The Odyssey

Homer



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The Odyssey

by Homer

Translated by Alexander Pope

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INTRODUCTION.

Scepticism is as much the result of knowledge, as knowledge is of scepticism. To be content with what we at present know, is, for the most part, to shut our ears against conviction; since, from the very gradual character of our education, we must continually forget, and emancipate ourselves from, knowledge previously acquired; we must set aside old notions and embrace fresh ones; and, as we learn, we must be daily unlearning something which it has cost us no small labour and anxiety to acquire.

And this difficulty attaches itself more closely to an age in which progress has gained a strong ascendency over prejudice, and in which persons and things are, day by day, finding their real level, in lieu of their conventional value. The same principles which have swept away traditional abuses, and which are making rapid havoc among the revenues of sinecurists, and stripping the thin, tawdry veil from attractive superstitions, are working as actively in literature as in society. The credulity of one writer, or the partiality of another, finds as powerful a touchstone and as wholesome a chastisement in the healthy scepticism of a temperate class of antagonists, as the dreams of conservatism, or the impostures of pluralist sinecures in the Church. History and tradition, whether of ancient or comparatively recent times, are subjected to very different handling from that which the indulgence or credulity of former ages could allow. Mere

statements are jealously watched, and the motives of the writer form as important an ingredient in the analysis of his history, as the facts he records. Probability is a powerful and troublesome test; and it is by this troublesome standard that a large portion of historical evidence is sifted. Consistency is no less pertinacious and exacting in its demands. In brief, to write a history, we must know more than mere facts. Human nature, viewed under an introduction of extended experience, is the best help to the criticism of human history. Historical characters can only be estimated by the standard which human experience, whether actual or traditionary, has furnished. To form correct views of individuals we must regard them as forming parts of a great whole—we must measure them by their relation to the mass of beings by whom they are surrounded; and, in contemplating the incidents in their lives or condition which tradition has handed down to us, we must rather consider the general bearing of the whole narrative, than the respective probability of its details.

It is unfortunate for us, that, of some of the greatest men, we know least, and talk most. Homer, Socrates, and Shakespere have, perhaps, contributed more to the intellectual enlightenment of mankind than any other three writers who could be named, and yet the history of all three has given rise to a boundless ocean of discussion, which has left us little save the option of choosing which theory or theories we will follow. The personality of Shakespere is, perhaps, the only thing in which critics will allow us to believe without controversy; but upon everything else, even down to the authorship of plays, there is more or less of doubt and uncertainty. Of Socrates we know as little as the contradictions of Plato and Xenophon will allow us to know. He was one of the _dramatis personæ_ in two dramas as unlike in principles

as in style. He appears as the enunciator of opinions as different in their tone as those of the writers who have handed them down. When we have read Plato _or_ Xenophon, we think we know something of Socrates; when we have fairly read and examined both, we feel convinced that we are something worse than ignorant.

It has been an easy, and a popular expedient of late years, to deny the personal or real existence of men and things whose life and condition were too much for our belief. This system—which has often comforted the religious sceptic, and substituted the consolations of Strauss for those of the New Testament—has been of incalculable value to the historical theorists of the last and present centuries. To question the existence of Alexander the Great, would be a more excusable act, than to believe in that of Romulus. To deny a fact related in Herodotus, because it is inconsistent with a theory developed from an Assyrian inscription which no two scholars read in the same way, is more pardonable, than to believe in the good-natured old king whom the elegant pen of Florian has idealized—_Numa Pompilius_.

Scepticism has attained its culminating point with respect to Homer, and the state of our Homeric knowledge may be described as a free permission to believe any theory, provided we throw overboard all written tradition, concerning the author or authors of the Iliad and Odyssey. What few authorities exist on the subject, are summarily dismissed, although the arguments appear to run in a circle. “This cannot be true, because it is not true; and that is not true, because it cannot be true.” Such seems to be the style, in which testimony upon testimony, statement upon statement, is consigned to denial and oblivion.

It is, however, unfortunate that the professed biographies of Homer are partly forgeries, partly freaks of ingenuity and imagination, in which truth is the requisite most wanting. Before taking a brief review of the Homeric theory in its present conditions, some notice must be taken of the treatise on the Life of Homer which has been attributed to Herodotus.

According to this document, the city of Cumae in AEolia was, at an early period, the seat of frequent immigrations from various parts of Greece. Among the immigrants was Menapolus, the son of Ithagenes. Although poor, he married, and the result of the union was a girl named Critheis. The girl was left an orphan at an early age, under the guardianship of Cleanax, of Argos. It is to the indiscretion of this maiden that we “are indebted for so much happiness.” Homer was the first fruit of her juvenile frailty, and received the name of Melesigenes from having been born near the river Meles in Bœotia, whither Critheis had been transported in order to save her reputation.

“At this time,” continues our narrative, “there lived at Smyrna a man named Phemius, a teacher of literature and music, who, not being married, engaged Critheis to manage his household, and spin the flax he received as the price of his scholastic labours. So satisfactory was her performance of this task, and so modest her conduct, that he made proposals of marriage, declaring himself, as a further inducement, willing to adopt her son, who, he asserted, would become a clever man, if he were carefully brought up.”

They were married; careful cultivation ripened the talents which nature had bestowed, and Melesigenes soon surpassed his schoolfellows in every attainment, and, when older, rivalled his

preceptor in wisdom. Phemius died, leaving him sole heir to his property, and his mother soon followed. Melesigenes carried on his adopted father's school with great success, exciting the admiration not only of the inhabitants of Smyrna, but also of the strangers whom the trade carried on there, especially in the exportation of corn, attracted to that city. Among these visitors, one Mentes, from Leucadia, the modern Santa Maura, who evinced a knowledge and intelligence rarely found in those times, persuaded Melesigenes to close his school, and accompany him on his travels. He promised not only to pay his expenses, but to furnish him with a further stipend, urging, that, "While he was yet young, it was fitting that he should see with his own eyes the countries and cities which might hereafter be the subjects of his discourses." Melesigenes consented, and set out with his patron, "examining all the curiosities of the countries they visited, and informing himself of everything by interrogating those whom he met." We may also suppose, that he wrote memoirs of all that he deemed worthy of preservation. Having set sail from Tyrrhenia and Iberia, they reached Ithaca. Here Melesigenes, who had already suffered in his eyes, became much worse; and Mentes, who was about to leave for Leucadia, left him to the medical superintendence of a friend of his, named Mentor, the son of Alcinor. Under his hospitable and intelligent host, Melesigenes rapidly became acquainted with the legends respecting Ulysses, which afterwards formed the subject of the Odyssey. The inhabitants of Ithaca assert, that it was here that Melesigenes became blind, but the Colophonians make their city the seat of that misfortune. He then returned to Smyrna, where he applied himself to the study of poetry.

But poverty soon drove him to Cumae. Having passed over the

Hermaean plain, he arrived at Neon Teichos, the New Wall, a colony of Cumae. Here his misfortunes and poetical talent gained him the friendship of one Tychias, an armourer. “And up to my time,” continues the author, “the inhabitants showed the place where he used to sit when giving a recitation of his verses; and they greatly honoured the spot. Here also a poplar grew, which they said had sprung up ever since Melesigenes arrived.”

But poverty still drove him on, and he went by way of Larissa, as being the most convenient road. Here, the Cumans say, he composed an epitaph on Gordius, king of Phrygia, which has however, and with greater probability, been attributed to Cleobulus of Lindus.

Arrived at Cumae, he frequented the _conversaziones_ of the old men, and delighted all by the charms of his poetry. Encouraged by this favourable reception, he declared that, if they would allow him a public maintenance, he would render their city most gloriously renowned. They avowed their willingness to support him in the measure he proposed, and procured him an audience in the council. Having made the speech, with the purport of which our author has forgotten to acquaint us, he retired, and left them to debate respecting the answer to be given to his proposal.

The greater part of the assembly seemed favourable to the poet’s demand, but one man “observed that if they were to feed _Homers_, they would be encumbered with a multitude of useless people.” “From this circumstance,” says the writer, “Melesigenes acquired the name of Homer, for the Cumans call blind men _Homers_.” With a love of economy, which shows how similar the world has always been in its treatment of literary men, the pension was denied, and the

poet vented his disappointment in a wish that Cumae might never produce a poet capable of giving it renown and glory.

At Phocaea Homer was destined to experience another literary distress. One Thestorides, who aimed at the reputation of poetical genius, kept Homer in his own house, and allowed him a pittance, on condition of the verses of the poet passing in his name. Having collected sufficient poetry to be profitable, Thestorides, like some would-be literary publishers, neglected the man whose brains he had sucked, and left him. At his departure, Homer is said to have observed: “O Thestorides, of the many things hidden from the knowledge of man, nothing is more unintelligible than the human heart.”

Homer continued his career of difficulty and distress, until some Chian merchants, struck by the similarity of the verses they heard him recite, acquainted him with the fact that Thestorides was pursuing a profitable livelihood by the recital of the very same poems. This at once determined him to set out for Chios. No vessel happened then to be setting sail thither, but he found one ready to start for Erythrae, a town of Ionia, which faces that island, and he prevailed upon the seamen to allow him to accompany them. Having embarked, he invoked a favourable wind, and prayed that he might be able to expose the imposture of Thestorides, who, by his breach of hospitality, had drawn down the wrath of Jove the Hospitable.

At Erythrae, Homer fortunately met with a person who had known him in Phocaea, by whose assistance he at length, after some difficulty, reached the little hamlet of Pithys. Here he met with an adventure, which we will continue in the words of our author.

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