

THE OXFORD SOLAR MYTH

A Contribution to Comparative Mythology

(Dedicated, without permission, to the Rev. G. W. Cox, M.A.)*

A very singular tradition, possibly due to the influence of classical Paganism in the course of study, still preserves, in the Oxford of the nineteenth century, the evident traces of that primeval Nature-worship whereby the earliest parents of the Aryan race marked their observance of the phenomena of the heavens. As so often occurs, the myth has assumed a highly anthropomorphic and concrete form, has gradually been incrustated with the deposits of later ages, and has been given a historical, or rather a biographical dress, which thereby veils, under modern names and ideas of the West, the legends current four thousand

*[This essay was originally published in *Kottabos*, a students' magazine of Trinity College, Dublin, number 5, for the Michaelmas Term, 1870 (pp. 145-54). Signed simply 'Δ.', it was probably by R. F. Littledale (1833-90), a Dublin lawyer and 'Anglican controversialist', who was said to 'have heard more confessions than any other Anglican priest', yet who nevertheless published a tract entitled *Plain reasons for not joining the Church of Rome*.

G. W. Cox (1827-1902), the dedicatee, was a baronet of Dunmanway, Co. Cork, though born in India, who later (1886) became Bishop of Bloemfontein in South Africa. In 1891 he was described as having made 'a specialty of comparative mythology and ancient history', and as 'a prominent advocate of the sun-myth theory'. Max Müller's life is recounted in *Scholar Extraordinary* by Nirad C. Chaudhuri (London, 1974). Born in 1823, he came to England in 1848. He became Taylorian Professor of Modern European Languages in Oxford in 1854, and a Fellow of All Souls in 1858; he married the following year. In 1860 he failed to obtain the Boden Chair of Sanskrit, which was given instead to Monier Williams; but in 1868, two years before the publication of this article, the chair of Comparative Philology was created for him. He died in 1900. Müller was a great exponent of using the discipline of comparative philology for the study of ancient religion, thus laying himself open to this essay in proving 'that Müller was himself a sun-myth by using Müller's own methods' (K. H. Jackson, *The International Popular Tale and Early Welsh Tradition*, p. 39). An expanded translation of the article into French was published by Henri Gaidoz in the journal *Mélusine*, 2 (1884-85), 73 ff. Though belonging to a different era of scholarship, it has a fresh relevance today, as the study of 'Indo-European mythology' grows once again in popularity.—Editors.]

years ago on the table-lands of Transoxiana.

The legend takes its not infrequent shape of celebrating a great teacher, passing from his Eastern birth-place on to the West, making his home therein, achieving great triumphs, and yet succumbing, in his chiefest struggle, to a power mysteriously identical with that which gave him being. The symbolical name by which the hero was deified, even in our own days, is Max Müller. The purely imaginative and typical character of this title appears at the first glance of a philologist. Max is, of course, *Maximus*, μέγιστος, identical with the Sanskrit *maha*. Müller, applied in the late High German dialects to the mere grinder of corn, denotes in its root-form a pounder or crusher. It comes from the radical *mar*, 'grinding', or 'crushing'. At once, then, we see that the hero's name means simply 'Chief of Grinders'. There are two explanations of this given. The more popular, but less correct one, identifies *grinder* and *teacher*—a metaphor borrowed from the monotonous routine whereby an instructor of the young has to pulverize, as it were, the solid grains of knowledge, that they may be able to assimilate it. The more scientific aspect of the question recognizes here the Sun-God, armed with his hammer or battle-axe of light, pounding and crushing frost and clouds alike into impalpability. We are not left to conjecture in such a matter, for the weapon of Thor or Donar, wherewith he crushes the Frost-giants, in Norse mythology is named *Mjölner*, from *at mala*, 'to crush or mill'.

Thus far, however, there might be a merely accidental coincidence of name, or the title might be a hereditary one in a priestly family devoted to the Sun-God's service. We require more exact data before we can with authority allege that Max Müller is indeed the Sun, or rather the Dawn, himself. But these data are accessible and abundant. In the first place, the legends are unanimous in representing him as a foreigner, travelling from the East, but making his home in the West, and received there by all as though native to the soil. This is very important. If he were depicted as indigenous, or as coming from North, South, or West, the difficulty to be overcome, though by no means insurmountable, would be considerable. The Eastern origin, however, obviates any doubt of this nature. Next, fable has not been slow to localize his birth-place. He is invariably called a German. This looks, at first, as though merely denoting the rough way in which an

untutored people is content to transfer the origin of any strange thing to the nation nearest to itself in the direction of transit, just as even still the inhabitants of Norway suppose storms to be sent them by the wizards of Lapland and Finland. Germany, being the nearest country to the east of England, may thus have naturally been selected as the Sun-God's birth-place; but a deeper idea seems to underlie the title. The duality of the Sun and Moon is too remarkable a phenomenon ever to have escaped popular attention; and we find them represented in almost every known mythology as brother and sister, Helios and Selene, Apollo and Artemis, Janus and Diana, and the like. Here, then, is a clue. It is not nationality, but brotherhood to the Moon which is denoted, and Müller the German is neither more nor less than the *Germanus Apollo* of Latin poets.

Again, having invented his birth-place, it was necessary, as the myth became more concrete, to provide him with a father also. The legend relates that his father was one Wilhelm Müller, a poet. Herein a very singular aspect of the solar myth, common to all its purest forms, appears. Darkness is the parent out of which the Dawn comes, a parent dethroned by its offspring, as typified in the story of Kronos and Zeus. Wilhelm is simply Will-hjælm, the 'helmet of force', or of strength. What is this helmet? We have it over and over again in our nursery legends; as the 'cap of darkness' (*tarn-kappe*) worn by Hasan of El-Basra in the 'Arabian Nights', by Jack the Giant-killer, and by Dwarf Trolls in Norse and Teuton stories, and above all, by Sigfrid in the Niebelungen Lied. It is thus simply the covering of clouds and obscurity which overspreads the heavens when the Sun has disappeared; and William Müller is only the Night, hidden but powerful, the νεφεληγέρετα Ζεύς, who is father of Apollo Helios. Night is typified as a poet, because all sounds are heard so clearly and distinctly during its course, just as the song of the primeval bard was the only voice loud enough to make itself audible in the stillness of pre-historic ages.

The Sun-God appears next, but still in the same relation, in his other character of teacher and enlightener, an idea symbolized by Max Müller editing the Vedas at the instigation of Bunsen = *Bundes-sohn*, (*vinculi filius*), another Teutonic hero, who typifies the offspring of that darkness which chains the world in the prison of night. Max is not called—and this is noteworthy—the *author* of the Vedas, or books of

knowledge, but only their editor or translator. The meaning of this is plain. Sunrise does not create the sensible world for us at each recurrence, but it makes it visible and knowable by us. Bunsen sending Müller to achieve the task is only another form of the myth which makes Wilhelm the father of Max.*

The next point of interest in the fable is the place where the Sun-God fixes his sacred abode. It is noteworthy that in no case do we find the special shrine of Apollo in the chief city of any land. Athens was the beloved home of Pallas Athene; Sparta, of the Dioscuri; Ephesus, of Artemis; Rome, of Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Mavors Gradivus: but Apollo always chooses a smaller and more sacerdotal city as his dwelling—Delphi, Delos, Patara. So the priestly city of Oxford is, in the English legend, assigned to Max Müller. Let us see why. Ox-ford, as all philologists know, is not Βόσπορος. Ox is *Usk*, *uisge* = water; and the compound word means no more than the 'ford of the river'. We shall best see its relation to the Sun-God by turning to the Edda. We find there that all the Aesir ride over the rainbow-bridge Bifröst to Valhalla, except Thor, who has to wade on foot through four rivers—Körmt, Ormt, and the two Kerlaug streams. This denotes, of course, the Sun making his way by slow degrees through the watery clouds, and at length attaining the mid-heaven.

The task of the Sun, when he has fairly begun to climb the sky, is to spread the great blue mantle over it. This mantle is woven or *stitched*, if we take the Sanskrit myth, by the Harits or Hours, the Χάριτες of the Greeks. We find it styled in poetical language, the 'cope of heaven'. And by a quaint grotesqueness of metaphor, we discover this function of the Dawn symbolized under the formula of Max Müller being at first Professor in the Taylorian Institution. *Taylorian* here, of course, is not a patronymic or eponymous adjective, but a tropological epithet. In Greek mythology, Artemis, as well as Athene, is mistress of the loom; but in this curious myth, her brother appears as superintending the tasks of the divine maidens who ply their shuttle

*That Max Müller is not called the *author*, but only the *translator* or *editor* of the Vedas, has puzzled many who have read his great work. This curious inversion of language, so inexplicable, except to the comparative mythologist, obtains a significance only on the principle suggested in the text.

and shape the garment of the heavens at his command. Here, too, we find cropping up the struggle with the powers of darkness. Max Müller is *Taylorian*; he cuts away with his glittering shears the ragged edges of cloud; he allows the 'chips', or cuttings from his 'workshop', to descend in fertilizing showers upon the earth.

But he has a foe striving to cast a black mantle over the sky which he would fain clothe in blue. This foe does not merely trim or patch together the work of others, as a *taylor*, but is the original maker of his own product; and thus he is symbolically called Weber, or *weaver*. And while Max is of more account in the West, Weber reigns securely over the East, which the other has quitted.

But even the Western sky is no secure dominion. All through the earliest poetry and the remotest legends of ancient races, we find the note of sorrow for the decline of day following at once on the triumphal tone which marks the ascent of the Sun to the zenith. The combat with the powers of darkness, which began with victory, is resumed, and always ends in defeat. Hence the wailing for Yanbushadh, for Thammuz or Adonis, for the Dorian Apollo, and for Baldur. The solar legend shines clearly yet through the mists in which the ignorance of our uncritical age had enveloped it. The Sun-God, fresh from his Vedas, enters upon a struggle with a competitor, apparently of the feeblest, for the throne of the sky. This throne, in the Oxford myth, is called the Boden Chair. *Boden* is not an English word. We must look to the Sun-God's home for its meaning; and we find that in the Teuton language *boden* is *floor*. Only one floor can be meant; that of which the greatest of English poets speaks—

'Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.'

There are two most remarkable circumstances in this legend of the strife for the Boden Chair, which put its mythical origin quite beyond all doubt. In the first place, the overthrow of Max in the struggle is said by all the bards to be due, not to the result of a single combat with his adversary, wherein he must needs have been victorious, but to the gathering together at the sacred city of a number of obscurantist beings, clothed in black, and assembling from all parts of the country to secure

the victory of the inferior warrior. It is almost superfluous to point out that this legend denotes no more than the black clouds assembling from all quarters of the heavens, to hide the brightness of the Sun. If any doubt yet remained, it would be dispelled by the name of the feeble victor, the Paris who slays Achilles, the Aegisthus of this Agamemnon, the Höd of our Baldur. The name given to him in the myth is Monier Williams. The intelligent reader will at once see that this is only a new aspect of the earliest part of the myth. *Monier* is, plainly enough, *meûnier*, *molinari*, *miller* = Müller. *Williams* we had before. Monier Williams then = Wilhelm Müller; and the father, as in the story of Sohrab and Rustum, slays his beloved son. What is this but that the Darkness, out of which the Dawn sprang in its infancy, also re-absorbs it, and hides its glory at the end of its career? This is the reason for the singular inversion of the order of the names. At first the darkness is the primary fact, and the power it exercises only the secondary one; and thus the helmet or *tarn-kappe* is put first, and the epithet of *grinder* or *crusher* in the lower place. But in the latter part of the myth, the slaying of the Sun-God is the earlier event, and not until that is accomplished, and the Western sky is red with his blood, does the victor put on the helmet of will, and spread darkness over the heavens.

There are consolations even in defeat. A bridal, in the mysterious life which follows death, is accomplished in the Western land; and that legend which takes so many shapes—the marriage of Uranos and Gaea, the descent of Zeus in golden shower on Danaë, and the like—is brought before us again in the wedding of Max Müller and the mortal maiden Grenfell, who denotes the *green hill* or *mountain pasture* on which the Sun delights to shine. We have this idea of the domestic joys of Helios, even after his declension and setting, preserved for us in Greek poetry—

Ἄελιος δ' Ὑπεριονίδας δέπας ἐσκατέβαινε
 χρύσειον, ὄφρα δι' ὠκεανοῖο περάσας
 ἀφίκουθ' ἱερὰς ποτὶ βένθεα νυκτὸς ἐρείνᾳς·
 ποτὶ μάτερα, κουριδίαν τ' ἄλοχον,
 παῖδάς τε φίλους.—Archilochus.

Thus we see the great teacher passing from the waters to the verdant

slopes, from Oxford to Grenfell—

φοιτᾶς δ' ὑπερόντιος ἐν τ'
 ἀγρονόμοις ἀύλαις.—Sophocles, *Antigone* 785–86.

He re-appears, however, if not as perennial holder of the throne on the floor of the sky, yet as the expounder of speech, or, in the Euhemerist phrase of sceptics, 'Professor of Comparative Philology'. What are we to understand by this title? No more than that sudden awakening of the sounds of Nature which greets the sunrise as night vanishes with its darkness and silence. Hence the epithet *πανόμφαιος*, 'Source of all speech', given to Zeus as Dyauspati, and to Helios also, as in Quintus Smyrnaeus—

τόν ῥά τέ φασι
 ἔμμεναι Ἡελίοιο πανομφαίοιο θυγατρῶν
 δάκρυ.—Posthomeric v, 625.

There can be no question that the meaning 'inspirer of all oracles' is a development of a far later age, when the meteorological idea had been lost; and there is a comparatively obscure legend which seems at first to point in the same direction. Nothing is clearer than that the sacred city of Oxford was the chosen shrine of the hero Max Müller. But he appears as a passing meteor in the annals of the other holy town of the English land. Cambridge alleges that for a day he was Rede Lecturer in her halls. Cambridge is the 'cam' or *crooked* bridge (compare 'game' leg, *cambuca*) of the sky, *i.e.* the Rainbow. What is *Rede*? Two rival theories exist. The first sees in the word the notion of counsel or advice. So in the ballad of King Estmere—

'Rede me, rede me, deare brother,
 My rede shall ryde at thee.'

The Rede Lecturer then will be simply Apollo Pythius, the god of counsel, applied to in some one sudden emergency. The other view seems more tenable. It sees in *Rede* the Norse *reidh*, a *chariot*, the Latin *rheda*, and recognizes in the title *Rede-Lehrer*, not a *lecturer* at all, but

Ving-Thor himself, the driver of the fiery car, whence he is called *Hlorridi*, from *at blóa*, to glow or burn, and *reidh*.*

Another legend, belonging to Oxford, calls Max Müller for a time by the singular title of 'Fellow (or Companion) of All Souls', and ceases to give him this appellation after he meets with the nymph Grenfell. Here is a difficulty needing solution. Hermes, not Apollo, is the *ψυχοπομπός* of Greek mythology, and the epithet is one applied, in the *Alcestis*, to Charon also. It is only in the Edda that we find the answer. Odin, who is a Sun-god as well as Thor, though he usually

*The identification of Cambridge with the rainbow, or curving bridge of the sky, at once simple and convincing, clears up the difficulty about Max Müller's one visit there, and his immediate return to dwell at Oxford. For the legend is in minute agreement with the Eddaic myth, which tells how Thor essayed once, and once only, to drive over Bifröst in his war-chariot, but had to desist, lest he should set the bridge on fire. He returned ever after to his wading through the four rivers of which we have spoken above; that is, to Ox-ford. And the myth of the Sun's chariot, common to Greek legend, finally settles the meaning of *Rede*, putting the interpretation 'counsel' out of court. Another obscure legend, quite disassociated from the Müller myth, confirms remarkably the identification of Oxford with the water, and Cambridge with the sky. There is a tradition still handed down that a strife, constantly renewed, existed between these two cities, not, as one should anticipate, in the rivalry of learning, but in some way connected with ships or boats. When so engaged, the names of Oxford and Cambridge are dropped, and those of Dark Blue and Light Blue appear in their stead. The former of these titles, applied to Oxford, points at once to the *οἴνοπα πόντον*, the *mare purpureum* of Greek and Latin poets, and the 'dark blue sea' of a famous English bard, while the rival epithet, describing the lighter shade of the heavens, (compare Theocritus, *γλαυκὰν ναίουσαν ὑπ' ἄω*, [Idyll lxvi, 5] and Ennius, *caeli caerulea templa*) is applied to Cambridge, and the true meaning of the myth comes out by reference to boats, as we thus learn that it typifies the astonishment of the first Aryans who reached the Caspian and the Persian gulf, at the elemental strife of a storm at sea, when sky and waves seem to those in a ship to be crashing together.

'The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch,
But that the sea, mounting to the welkin's cheek,
Dashes the fire out.'—Tempest, Act I, Scene 2.

sends the Valkyrier to conduct the souls of slain heroes to Vingolf, yet sometimes, in his character of *Valföðhr*, is himself the guide of such chieftains as, nobly born and clad in warriors' armour, have died with more than common valour and renown. And thus the ancient statutes of the Fellowship show that *all* souls are not meant to be honoured, but only the souls of those who are *bene nati* and *bene vestiti*, the true Einherjar of the foundation. These departed heroes are no other than the sunbeams, slain by the advancing powers of darkness, but collected again by their father, the Sun, who burns them on the glowing pile of the Western evening sky, and then revives them once more to shine in Gladsheim. The loss of this office of *ψυχοπομπός* on wedding a mortal is a myth which has several congeners. It is akin to that of Orpheus and Eurydice, though less tragic in its termination; and its meaning here plainly is the return of the Sun to Earth from the unseen 'combination-room' whither his rays vanished at his setting. He returns to living nature, and is, as stated above, not any more 'Fellow of All Souls', silent and ghostly, but Professor of all Languages, vocal and embodied. This office, however, ties him to earth; and we find the story of Apollo's servitude to Admetus repeated; because the task imposed on the hero is to look after the training of the young Bulls. He thus appears as Phœbus Nomios; and a confusion between the oxyton word *νομή* or *νομός*, *pasture*, and the paroxyton word *νόμος*, *law*, has led to a curious error in the Cambridge form of the myth. In this imperfect record Max Müller is styled 'Doctor of Laws', as though he were *Thesmorphoros*. But that epithet belongs properly to Dionysos—
θεσμοφόρον καλέω νερθηκοφόρον Διόνυσον.—Orphica xlii, 1.

And the more exact Oxonian records preserve his true title as 'Master of Arts'. This is not merely the Apollo of Parnassus, leader of the Muses, inspirer of poetry, painting, and sculpture, beautiful as such a personification is. It goes far deeper; and we see in Max Müller, M.A., the elemental Fire-god, whose chief manifestation is the Sun, but whose heat and light are essential to all life and manufacture. And thus he is described in Aeschylus—

τὸ σὸν γὰρ ἄνθος, παντέχρου πυρὸς σέλας.—Prom.Vinct. 7.

A fragment of a solar hymn, apparently having reference to the hero

or divinity Müller, is still chanted by children in the mystic rites of the gynaeceum—

There was a jolly Miller
 Lived on the river Dee,
 And thus the burden of his song
 For ever used to be —
 I jump mejerrime jee!
 I care for nobody, no, not I,
 And nobody cares for me!

Jolly is, of course, *Jovialis*, noting that the Müller referred to is no mortal, but the son of Jovis or Dyaus; and the *river* is, of course, the Ox-ford (*Uisge*) through which he daily wades. He is the master of song, because the birds commence their music as he rises. *Mejerrime jee* presents great difficulty. It is clearly a trace of the primeval lay, and is as hard to explain as *κόγξ ὄμπαξ*. The earlier word looks Oscan, and seems to be the superlative of the root *maj*, 'great', which we have in *maj-estas*, *major* (Spanish, *mejor*), and then, probably, *majorrimus*. The second word, most likely, stands for *age*; and the whole phrase denotes the quick leap of the levin-brand from the cloud. The interpretation *Μεγαρική γῆ*, though ingenious, is untenable. And in the two closing lines, wherein some have thought the disposition of a human Max Müller to be exactly portrayed, those who, with truer science, acknowledge him to be a solar myth, will recognize that grand impassive inexorability of natural phenomena which at once strikes and awes every untutored man as well as every civilized philosopher.

It is not easy to overrate the interest and value of such a legend as this to the comparative mythologist. Few solar myths are so detailed and various, and, perhaps, there is none which brings together in so concentrated a focus the special characteristics of Sanskrit, Hellenic, and Norse fable.

Δ.