, its beneficence is told in the *Avesta*, a work of such holiness that it was polluted if seen. In the *Rig-Veda*, there are verses which were subsequently accounted so sacred that if a soudra overheard them the ignominy of his caste was effaced.

The verses, the work of shepherds who were singers, are invocations to the dawn, to the first flushes of the morning, to the skies' heightening hues, and the vermillion moment when the devouring Asiatic sun appears. There are other themes, minor melodies, but the chief inspiration is light.

To primitive shepherds the approach of darkness was the coming of death. The dawn, which they were never wholly sure would reappear, was resurrection. They welcomed it with cries which the *Veda* preserves, which the *Avesta* retains and the *Eddas* repeat. The potent forces that produced night, the powers potenter still that routed it, they regarded as beings whose moods genuflexions could affect. In perhaps the same spirit that Frenchmen assisted at a *lever du roi*, and Englishmen attend a prince's levee, the Aryan breakfasted on song and sacrifice. It was an homage to the rising sun.

The sun was *deva*. The Sanskrit root *div*, from which the word is derived, produced deus, devi, divinities – numberless, accursed, adored, or forgot. The common term applied to all abstractions

that are and have been worshipped, means *That which shines* and the name which, in the early Orient, signified a star, designates the Deity in the Occident to-day.

Apologetically, Tertullian, a Christian Father, remarked: "Some think our God is the Sun." There were excuses perhaps for those that did. Adonai, a Hebrew term for the Almighty, is a plural. It means lords. But the lords indicated were Baalim who were Lords of the Sun. Moreover, when the early Christians prayed, they turned to the East. Their holy day was, as the holy day of Christendom still is, Sunday, day of the Sun, an expression that comes from the Norse, on whom also shone the light of the Aryan deva.

To shepherds who, in seeking pasture for their flocks, were seeking also pasture for their souls, the deva became Indra. They had other gods. There was Agni, fire; Varuna, the sky; Maruts, the tempest. There was Mithra, day, and Yama, death. There were still others, infantile, undulant, fluid, not infrequently ridiculous also. But it was Indra for whom the dew and honey of the morning hymns were spread. It was Indra who, emerging from darkness, made the earth after his image, decorated the sky with constellations and wrapped the universe in space. It was he who poured indifferently on just and unjust the triple torrent of splendour, light, and life.

Indra was triple. Triple Indra, the *Veda* says. In that description is the preface to a theogony of which Hesiod wrote the final page. It was the germ of sacred dynasties that ruled the Aryan and the Occidental skies. From it came the grandiose gods of Greece and Rome. From it also came the paler deities of the Norse. Meanwhile ages fled. Life nomad and patriarchal ceased. From forest and plain, temples arose; from hymns, interpretations; from prayer, metaphysics; for always man has tried to analyze the divine, always too, at some halt in life, he has looked back and found it absent.

In meditation it was discerned that Indra was an effect, not the cause. It was discerned also that that cause was not predicable of the gods who, in their undulance and fluidity, suggested ceaseless transformations and consequently something that is transformed.

The idea, patiently elaborated, resulted in a drainage of the fluid myths and the exteriorisation of a being entirely abstract. Designated first as Brahmanaspati, Lord of Prayer, afterward more simply as Brahma, he was assumed to have been asleep in the secret places of the sky, from which, on awakening, he created what is.

The conception, ideal itself, was not, however, ideal enough. The labour of creating was construed as a blemish on the splendour of the Supreme. It was held that the Soul of Things could but loll, majestic and inert, on a lotos of azure. Then, above Brahma, was lifted Brahm, a god neuter and indeclinable; neuter as having no part in life, indeclinable because unique.

There was the apex of the world's most poetic creed, one distinguished over all others in having no founder, unless a heavenly inspiration be so regarded. But the apex required a climax. Inspiration provided it.

The forms of matter and of man, the glittering apsaras of the vermillion dawns, Indra himself, these and all things else were construed into a bubble that Brahm had blown. The semblance of reality in which men occur and, with them, the days of their temporal breath, was attributed not to the actual but to Mâyâ – the magic of a high god's longing for something other than himself, something that should contrast with his eternal solitude and fill the voids of his infinite ennui. From that longing came the bubble, a phantom universe, the mirage of a god's desire. Earth; sea and sky; all that in them is, all that has been and shall be, are but the changing convolutions of a dream.

In that dream there descended a scale of beings, above whom were set three great lords, Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver, and Siva the Destroyer, collectively the Tri-murti, the Hindu trinity expressed in the mystically ineffable syllable Om. Between the trinity and man came other gods, a whole host, powers of light and powers of darkness, the divine and the demoniac fused in a hierarchy surprising but not everlasting. Eventually the dream shall cease, the bubble break, the universe collapse, the heavens be folded like a tent, the Tri-murti dissolved, and in space will rest

but the Soul of Things, at whose will atoms shall reassemble and forms unite, dis-unite and reappear, depart and return, endlessly, in recurring cycles.

That conception, the basis perhaps of the theory of cosmological days, is perhaps also itself but a dream, yet one that, however defective, has a beauty which must have been too fair. Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, originally regarded as emanations of the ideal, became concrete. Consorts were found for them. From infinity they were lodged in idols. A worship sensuous when not grotesque ensued, from which the ideal took flight.

That was the work of the clergy. Brahmanism is also. The archaic conflict between light and darkness, the triumph of the former over the latter, diminished, at their hands, into the figurative. That is only reasonable. It was only reasonable also that they should claim the triumph as their own. Without them the gods could do nothing. They would not even be. In the *Rig-Veda* and the *Vedas* generally they are transparent. The subsequent evolution of the Paramâtmâ, the Tri-murti and the hierarchy, had, for culmination, the apotheosis of a priesthood that had invented them and who, for the invention, deserved the apotheosis which they claimed and got. They were priests that were poets, and poets that were seers. But they were not sorcerers. They could not provide successors equal to themselves. It was the later clergy that pulled poetry from the infinite, stuffed it into idols and prostituted it to nameless shames.

In the *Bhagavad-Gita* it is written: "Nothing is greater than I. In scriptures I am prayer. I am perfume in flowers, brilliance in light. I am life and its source. I am the soul of creation. I am the beginning and the end. I am the Divine."

That is Brahm. Ormuzd has faded. Zeus has passed. Jupiter has gone. With them the divinities of Egypt and the lords of the Chaldean sky have been reabsorbed and forgot. Brahm still is. The cohorts of Cyrus might pray Ormuzd to peer where he glowed. There, the phalanxes of Alexander might raise altars to Zeus. Parthians and Tatars might dispute the land and the god. Muhammadans could bring their Allah and Christians their creed. Indifferently Brahm has dreamed, knowing that he has all time as these all have their day.

The conception of that apathy, grandiose in itself and marvellous in its persistence, was due to unknown poets that had in them the true *souffle* of the real ideal. But that also demanded a climax. They produced it in the theory that the afflictions of this life are due to transgressions in another.

From afflictions death, they taught, is not a release, for the reason that there is no death. There is but absorption in Brahm. Yet that consummation cannot occur until all transgressions, past and present, have been expiated and the soul, lifted from the eddies of migration, becomes Brahm himself.

To be absorbed, to be Brahm, to be God, is an ambition, certainly vertiginous yet as surely divine. But to succeed, consciousness of success must be lost. A mortal cannot attain divinity until annihilation is complete. To become God nothing must be left of man. To loose, then, every bond, to be freed from every tie, to retire from finite things, to mount to and sink in the immutable, to see Death die, was and is the Hindu ideal.

Of the elect, that is. Of the higher castes, of the priest, of the prince. But not of the people. The ideal was not for them, salvation either. It was idle even to think about it. Set in hell, they had to return here until in some one of the twenty-four lakhs of birth which the chain of migrations comports, and which to saint and soudra were alike dispensed, they arrived here in the purple. Then only was the opportunity theirs to rescale a sky that was reserved for prelates and rajahs.

Suddenly, to the pariah, to the hopeless, to those who outcast in hell were outcast from heaven, an erect and facile ladder to that sky was brought. The Buddha furnished it. If he did not, a college of dissidents assumed that he had, and in his name indicated a stairway which, set among the people, all might mount and at whose summit gods actually materialized.

To those who believe in the Dalai Lama – there are millions that have believed, there are millions that do – he is not a vicar of the divine, he is himself divine, a god in a tenement of flesh who, as such, though he die, immediately is reincarnated; a god therefore always present among his

people, whose history is a continuous gospel. In contemporaneous Italy, a peasant may aspire to the papacy. In the uplands of Asia, men have loftier ambitions. There they may become Buddha, who perhaps never was, except in legend.

In the *Lalita Vistâra* the legend unfolds. In the strophes of the poem one may assist at the Buddha's birth, an event which is said to have occurred at Kapilavastu. Oriental geography is unacquainted with the place. With the thing even Occidental philosophy is familiar. Kapilavastu means the substance of Kapila. The substance is atheism.

History has its hesitations. Often it stammers uncertainly. But its earliest pages agree in representing Kapila as the initial religious rebel. Kapila was the first to declare the divine a human and invalid conjecture. The announcement, with its prefaces and deductions, is contained in the *Sankhya Karika*, a system of rationalism, still read in India, where it is known as the godless tract.

In the Orient, existence is usually a sordid nightmare when it does not happen to be a golden dream. Kapila taught that it was a prison from which release could be had only through intellectual development. That is Kapilavastu, the substance of Kapila, where the Buddha was born. In the *Lalita Vistâra* it is fairyland.

There, Gotama the Buddha is the Prince Charming of a sovereign house. But a prince who developed into a nihilist prior to re-becoming the god that anteriorly he had been. It was while in heaven that he selected Mâyâ, a ranee, to be his mother. It was surrounded by the heavenly that he appeared. The fields foamed with flowers. The skies flamed with faces. In the air apsaras floated, fanning themselves with peacocks' tails. The galleries of the palace festooned themselves with pearls. On the terraces a rain of perfume fell. In the parterres Mâyâ strolled. A tree bent and bowed to her. Touching a branch with her hand she looked up and yawned. Painlessly from her immaculate breast Gotama issued. An immense lotos sprouted to receive him. To cover him a parasol dropped from above. He, however, already occupied, was contemplating space, the myriad worlds, the myriad lives, and announced himself their saviour. At once a deluge of roses descended. The effulgence of a hundred thousand colours shone. A spasm of delight pulsated. Sorrow and anger, envy and fear, fled and fainted. From the zenith came a murmur of voices, the sound of dancing, the kiss of timbril and of lute.

That is Oriental poetry. Oriental philosophy is less ornate. From the former the Buddha could not have come. From the latter he probably did, if not in flesh at least in spirit. To that spirit antiquity was indebted, as modernity is equally, for the doctrines of a teacher known variously as Gotama the Enlightened and Sakya the Sage. Whether or not the teacher himself existed is, therefore, unimportant. The existence of the Christ has been doubted. But the doctrines of both survive. They do more, they enchant. Occasionally they seem to combine. The Gospels have obviously nothing in common with the *Lalita Vistâra*, which is an apocryphal novel of uncertain date. The resemblance that is reflected comes from the *Tripitaka*, the Three Baskets that constitute the evangels of the Buddhist faith.

In an appendix to the *Mahâvaggo*, it is stated that disciples of Gotama, who knew his sermons and his parables by heart, determined the canon "after his death." The expression might mean anything. But a ponderable antiquity is otherwise shown. Asoko, a Hindu emperor, sent an embassy to Ptolemy Philadelphos. The circumstance was set forth bilingually on various heights. In another inscription Asoko recommended the study of the *Tripitaka* and mentioned titles of the books. Ptolemy Philadelphos reigned at Alexandria in the early part of the third century B.C. The *Tripitaka* must therefore have existed then. But the thirty-seventh year of Asoko's reign was, in a third inscription, counted as the two hundred and fifty-seventh from the Buddha's death, a reckoning which makes them much older. Their existence, however, as a fourth inscription shows, was oral. Transmitted for hundreds of years by trained schools of reciters, it was during a synod that occurred in the first quarter of the first century before Christ that, finally, they were written.

In them it is recited that Mâyâ, the mother of Gotama, was immaculate. According to St. Matthew, Maria, the mother of Jesus, was also. Previously, in each instance, the coming of a Messiah had been foretold. The infant Jesus was visited by magi. The infant Buddha was visited by kings. Afterward, neither Jesus or Gotama wrote. But both preached charity, chastity, poverty, humility, and abnegation of self. Both fasted in a wilderness. Both were tempted by a devil. Both announced a second advent. Both were transfigured. Both died in the open air. At the death of each there was an earthquake. Both healed the sick. Both were the light of a world which both said would cease to be.

According to *Luke*, a courtesan visited Jesus and had her sins remitted. According to the *Mahâvaggo*, Gotama was visited by a harlot whom he instructed in things divine.¹ In *Matthew*, Jesus is depicted as a glutton and a wine-bibber. In the *Mahâvaggo*, the picture of Gotama is the same.² In *Matthew* it is written; "Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust doth consume and where thieves break through and steal." The *Khuddakapatho* says: "Righteousness is a treasure which no man can steal. It is a treasure that abideth alway."³ In *Luke* it is written: "As ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also unto them." The *Dhammaphada* say: "Put yourself in the place of others, do as you would be done by."⁴

The miracle of walking on the water, that of the money-bearing fish, the story of the Woman at the Well, the proclamation of an unpardonable sin, even the mediæval myth of the Wandering Jew, may have originated in Buddhist legend.⁵

Pious minds have been disturbed by these similitudes. The resemblance between Mâyâ and Maria has perplexed. The perhaps uncertain likeness of Gotama to Jesus has occasioned irreverent doubts. But the parallelisms may be fortuitous. Probably they are. Even otherwise they but enhance the sororal beauties of faiths which if cognate are quite distinct. Then too the penetrating charm of the parables and sermons of the Buddha fades before the perfection of the sermons and parables of the Christ. The birth, ministry, transfiguration, and passing of Gotama are marvels which, however exquisite, the wholly spiritual apparitions of the Lord efface.

Other similarities, such as they are, may without impropriety, perhaps, be attributed to the ideals progressus. Hindu and Chaldean beliefs constitute the two primal inspirational faiths. From the one, Buddhism and Zoroasterism developed. From the other the creed of Israel and possibly that of Egypt came. Religions that followed were afterthoughts of the divine. They were revelations sometimes more intelligible, in one instance inexpressibly more luminous, yet invariably reminiscent of an anterior light.

The light of contemporaneous Buddhism is that of Catholicism – heaven deducted, a heaven, that is, of ceaseless Magnificats. The latter conception is Christian. But it was Persian first. Otherwise, in common with the Church, Buddhism has saints, censures, litanies, tonsures, holy water, fasts, and confession. Barring confession, the extreme antiquity of which has been attested, the other rites and ceremonies are, it may be, borrowed, but not the high morality, the altruism, the renunciation and effacement of self, which Buddhists no longer very scrupulously observe, perhaps, but which their religion was the first to instil.

Buddhism originally had neither rites nor ritual. It was merely a mendicant order in which one tried to do what is right, with, for reward, the hope of Pratscha-Parâmita, the peace that is beyond all knowledge and which Nirvana provides. That peace is – or was – the complete absence of anything, extinction utter and everlasting, a state of absolute non-existence which no whim of Brahm may disturb.

¹ Luke vii. 37-50. Sacred Books of the East, xi. 30.

² Matthew xi, 19. S. B. E. xiii. 92.

³ Matthew vi. 19. S. B. E. x. 191.

⁴ Luke vi. 31. S. B. E. x. 36.

⁵ Cf. Edmunds: Buddhist and Christian Gospels.

Buddhism denied Brahm and every tenet of Brahmanism, save only that which concerned the immedicable misery of life. Of final deliverance there was in Brahmanism no known mode. None at least that was exoteric. Brahmanism rolled man ceaselessly through all forms of existence, from the elementary to the divine, and even from the latter, even when he was absorbed in Brahm, flung him out and back into a fresh circle of unavoidable births.

The theory is horrible. In the horrible occasionally is the sublime. To Gotama it was merely absurd. He blew on it. Abruptly, the categories of the infinite, the infant gods, shapes divine and demoniac, the entire phantasmagoria of metempsychosis, seemed really absorbed and Brahm himself ablated. For a moment the skies, sterilized by a breath, seemingly were vacant. Actually they were never more peopled. Behind the pall, tossed on an antique faith, new gods were crouching and waiting. Buddhistic atheism had resulted but in the production of an earlier New Testament. From the depths of the ideal, swarms of bedecked and bejewelled divinities escorted Brahm back to a lotos of azure. Coincidentally Gotama, enthroned in the zenith, contemplated clusters of gods that dangled through twenty-eight abodes of bliss which other poets created.

In demonstrable triumph the Buddha was then, as he has been since, even if previously his existence had been omitted. But though he never were, there nevertheless occurred a social revolution of which he was the nominal originator and which, had it not been diverted into other realms, might have resulted in Brahm's entire extinction.

Wolves do not devour each other. Ideals should not either. The Oriental heavens were wide enough to serve as fastnesses for two sets of hostile, germane, and ineffably poetic aberrations. There was room even for more. There always should be. Of the divine one can have never enough.

The gospel according to Sakya the Eremite is divine. It is divine in its limitless compassion, and though compassion, when analyzed, becomes but egotism in an etherialized form, yet the gospel had other attractions. In demonstrating that life is evil, that rebirth is evil too, that to be born even a god is evil still, – in demonstrating these things, while insisting that all else, Buddhism included, is but vanity, it fractured the charm of error in which man had been confined.

Sakya saw men born and reborn in hell. He saw them ignorant, as humanity has always been, unaware of their abjection as men are to-day, and over the gulfs of existence, through the torrents of rebirth, he offered to ferry them. But in the ferrying they had to aid. The aid consisted in the rigorous observance of every virtue that Christianity afterward professed. Therein is the beauty of Buddhism. Its profundity resided in a revelation that everything human perishes except actions and the consequences that ensue. To orthodox India its tenets were as heretical as those of Christianity were to the Jews. Nonetheless the doctrine became popular. But doctrines once popularized lose their nobility. The degeneracy of Buddhism is due to Cathay.

To the Hindu life was an incident between two eternities, an episode in the string of deaths and rebirths. To Mongolians it was a unique experience. They had no knowledge of the supersensible, no suspicion of the ideal. Among them Buddhism operated a conversion. It stimulated a thirst for the divine.

The thirst is unquenchable. Buddhism, in its simple severity, could not even attempt to slake it. But on its simplicity a priesthood shook parures. Its severity was cloaked with mantles of gold. The founder, an atheist who had denied the gods, was transformed into one. About him a host of divinities was strung. The most violently nihilistic of doctrines was fanned into an idolatry puerile and meek. Nirvana became Elysium, and a religion which began as a heresy culminated in a superstition. That is the history of creeds.

II ORMUZD

THE purest of thoughts is that which concerns the beginning of things."

So Ormuzd instructed Zarathrustra.

"And what was there at the beginning?" the prophet asked.

"There was light and the living Word."⁶ Long later the statement was repeated in the Gospel attributed to John. Originally it occurred in the course of a conversation that the *Avesta* reports. In a similar manner *Exodus* provides a revelation which Moses received. There Jehovah said: 'ehyèh 'Āsher 'ehyèh. In the *Avesta* Ormuzd said: *ahmi yad ahmi*.⁷ Word for word the declarations are identical. Each means *I am that I am*.⁸

The conformity of the pronouncements may be fortuitous. Their relative priority uncertain chronology obscures. The date that orthodoxy has assigned to Moses is about 1500 B.C. Plutarch said that Zarathrustra lived five thousand years before the fall of Troy. Both dates are perhaps questionable. But a possible hypothesis philology provides. The term Jehovah is a seventeenth-century expansion of the Hebrew , now usually written Jahveh and commonly translated: *He who causes to be*. The original rendering of Ormuzd is Ahura-mazda. Ahura means *living* and mazdaô *creator*. The period when *Exodus* was written is probably post-exilic. The period when the *Avesta* was completed is assumed to be pre-Cyrian. It was at the junction of the two epochs that Iran and Israel met.

But, however the pronouncements may conform, however also they may confuse, the one reported in *Exodus* is alone exact. In subsequent metamorphoses the name might fade, the deity remained. Whereas, save to diminishing Parsis, Ormuzd, once omnipotent throughout the Persian sky, has gone. A time, though, there was, when from his throne in the ideal he menaced the apathy of Brahm, the majesty of Zeus, when even from the death of deaths he might have ejected Buddha and, supreme in the Orient, ruled also in the West. Salamis prevented that. But one may wonder whether the conquest had not already been effected, whether for that matter the results are not apparent still. Brahma, Ormuzd, Zeus, Jupiter, are but different conceptions of a primal idea. They are four great gods diversely represented yet originally identical, and whose attributes Jahveh, in his ascensions, perhaps absorbed.

Ormuzd represented purity and light. For his worship no temple was necessary, barely a shrine, never an image. In his celestial court were parikas, the glittering bayaderes of love that a later faith called peris, but his sole consorts were Prayers. About him and them gathered amshaspands and izeds, angels and seraphs, the winged host of loveliness that in Babylon enthralled the Jews who returned from captivity escorted by them. The allurements of their charm, enchanting then, enchants the world to-day. There has been little that is more poetic, except perhaps Ormuzd himself, who symbolized whatever is blinding in beauty, particularly the sun's effulgence, the radiance of light.

The light endures, though the god has gone. Yet at the time, aloof in clear ether and aloft, he resplended in a sovereignty that only Ahriman disputed.

Ahriman has been more steadfast than Ormuzd. He too captivated the captive Hebrews. The latter adopted him and called him Satan, as they also adopted one of his minor legates, Ashmodai – transformed by the Vulgate into Asmodeus – a little jealous devil who, in the apocryphal *Tobit*, strangled husbands on their bridal nights. Ahriman, his master, represented everything that was the opposite of Ormuzd. Ahriman dwelt in darkness, Ormuzd in light. Ormuzd was primate of purity;

⁶ Avesta (Anquetil-Duperron), i. 393

⁷ Avesta, Hormazd Yasht.

⁸ Exodus iii. 14.

Ahriman, prince of whatever is base. One had angels and archangels for aids, the other fiends and demons. Between their forces war was constant. Each strove for the soul of man. But after death, when, in the balance, the deeds of the defunct were weighed, there appeared a golden-eyed redeemer, Mithra, who so closely resembled the Christ that the world hesitated, for a moment, between them.

It was because of these conceptions that Persia dreamed of conquering the West. At Marathon and at Salamis that illusion was looted. History tells of the cohorts that descended there. It relates further what they did. But of what they thought there is no record. It was, perhaps, too obvious. Ormuzd, god of light and, in the Orient, god of the day, was, in the darker and duller Occident, menaced there also by Ahriman. Politically the expedition is not very explicable. Considered from a religious standpoint the motive is clear. But though the Persian forces could not uphold their light in Greece, higher forces projected it far beyond, to the remote north, to a south that was still remoter.

Originally the light was Vedic. It was identical with that of Agni, of Indra and of Varuna. But while these, without subsidence, passed, absorbed by Brahm, the light of Iran, deflecting, persisted, and so potently that it lit the Teutonic sky, glows still in Christendom, after refracting perhaps in Inca temples. Its revelation is due to Zarathrustra.

Zarathrustra, commonly written Zoroaster, is a name translatable into "star of gold" and also into "keeper of old camels." Probably it was first employed to designate an imaginary prophet, and then a series of spiritual though actual successors by whom, in the course of centuries, the *Avesta* was evolved. Otherwise Zarathrustra and Gotama are brothers in Brahmanaspati. Both had virgin mothers. In the lives of both miracles are common. The advent of Zarathrustra was accounted the ruin of demons. When he was born he laughed aloud. As a child he slept in flames. As a man he walked on water. Before prodigies such as these fiends fell like autumn leaves. Hence, on the part of the devil, an attempt to seduce him from the divine. Mairya, the demon of death, offered him, as Mara offered Gotama, as Satan offered Jesus, the empire of the earth. Zarathrustra rebuked the devil first with stones, then with pious words. From him, as from the Buddha and the Christ, abashed the tempter retreated.⁹

That victory over evil, the Parsis to-day regard as the capital event in the history of the world. It was the immediate prelude to the revelation of the Law which Ormuzd vouchsafed to his prophet.

The revelation occurred on a mountain, in the course of conversations, during which Zarathrustra questioned and Ormuzd, in the voice of heaven, replied. So was the Law proclaimed in India. There Mithra and Varuna sang it through the sky.¹⁰ The expression is notable, for the song of the sky is thunder and the theophany that of Sinai. There is another *rapprochement* in Babylonian lore and a third in the *Eddas*, where it is related that to Sigurd the secret of the runes was sung.

Meanwhile, the revelation completed and proclaimed, Zarathrustra died as miraculously as he was born, foretelling, as he went, the coming of a messiah, his own son, Coshyos – the delayed fruit of an immaculate hymen that is not to be fecund until the end of time – but who, at the consummation of the ages, will rejuvenate the world, affranchise it from death, vanquish Ahriman, terminate the struggle between good and evil, purify hell and fill it full with glory. Then the dead shall rise and immortality be universal.¹¹

Zoroaster is obviously mythical. The Buddha is also. But precisely as the Buddhist scriptures exist, so also do the Zoroastrian. They do more. Frequently they enlighten, occasionally they exalt. Written in gold on perfumed leather, the original edition, limited to two copies, was so sacred that it was sullied if seen. Burned with the palace of Persepolis – which Alexander, the Great Sinner, in a drunken orgy, destroyed – only fragments of the fargards remain. These tell of creation, effected in six epochs, and of a *pairi-daêza*.

⁹ Darmestetter: Ormazd et Ahriman.

¹⁰ Rig-Veda, i. 151.

¹¹ Zamyad Yasht. xix. 89 *sq.*

Delitzsch voluminously asked: *Wo lag das Paradies?* There it is. There is the primal paradise. In it Ormuzd put Mashya, the first man, and Mashyana, the first woman, whom Ahriman, in the form of a serpent, seduced. Thereafter ensued the struggle in which all have or will participate, one that, extending beyond the limits of the visible world, arrays seasons and spirits and the senses of man in a conflict of good and evil that can end only when, from the depths of the dawn, radiant in the vermillion sky, Coshyos, hero of the resurrection, triumphantly appears.

The parallel between this romance and subsequent poetry is curious. In Chaldea, before the fargards were, the story of Creation, of Eden, and of the fall had been told. In Egypt, before the *Avesta* was written, the resurrection and the life were known. Similar legends and prospects may or may not represent an autonomous development of Iranian thought. The successors of the problematic Zarathrustra, the line of magi who wrote and taught in his name, may have gathered the tales and theories elsewhere. In the creed which they instituted there is a trinity. India had one, Egypt another, Babylonia a third. Babylonia had even three of them. But in Mithra, Iran had a redeemer that no other creed possessed. In Coshyos was a saviour, virgin born, who nowhere else was imagined. In Mara, Buddhism had a Satan. The Persian Ahriman is Satan himself. Babylon had angels and cherubs. In Iran there were guardian angels, there were archangels with flaming swords, there were fairies, there were goblins, the celestial, the poetic, the demoniac combined. Zoroasterism may or may not have had a past, it is perhaps evident that it had a future.

An inscription chiselled in the red granite of Ekbatana describes Ormuzd as creator of heaven and earth. In the *Veda* the description of Indra is identical.¹² It was applied equally to Jahveh in Judea. But above Jahveh, Kabbalists discerned En Soph. Above Indra metaphysicians discovered Brahma. Similarly the Persian magi found that Ormuzd, however perfect, was not perfect enough and, from the depths of the ideal, they disclosed Zervan Akerene, the Eternal, from whom all things come and to whom all return.

That conception is not reached in the *Avesta*. It is in the *Bundahish*, a work which, while much later, is based on earlier traditions, memories it may be, of antediluvian legends brought from the summits of upper Asia by Djemschid, the fabulous Abraham of the Persians of whom Zarathrustra was the Moses. But in default of the Eternal, the *Avesta* contains pictures of enduring charm.

Among these is a highly poetic pastel that displays the soul of man surprised in the first post-mortem ambushades. There a figure, beautiful or revolting, cries at him: "I am thyself, the image of thine earthly life."

If that life has been beautiful, the soul of man, led by itself, is conducted to heaven. Otherwise, led still by itself, it descended to Drûjô-demâna, the House of Destruction, where, fed on insults and offal, it waited till its sins were destroyed. The waiting might be long. It was not everlasting. There was Mithra to intercede. Besides, evil was regarded but as a shadow on the surface of things. In the seventh epoch of creation, a period yet to be, the age which Coshyos is to usher, the shadow will fade. The wicked, purified of their wickedness, will be received among the blessed. Even Ahriman is to be converted. In that definite triumph of light over darkness is the resurrection and the life, life in Garô-demâna, literally House of Hymns, a pre-Christian heaven, yet strictly Christian, where, to the trumpetings of angels, hosannahs are ceaselessly sung.¹³

John – or, more exactly, his homonym – was perhaps acquainted with that idea, as he may have been with other theories that the *Avesta* contains. But the possibility is a detail. It is the idea that counts. Behind it is the unique character of this doctrine which, in eliminating evil, converted even Satan.

Satan seldom gets his due. He was the first artist and has remained the greatest. In creating evil he fashioned what is a luxury and a necessity combined. Evil is the counterpart of excellence. Both

¹² R. V. x. 3. "Indra created heaven and earth."

¹³ Yasht. xxviii. 10, xxxiv. 2.

have their roots in nature. One could not be destroyed without the other. For every form of evil there is a corresponding form of good. Virtue would be meaningless were it not for vice. Honour would have no nobility were it not for shame. If ever evil be banished from the scheme of things, life could have no savour and joy no delight. Happiness and unhappiness would be synonymous terms.

It is for this reason that scoffers have mocked at heaven. Heaven may be very different from what has been fancied. But the theory of it, however unphilosophic, which Zoroasterism supplied, carried with it a creed not of tears but of smiles, a religion of lofty tolerance, one in which the demonology barely alarmed, for redemption was assured, and so fully that on earth melancholy was accounted a folly.

Though tolerant, it could be austere. Meanness, thanklessness, loquaciousness, jealousy, an unbecoming attire, evil thoughts, whatever is sensual, whatever is coarse, any promenade in mud actual or metaphorical, severely it condemned. Particularly was avarice censured. "There are many who do not like to give," Ormuzd, in the *Vendidad*, confided to Zarathrustra. The high god added: "Ahriman awaits them."

Ahriman awaited also the harlot who, elsewhere, at that period, was holy. Yet in lapses, confession and repentance sufficed for remission, provided that in praying for forgiveness the sinner forgave those that had sinned against him. If he lacked the time, were he dying, a priest might yet save him with words whispered in the ear. That was the extreme unction, hardly administrable, however, in case of wilful omission of the *darûn*, which was communion.

This sacrament, the most mystic of the Church, was observed by the Incas, who also confessed, also atoned, who, like the Buddhists, were baptized, but who, like the Persians, worshipped the sun and, with perhaps a finer instinct of what the beautiful truly is, worshipped too the rainbow.¹⁴

Huraken, the winged and feathered serpent-god of the Toltecs, was adored in temples that upheld a cross. The Incas lacked that symbol. But they had a Satan. They had also the expectation of a saviour, belief in whom could alone have consoled for the advent of Pizarro. Over what highways of sea or sky, the living Word, which Ormuzd spoke, reached them, there has been no somnambulist of history to divine. But in the splendour that Cuzco was, in the golden temples of the town of gold, along the scarlet lanes where sacred peacocks strolled and girls more sacred still – vestals whom Pizarro's soldiers raped – in that City of the Sun, the Word re-echoed. The mystery of it, reported back to the Holy Office, was declared an artifice of the devil.

¹⁴ Garcilasso: *Commentarios reales*.

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