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YGGDRASIL;
OR THE
TEUTONIC TREE OF EXISTENCE.

BY
KARL BLIND.

REPRINTED (*by permission*) from FRASER'S MAGAZINE;
with a few additions.

Printed by
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1877.

To Monsieur D. Conway -
as a token of friendship -

J. B.
175

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IN our present days when Richard Wagner has restored the Gods and heroes of the Teuton race to dramatic life and brought back the grand old tale on the wings of song, a special plea is hardly needed for occupying ourselves with the deeper thoughts of our forefathers. One of the strongest-marked traits of their creed—a 'strange and savage faith of mightiest power,' as Southey calls it—is its tragic character. The Hellenic deities, it has been truly said, sit in Ambrosian quiet in their lofty abodes; only now and then mixing in the fray of men. They are eternal gods, inaccessible to the corroding power of Time. There are some faint indications, no doubt, of a final change when Zeus himself is to make place for a juster ruler. But, in the main, the deities of classic antiquity live on in an unbroken, immortal life. They are, in Mannhardt's words, like so many statues ranged along a stately edifice, each statue perfect in itself—no idea of action, of tragic complication, arising out of the whole.

It is different with the Germanic view of the Universe. There, all is action, struggle: and the world of Gods itself is, from the beginning, doomed to a tumultuous catastrophe. A deep, dark background of Fate controls alike gods and men—not merely in the Greek sense of Heimarmenê and Anankê, or the inevitable Connection and Necessity of All Things and Events, but even in the sense of the final overthrow of the very rulers in Asgard. The celestial circle of the Teutons is not proof against the crack of doom. So long as the Aesir last, they serve as pillars and girders of the

Universe. But then, at the end of time, the world is to be consumed in a mighty conflagration; the firmament and the earth stand in a lurid blaze; Asgard and Walhalla, the abodes of gods and heroes, disappear; all creation, and creation's rulers, are enveloped in the gigantic crash:—

The sun darkens;
 Earth in Ocean sinks;
 From Heaven fall
 The bright stars.
 Fire's breath twines round
The all-nourishing Tree.
 Towering flames rise on high,
 Against Heaven itself.¹

Only after this fearful convulsion shall be over, will there be a new and peaceful reign, with eternal bliss. Then the God of Peace, whose murder the evil-doing Loki had wrought, will triumphantly return: and with him a brighter and happier age. In the song before quoted, it is said that in that distant happier future, the Teutonic Sibyl sees arise, a second time, Earth from Ocean, beautifully green. Then, unsown shall the fields bring forth; all evil will cease; for, Balder comes back. In a golden hall the righteous dwell; all strife is allayed, holy peace ensured—which shall for ever last.

In this tale, both the battle-spirit and the deep moral earnestness of the Germanic race are clearly reflected. Schiller's saying, that 'in his Gods, Man depicts himself,' is fully illustrated in the case of our heathen forefathers. The remarkable thing in Teutonic mythology is, that it has been worked out, so to say, in accordance with dramatic rules. It is a tragedy—with a reconciling finale, though; actually a tragedy in four or five acts. Grundtvig has brought into

¹ *Völuspá*; or, the Prophetess' Song, 56.

relief this noteworthy feature of Teutonic mythology. As to the division into acts which he has made, I think a slightly different order of arrangement will be permissible.

There is, first, the rise of the Universe from Chaos. There is, secondly, the happy Golden Age, before Balder, the God of Light and Peace, is killed. There comes, after that criminal deed is done, the Epoch of Decline, with its sword-ages and axe-ages, its wind-ages and wolf-ages; most grandly foreshadowed by the soothsayer. The fourth act shows the Twilight of the Gods, the End of Things as they are, when Odin is to be devoured by the Wolf; Thor to die from the Serpent's poison; and the whole structure of the Universe falls dead on a bed of flames. The concluding act is the blissful Regeneration, with a purified heavenly realm and a new race of mankind.

I think there can be but little doubt that this well-sustained mythological drama arose originally, in its simplest elements, out of the contemplation of the changes between Day and Night, followed by daylight again;—of the change between bright summer and wintry gloom, which in its turn is relieved by blithesome Spring's re-awakening breath. But in course of time the symbolising tale of Nature-worship acquired a deeper sense. It became transfused with an ethical meaning. Even some historical allusions may have been wrought into it. In this way, a spirit-thrilling cosmogonic tragedy was gradually built up, which has a regular dramatic development; a central plot; a moral idea as its kernel; and which ends, not simply with bloodshed and horrible destruction, but with the final victory of Light and Right—with the triumph, so to say, of a good cause, in which is involved the Progress of Mankind.

II

THIS tragic representation of the

rise and destiny of the Universe expresses very strikingly the tumult in the Teuton soul, as well as its yearning after a placid peace, which is to follow the havoc of the sword. *Ense petit placidam sub libertate quietem.*

At the side of this great dramatic picture, we find another powerful conception, of venerable age and philosophic import, which proves that the early Germanic tribes did not lack deep thought. I mean the lofty, beautiful, and impressive myth of the all-embracing and all-nourishing World-Tree, the ash-tree Yggdrasil, whose very name seems to carry Thought in its boughs. It is the Tree of Existence—the Tree of Knowledge and Life—the Tree of Grief and Fate—the Tree of Space and Time; an allegory of the Universe.

In all the mythological systems we know of, there is not a poetical image equal in vastness and grasp of ideas to the conception of the great Teutonic Middle Tree. That tree spans the vault of heaven and the green earth. It stretches its roots to the turbid, weltering sources of primary life, and to Death's gate of gloom. The ceaseless movement going on in its mighty branches is a reflection of the restless activity of the race that worked out this myth. And the same undercurrent of woe which is peculiar to Germanic mythology at large, also is felt in the immense storm-tossed Tree.

All the sorrows of man hang in Yggdrasil's heavenly-laden branches. The fate of the Gods, too, is bound up with its roots. Worlds full of wrestling energy are connected with its colossal stem. Yet, if we look closely, the freewill which the dwellers in these worlds seem to possess, is but the individualised manifestation of a great pushing force within the vast structure of Yggdrasil—a structure itself destined to a violent end, when, out of the waters, a new world will arise. We have here a very expressive

image of the inevitable Laws of Nature; a most striking pourtray, in pantheistic or pan-materialistic form, of the wondrous living guise of the Unknowable.

It is quite in keeping with the extensive Tree-Worship of the Germanic tribes that they should have figured to themselves a tree as the symbol, nay, as the real self of the Universe. Holy woods and holy trees were frequent with them. One of the oldest expressions for a Germanic temple simply meant 'forest.' *Wallfahren* (to make a pilgrimage) at first signified 'to go to the forest' (*zum Walde fahren*). In what is called Gothic architecture, the tree appears in all its leafy richness. So deep was, as Grimm has observed, the impress made by the life in woods upon the Teutonic tribes, that their early communities bore a name which meant forest; then also boundary; and lastly was used in a composite word denoting a clanship, or union of families. Again, the famous Irmin-sul, the wooden idol in the shape of a trunk or column, which the Saxons worshipped at the time of Karl the Great, is explained in an old German glossary as *altissima universalis columna, quasi sustinens omnia*. This interpretation comes very near to the idea of Yggdrasil, the gigantic central prop and reality of all Being.

In the very first song of the elder poetical Edda, we are initiated into this dogma. There the prophetess Vala, dwelling in a place from whence she can see all the worlds, gives forth in solemn strains a fantastic ode, containing a cosmogony of the Universe, and an apocalyptic vision of its final fall and better reconstruction. In words strangely resembling those of a Vedic hymn,² she sings of the ageless age that lay beyond the beginning of things; of the Titanic period and the primæval

Chaos which preceded the rise of Gods and Men. She unfolds a picture of the Golden Age; of the Evil that afterwards crept into the divine circle itself; of the battle that raged between the Asa and Vana deities. This seems to refer to a struggle between the adherents of a fire-worshipping and a water-worshipping creed, in which the former were victorious. She sings of the creation of the Dwarf-world and the world of Men; through which a notion is perhaps conveyed of a successive development of reasonable beings. We get a glimpse, in the Vala's further revelation, of the ancient World Tree whose lofty top is encircled with white cloud-wreaths; from whose branches honey drops into the dales; and which stands ever green over the Fountain of the Past.

*Ask veit ek standa,
heitir Yggdrasil;
hár baðmr ausinn
hvíta auri.
þaðan koma dögguvar,
þaers í dala falla;
staendr æ yfir groenn
Urðar brunni.*

In the same lay, the soothsayer describes Yggdrasil as trembling all over when, at the great cataclysm, every living form reverts to chaotic strife.

It is a characteristic trait of the Teutonic creed that a woman's voice is made to utter this grand cosmogonic hymn. In the opinion of our forefathers, 'something sacred and prophetic' marked the character of womankind. Hence the rough German warriors of Tacitus' time consulted women on all important occasions. To make a tale of world-creation fall from the lips of a Vala, seems to show that the Germanic tribes looked upon womankind as standing nearer to the forces of Nature—as being imbued, so to say, with the strange secret of growth and existence.

² *Rig-Veda*; x. 129.

In the 'Song of Grímnir' we get a fuller notion of the World-Tree. That lay has been chiefly used for the astronomical interpretation of the twelve Germanic gods, as representatives of the twelve months; that is, of an old Northern Zodiac. The contact of the Germanic Pantheon, not only with the early Indian and Greek, but also with the Etruscan, as well as with the Egyptian, Assyrian and other non-Aryan creeds, is thus additionally strengthened. It is in this remarkable Grímnir's Song—(whose description of the doors of Walhalla, and of the blessed heroes that issue from it, I believe contains also an arithmetical puzzle embodying the numbers XII. and III.; in other words, an astronomical idea and the idea of a Trinity)—that the great Tree of Existence is very clearly depicted.

A passing allusion to Yggdrasil we find in 'Odin's Raven Song,' one of the Eddic lays which has baffled many interpreters. Erik Halson, a learned Icelander of the seventeenth century, spent not less than ten years in trying to unravel all its deep and dark meanings and its fragmentary allusions! Some Norse scholars, and Uhland after them, have suspected this poem to be of comparatively late origin. To me its pithy strength and graphic briefness seem to plead for great antiquity. At any rate it contains

some of the most poetical references to Yggdrasil. The concluding staff-rhymes of 'Odin's Raven Song' grandly describe how the Teutonic Sun-god, sitting in his chariot with his sister who is herself a Goddess of Light and Love, speeds on his steed, which is adorned with brilliant gems—that is, with the rays of the heavenly orb. Far over the world shines his horse's mane. The Night he northward chases. There—

At the north boundary
Of the nourishing earth,
Under the outmost root
Of the noble Tree,
Went to their couches the Giantesses,
Titans, spectres, dwarfs, and dark elves.

Lastly, a number of details about the mighty Ash-Tree are to be found, in consecutive statement, in the Younger Edda's *Gylfaginning*. As usual, they are given there in the form of the questions and answers of a catechism, which purpose the Prose Edda, in fact, serves.

III

BUT now for the closer description of the extraordinary symbol of the Universe.

The three roots of the lofty Ash-Tree were said to reach to the Nether World, to the Home of the Frost Giants, and to the Abode of Mankind. I think there is peculiar meaning in the fact of the Home of Darkness, where Hel reigns, being named first in this enumeration.³

³ In the Younger Edda—in the later exegesis of Teutonic cosmogony and theology—the Abode of Mankind is significantly left out as one of the props of the World-Tree. Heaven, the Home of the Giants, and the Nether World are mentioned there as the places where Yggdrasil has its roots; and Heaven is named first. The Younger Edda says that this first named root reaches to the Aesir, and that the branches of Yggdrasil also spread over Heaven; thus bringing Heaven into the fullest prominence. Now, though in such matters there is scarcely a limit to the miraculous, it is yet hard to believe in a tree having its root and its top in the same place. I will remark here, in passing, that the Younger Edda shows here and there a tendency of so altering the texts as to make more easy the transition from the old faith to the new. I believe it is in consonance with the strict heathen view not to let the great World-Tree in any way descend from Heaven, but rather to make it a support of Heaven itself. This view is strengthened by the Idun Myth; of which more hereafter. In the *Grimnismál*, which is far older than the Prose Edda, the three roots are clearly fastened in the Realm of Hel, in the Giant World, and in the Abode of Mankind:—

*Þrjár roetr standa
á þrjá vegga
Undan aski Yggdrasils:*

*Hel býr undir einni;
Annarri Hrímpursar;
Þriðju mennskir menn.*

The grim goddess whose name afterwards furnished the designation for Hell, was beyond doubt at first figured as a Mother of Life as well as a Ruler of the Dead. In her shadowy dominion flows the stream Hvergelmir, an old, tumultuous Fountain of Life. Hel's name, which comes from *helan*, *hehlen*, to conceal—in Latin, *celare*—indicates that she is not so much a representative of absolute torpor, as a deity who keeps things hidden for a time. She, too, is a force of Nature; only covertly working beneath the soil.⁴ She is not a simple agent of destruction; she rather aids in Nature's rejuvenation. She originally typifies the idea of Life emerging from Death, and of Death being only a transformation of Life. Motionless rigidity, total annihilation, are notions contrary to the heathen Germanic view.

In the Edda, Hel is half dark, or livid, half of the hue of the human skin. She thus resembles the Hindoo Bhavani or Maha Kali, the goddess who creates and destroys, the representative of love and death, whose face alternately is radiant with beauty, like that of Aphrodite, or expressive of hideous terrors. It is noteworthy that the oldest Eddic text should place the first root of the Tree of Existence in the domain of this double-complexioned Mistress of the Underworld.

The next root brings us to the Home of the Giants. They are a race anterior to the Gods—even as the Titans of the Greek and Indian systems of faith were. They represent the ancient Chaos. Their realm stands in the place where, before the beginning of things, in the Night of Ages, there was no sun, nor moon, nor starry firmament; 'no earth, nor sky above; only a yawning abyss, and grass nowhere.' That the Tree of

Existence should thus have its second root fixed in the region of untutored Force and Matter, against which the Abode of Mankind has to be shielded by a wall, is also an idea carrying with it an evident significance.

The third root only is fixed in Manheim or Midgard—in the Home of Men, in the Middle Garden of the World. Thus Yggdrasil clearly does not symbolise this globe alone. It comprehends the whole range of the Universe. It is grounded in the ghastly depths where eternal Evolution is prepared; in the region of the chaotic powers of Nature; and in the well-ordered home of living Mankind.

From the number three, which is that of the roots, we come to the number nine, which is that of the worlds that stretch forth from the central stem of Yggdrasil. These worlds themselves were by our wood-dwelling and tree-worshipping forefathers conceived under the name of forests (*viðr* in the Edda). Nine is a sacred number, which in Teutonic mythology recurs in a great many combinations. The nine worlds which the 'Song of the Prophetess,' and the corresponding nine heavens, which the 'Song of the All-knowing Dwarf'⁵ mention, forming the number eighteen, may, I think, be compared to the Buddhistic World of Colour, which is composed of eighteen regions.

It would lead too far, in this special essay, to enter fully into the connection, sometimes slight and vague, sometimes striking and strong, between Germanic mythology and the Indian systems of faith. If, occasionally, a surprising contact can be pointed out with the later Buddhist, rather than with the earlier Vedic, system, it may be permitted to assume that, in the reformed religion of India, ideas

⁴ Compare also the 'Song of Fenja and Menja'; II.

⁵ *Alvismál*; 9.

cropped up again which are even older than those that have been handed down in the Vedas.

IV

YGGDRASIL is aglow with colour, and overrun with life. The Rainbow-bridge, over which the Gods daily ride, extends its noble arch through its structure. A whole animal world, that creeps and runs and flies, is bustling about the Tree. Limpid waters flow beneath one of its roots. The character of Yggdrasil, as a symbol of universal life, is thus brought home to us in a great many ways.

In the leafy dome of the wonderful tree, which reaches into Heaven, an Eagle sits. A hawk is perched betwixt its eyes. A huge Serpent gnaws Yggdrasil from below. Between the Eagle and that Serpent, a squirrel, busily running up and down, brings strife-creating words of wangling to and fro. The interpretation of this and other minor parts of the myth offers some difficulty. But we must not, on that account, assume that there is no meaning in them. Some inner meaning, however fanciful, always attaches to these ancient fables. Their cypher-language, or hieroglyphic talk, has not been invented for nothing. The hidden idea, the locked-up treasure of thought, is there. It is only the password, the key, or the clever locksmith, that are sometimes wanting.

Most likely, the quarrel between the Eagle that dwells in the green foliage near the ether, and the Serpent that works with destroying tooth in the dark regions below, refers to the contest between the powers of Life and the powers of Destruction. Besides Nidhögg, a host of other serpents—'so many that no tongue can tell them'⁶—lie gnawing at the roots of the Tree of Existence. In other words, the

forces of destruction are countless.

There are stags also, and a goat, Heidrun—which may be compared to Amaltheia—that feed on the leaves of Yggdrasil. But the description of them shows that they are symbols rather of rejuvenescence than of demolition. From Eikthyrnir's antlers, great rivers flow down, which feed the Hwergelmir Fountain. From the udders of Heidrun, the blessed heroes of Walhalla are provided with a drink, even as Zeus was fed by Amaltheia. The forces of Destruction and Rejuvenation were rendered figuratively, in the Teutonic creed, by a great many poetical phantasies.

The Goddess of Life, Idun, who by her rejuvenating apples preserves the very Aesir from becoming aged and wrinkled, is also connected with Yggdrasil. In an earlier myth, Urd, who typifies the Past, was understood as sitting in the boughs of the World-Tree. By a substitution not lacking in philosophical depth, her place was afterwards taken by Idun. The dead Past is succeeded by the Essence of Life.

We learn from 'Bragi's Discourses'⁷ that Idun was once kidnapped by the giant Thiassi, who flew with her to Thunder's Home. Through the cunning of Loki, the artful deity and friendly counsellor of the goddesses,⁸ to whom Freyja lent her falcon-dress, Idun was brought back in the shape of a nut. I think an early Teutonic Germ Theory is concealed also in this tale—in *nuce*, so to say; the nut standing for a germ or a seed. Nor is it without significance that the artful and mischievous Loki, a sparkling Fire-god, restores the Essence of Life with the aid of the Goddess of Love.

It seems that, originally, Idun's apples were regarded as the fruits of Yggdrasil. The Gods themselves depend upon, and are supported by,

⁶ *Gylfaginning*; 16.

⁷ *Bragarœdhur*; 56.

⁸ *Hrafnagaldur Óðins*; 18.

the great World-Tree; nay, without it they would soon become grey,⁹ would wither and vanish. In this way, Asgard fully appears as an anthropomorphic projection of the human mind.

Though it is not my object, in the present treatise, to speak of the many vestiges which the Yggdrasil idea seems to have left in yet current folklore, it may at least be mentioned that there are still German popular tales of a tree which, standing near a well containing the Water of Life, is laden with golden apples. The probable connection of this tree with Yggdrasil has been before pointed out by others. I would add, as my surmise, that Goethe's words—

*Grau, theurer Freund, ist alle Theorie,
Und grün des Lebens gold'ner Baum,*

words which have often been objected to as an impossible poetical figure—may, after all, be only a very short and graphic rendering of the green tree, laden with vivifying golden apples, that occurs in German tales as a last vestige of a World-Tree even older, perhaps, than the Eddic version of Yggdrasil.

V

YET more startling thoughts are embodied in the Norse myth. Odin himself, the chief Teutonic deity, appears, strange enough, as the fruit of the World-Tree. He hangs in it during 'nine long nights,' which no doubt represent nine maturing months, or nine cosmogonic periods. He says of himself:—

I know that I hung
On the wind-rocked tree,
Nine long nights,
With a spear wounded,
And to Odin offered,
Myself to myself—
On the branch of that Tree, of which none
knows
From what root it springs.

Bread no one gave me.
Nor a horn of drink;
Downward I peered,
To runes applied myself—
Then fell down thence. . . .

Then I began to thrive, and began to think;
I grew and gained in strength.
*Word by word rose to me from the word;
Deed after deed rose to me from the deed.*¹⁰

The first verse above quoted from Odin's 'Runic Song' does not allow of any other interpretation than that Yggdrasil is meant by the wind-rocked tree. The first syllable in the word 'Yggdrasil' is explained either as signifying 'deep terror,' or 'the deep Thinker'; whilst 'drasil' probably means 'Bearer.' Under the latter supposition, the 'World-Tree' would be the Bearer of Thought; and Odin, the representative of Thought, would be the fruit of a Tree of which no one knows from what root it springs. Like a fruit, he suddenly drops from its branches: Mind emancipates itself from Matter.

From a Giant, Odin learns the first chapters of wisdom. His knowledge is increased by an Ambrosian drink. The runic study on which he had been bent, is, in the following verses, shown to constitute henceforth Odin's strength of charm. By their spell he enchants men, gets rid of foes, disperses wraiths, and raises the dead. The runes, the ancient Teutonic art of writing, are his means of making Thought victorious.

Have we then not, in this tale, a poetical rendering of the Evolution of Mind from Matter—an evolution which, after long periods, brings out, from the grosser elements of existence, a spiritual personality that projects itself into the transcendental form of a Godhead?

Great danger—the Germanic tale goes on to say—threatens the all-nourishing tree, which groans

⁹ *Bragarœdhur*; 56.

¹⁰ *Runatalspátrr Odins*; 140. 141 143.

under its burden. In the words of Grimnir's Song:—

The tree Yggdrasil
Bears a heavier burden
Than men can think.
Above, the stag bites it;
Its trunk by age is hollowed;
The Serpent gnaws it below.

The deep mystery of grief, which, Luther said, underlies all life, and the never-ceasing process of decay in all forms of existence, are apparently indicated in these verses.

There are three fountains, however, near Yggdrasil, in which the powers of rejuvenescence, of preservation and continual transformation, are clearly symbolised. The Tree is not exclusively the symbol of universal existence. Water is added, as the very essence of life. One of the oldest forms of the Teutonic faith is a worship of Water Deities. This creed was once wrought even into a separate religion—in hostile conflict for a time, as we see from the 'Prophetess Song,' with the Asa creed—until, after a severe struggle, a compromise was made between the two. A Neptunistic and a Plutonic theory of cosmogony may have been at the bottom of this diversity of faith. At all events, the Vana Creed, or Water Religion, left a sufficiently deep imprint upon the prevailing mythological system of the Northmen.

To the ancient Hellenic notion, as Pindar has it, that 'water is the best,' or the 'source of all things,'¹¹ which is but a fresh rendering of the Vedic doctrine that 'in the waters are all the healing powers'—parallels may be found in the Teutonic cosmogony. In the *Völuspá*, the Sea is placed first in the order of things that rose into existence out of the previous Chaos. A Hebrew comparison is too obvious to require special reference. So we also find three wells, or seas, placed near the roots

of the Tree of Existence. One of these wells, apparently the oldest, is the very Source of Being.

At one of them live the Nornes, the Sisters of Fate, 'the maidens who over the Sea of Ages travel in deep foreknowledge.'¹²

They laid the lots; they ruled the life
To the sons of men, their fate foretelling.

The names of these divine spinners of Fate—Urd, Verdandi, Skuld—signify the Past, the Present, and the Future. From the name of one of the Nornes, Urd or *Wurd*, Shakspeare's 'Weird Sisters' are derived. I will here remark that the translation of Verdandi's name as 'the Present' is not strictly correct. Verdandi's name has an even more significant meaning. Instead of deriving it, as is sometimes done, from '*vera*' (to be), there can be not the slightest doubt that it must be traced to *verða* (German, *werden*), of which it is the present participle. This verb, which has a mixed meaning of 'to be,' 'to become,' or 'to grow,' has been lost in English. Verdandi is not merely a representative of present being, but of the process of Growing, or of Evolution—which gives her figure a profounder aspect.

The Weird Sisters of the Germanic myth sprinkle the all-nourishing tree with the waters of life from a holy well, so that the tree should not wither. So pure is that water that everything which enters the fountain becomes as white as the skin of the egg in an egg-shell. The egg, which plays a large part in not a few cosmogonies, was, with the Teutonic tribes, the symbol of all life, and, as I have shown elsewhere, the symbol also of a theory of evolution which was held by them, though in somewhat fantastic form.

Another fountain close to the roots of Yggdrasil is the well of

¹¹ *Ilias*, xiv. 246; and xxi. 196.

¹² *Vufthrúdnismál*; 49.

Mimir the Giant. In it, the remembrance of all things past—the remembrance of the origin of the world, even of the Gods, as well as of the human race—lies hidden. A myth, evidently referring to Odin's character as an older Sun-god, says of him that he once went to Mimir to get a draught from his well of wisdom and remembrance, and that, on this occasion, he had to leave one of his eyes in pledge—for which reason Odin is pictured as one-eyed. Mimir's very name signifies 'remembrance.' It is a word from the same stock as the Greek *Mnemosyne*; the Latin *memoria*; the Anglo-Saxon *meomor*.

In the 'Song of Fiölsvidr'¹³ (that is, the Much-Knowing) a tree is mentioned, called Mimameidr, or Mimir's Tree, 'which spreads its boughs over all lands, and whose root is unknown to most men.' It seems to be identical with Yggdrasil. Mimir being a source of information to Odin himself, the great World-Tree once more appears to be a power superior to the chief deity itself.

A third fountain near the Tree of Universal Existence is called by a name which brings us back to primary matter—to the elementary principles of Being in a state of turbulent fermentation. At that well, Life arises; and the Dead return thither. Hel dwells near it. Thus, the roots of Yggdrasil lie deep indeed.

Every day—it was further said—the Gods ride over the Rainbow-bridge which spans Heaven and Earth, to this Tree of Life, to a place of judgment near the fountain of the Sisters of Fate. These inexorable rulers of destiny weave a web of golden thread from East to West, from the region where the vivifying orb of heaven rises, to where it sets behind man's horizon. In the dark North the Norne woof

is fixed. But that web which the Past and the ever-growing Present have woven, is torn to pieces every evening by Skuld, the Future.

At last, when all things are nearing their doom, the Giallar horn is blown that lies at the bottom of the World-Tree. Its stern sounds proclaim the fatal battle. Then, the great Ash quivers and shakes; the Fire-god Surtur comes with his flaming sword of destruction: and Idun sinks down from the branches of Yggdrasil. Life, in its present cosmic form, is at an end.

VI

IN this remarkable myth we have, in poetical guise, a symbol of the union of all forms of existence—a symbol of their intertwining, as well as of their fleeting and perishable character—a symbol of the vastness of the Universe and of the smallness of Man, who is merely a passing leaf or bud on the twigs of the Tree of Existence. In this many-sided mythological picture we see the rise of worlds from chaotic elementary matter; the three gradations, or steps, of Time, within which we think; the unfathomable secret of the beginnings of life, deeply hidden in a mysterious well; the Fate which encompasses everything with its threads between Morn and Night; the continual evolution between life and decay, and life again; and the idea of a coming downfall, when all forms of existence will vanish to make room for a new and nobler world. All this is prefigured in the wonderful tree Yggdrasil, which does credit to our forefathers' power of thought and soaring fancy.

It may be, as Kuhn¹⁴ has suggested, that the dogma of the World-Tree originally arose from a contemplation of the forming of the clouds, which, especially after sunset, often take the shape of a tree with out-

¹³ *Fiölsvinns-mål*; 20.

¹⁴ *Die Herabkunft des Feuers*; 20.

stretched branches. In Northern Germany, to this day, people call such clouds a Weather-Tree (*Wetterbaum*), and speak of its 'bloom' as indicating rain. In some parts of the country, the cloudy formation is styled Adam's Tree, or Abraham's Tree—names which, by their vague similarity of sound, appear to me to point back to some corrupted Teutonic word no longer recognisable, but which may once have held a place in the Asa creed. Maybe that the 'Adam's' Tree was once the 'Odin's' or Woden's Tree; in accordance with the tale which made Odin grow on the Ash.

If it were objected that it seems strange to make the shifting Cloud Sea the cradle of a mythical notion which gradually embraced the whole world with its intense realism, I would reply that primitive races have a far stronger feeling of the connection between the welkin region and the soil they tread. Their open-air life, which renders them so much more dependent upon climatic changes, and their grossly realistic idea of the solid nearness of a firmament, continually lead their thoughts in the direction of the clouds and the stars. A frequent recumbent position in the open air, with their eyes turned to the canopy of heaven, easily makes them look upon natural phenomena in what otherwise they, with their ignorance of the earth's rotation, might have considered a topsy-turvy fashion.

Some fragments of astronomical terminology among the heathen Germans have come down to us, which show that our forefathers gave the same names to constellations above, and to high-roads below. They had a Watling Street and an Iring Street (the Milky Way)—probably also a Karl's Way and a Hel Way—both in the starry sky and on the soil of their country. Mentally, they were as much at home in the clouds as among their woods and dales. No wonder, the

Cloud should prove of such importance in their Creed.

A gross natural origin can be traced in most myths, even when they have been surrounded with the greatest artistic or ethic refinements. The metaphysical subtilisation is grafted upon a rough stem. From a gnarly branch a delicate blossom issues. This is a well-known process in mythology. Out of a simple elementary worship of the forces and phenomena of Nature, there is evolved, by a gradual change in imagery, a conception in which philosophical ideas and moral notions play a large part—to such an extent even that, at last, the earlier meaning of the myth may be wellnigh lost or hopelessly overlaid for recovery.

Sometimes, the two conceptions—the grossly natural and the higher ethic one—maintain themselves side by side in two different forms, having become disconnected in popular fancy or remembrance. Thus I should not wonder if both the simple Weather-Tree and the great World-Tree—the latter of which perhaps arose out of the former—had lingered in the memory of the Germanic nations as separate images. Or it may be that a higher conception, worked out in a more artistic and ethic sense, had made its chief imprint on the mind of the more advanced class of the nation, and that, when the conversion to Christianity took place, the simpler form was only retained by the masses. Among them, many fragments of the ancient heathen belief have been preserved down to our own days.

In this way, Yggdrasil, the Tree of Existence, may have vanished into thin air—out of sight, out of mind; and nothing may have remained but the simpler and earlier idea of the *Wetterbaum*, the Adam's or Abraham's Tree.

VII

THE question arises here:—How

old is the more philosophical conception of Yggdrasil? Since when did the Germanic races symbolise the Universe under the form of a Tree of Existence, of a Tree of Knowledge and Life, of Grief and Fate, of a Tree of Space and Time? Is it merely a later Eddic view? Or did they bring with them this doctrine even at the time when, from their old home on the pasture-grounds of Central Asia, they wandered westward into Europe?

If we possessed those old heroic songs (*antiqua carmina*) which Karl the Great, according to Eginhard's testimony, had collected, out of regard for his own Germanic nationality, we might probably speak with greater confidence on this interesting point. Those old songs are, no doubt, the missing link between our mediæval epic, the Nibelungen Lied, and the Wodan or Odin religion, as preserved in the Edda. The day may come when in some old castle or cloister, or in some Bavarian yeoman's homestead which was once a mediæval mansion, a copy or a tattered piece of those songs will be found, even as the important Merseburg Incantation Song was discovered as late as 1841. In the meanwhile, we must try to arrive at a conclusion by different means.

A vestige of the myth of the World-Tree seems to linger in a German mediæval lay of the Singer's Contest on the Wartburg. (I may here incidentally remark that the Wartburg has, no doubt, its name from an older Wodan's worship having been carried on on the summit of that hill; 'Wart' being a corruption of 'Wotan' or 'Wöde.') A riddle is given, in that lay, about a noble tree, standing in a garden that is constructed and laid out with great cunning. Its root

strikes down to the regions of Hell. Its top reaches to the Throne of God. Its branches embrace the whole world. It is a beautiful tree of the richest foliage, in which birds are singing their wondrous song. The riddle is interpreted as referring to the Cross, and to the descent into Hell.

Now, Yggdrasil too, when we look to its stem and its three roots, has the form of a cross, although inverted. Among the many pre-Christian crosses which occur from India to Assyria, and from Egypt to Mexico, there were also various Germanic ones. Thor's hammer itself was in the shape of a cross. The adaptation of the ancient myth to a mediæval belief would, therefore, have been all the more easy.

The great antiquity of the Yggdrasil doctrine seems to me provable from the poetical Edda itself. Allusions to the World-Tree only occur in its older Aesir Songs; not in the later Hero Ballads of that sacred Germanic Scripture. In the Aesir Songs, these allusions are chiefly incidental ones, presupposing familiar, general, and long-established knowledge of the myth. In the Grimnismâl alone, a fuller description occurs. The Prose Edda being the more systematised catechism of the Germanic creed, founded on the older and partly lost scriptures, but also corrupted by interpolations, has, of course, a consecutive description of the great World Tree.

But quite irrespective of this test, a comparison with other mythologies has led many Norse and German inquirers to attribute to the Yggdrasil myth a very high age. There is a passage in Vergil's Georgics (II., 291), which says:—

*Altior ac penitus terrae defigitur arbor,
Aesculus in primis, quae quantum vortice ad
auras
Aetherias, tantum radice in Tartara tendit.*¹⁵

¹⁵ In Dryden's rendering:—

Jove's own tree,
High as his topmost boughs to Heaven ascend,
So low his roots to Hell's dominions tend.

*Ergo non hiemes illam, non flabra, neque
imbres
Convellunt; immota manet, multosque
nepotes,
Multa virum volvens durando saecula vincit.
Tum fortis late ramos et brachia tendens
Huc illuc, media ipsa ingentem sustinet
umbram.*

This often-quoted passage looks, indeed, like a vague remembrance of the old Teutonic or Aryan tree whose top reaches to Asgard, and whose roots go down to the gate of Hel. Unless we assume that the classic poet could have got his notion from some Germanic warrior in Roman service, one would be inclined to think that his remarkable lines contain a distant echo of a dogma once prevalent also in Ausonian lands.

VIII

MYSTIC trees play a large part in Aryan as well as in Semitic creeds. The Greeks had various tales in which the ash-tree stands as an image of physical phenomena, or as a cosmogonic symbol. The clouds were described by the Greeks under the figure of an ash. And even as a Trinity of Germanic Gods, namely, Odin, Hoenir, and Lodur, fashioned the first man out of an ash—whence his name was Askr:¹⁶ so, in Greek mythology, we have a number of tales about the origin of mankind from trees, and particularly from the ash.

Phoroneus, the first man, who is also a bringer of fire, is the son of the river-god Inachos and of the nymph Melia. Her name means 'Ash.' Hesiod makes Zeus create the third race of men from ash-trees. Another ancient writer attributes the origin even of the first race of men to the divine wood-women, or ash-nymphs, the Meliai. This accords with Hesychios' description of mankind as 'the fruit of the ash-

tree.' In Teutonic mythology it is the All-father that hangs, fruit-like, in the Ash-tree, with a spear wounded, suffering thirst, offering himself to himself. No great stretch of interpretation is required to look upon Odin, in this case, as a hypostasis, or divinisation, of Mankind itself—so that the Greek and the Teutonic tales would once more come close to each other.

Perhaps it may seem a bold procedure to assert, in positive terms, the existence of 'an older Grecian world-tree,'¹⁷ of which the Hellenic myths in question would be the disjointed and scattered pieces. Yet, taking these myths all together, and keeping in mind the passage of Vergil, the assumption becomes a less venturesome one. Even for the eagle which sits in the top of Yggdrasil, and for the goat from whose udders the heroic guests of Odin are nourished in Walhalla, parallels are found in the Greek circle of myths.

IX

Naturally, after having looked for traces of the Germanic World-Tree in the creed of kindred European nations, we go back to old Persian and Indian writings.

Among the adherents of the doctrine of Zarathustra, we come upon two trees, standing in the Iranian Paradise, which resemble the Semitic Tree of Knowledge and Tree of Life. It is contended by Professor Max Müller that these *two* trees must not be compared to any *one* tree symbolising the Universe. I cannot entirely join in this view. The greatest care is certainly to be taken in the endeavour to trace the connection of mythic ideas; 'otherwise,' as Max Müller says, 'everything becomes everything.' At the same time, we have to keep in mind that the most multiform, most many-coloured

¹⁶ *Völuspá*; 17, 18. *Gylfaginning*; 11.

¹⁷ See Kelly's *Curiosities of Indo-European Tradition and Folklore*, which are mainly founded on Kuhn.

religious ideas and figures have, in numberless cases, been proved to have sprung from very simple germs. The process of individualisation is the very essence of the progress of mythology.

Hence, at a first glance, it is by no means an unlikely thing that a single World-Tree, such as the Germanic tale assumes, should, among Persians or Semites, have branched out, or split, into two different trees, whose separate qualities were once joined in the earlier myth. Thus the Life-giving Tree and the Painless Tree of the Iranians, the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of the Semites, may, for aught I know, have had their prototype in some older Aryan World-Tree whose stem and branches represent Life, and whose roots are nourished by a Fountain of Knowledge. Indeed, we possess in Yggdrasil itself a two-fold image, for in its branches the Goddess of Life dwells, whilst at its root the well of Mimir lies, who typifies Knowledge or All-Wisdom.

The connection between these Iranian and Teutonic myths comes out all the stronger when we look at some details in the description of the trees mentioned in the Zend-Avesta¹⁸ and the Bundesh.¹⁹ As in the Hebrew, so in the Iranian account, the two great trees stand in a garden, surrounded by other trees. Yggdrasil, too, is surrounded by other plantations; the nine worlds that issue from its stem being represented as forests. Again: the towering Gaokerena Tree of the Zend-Avesta, as well as the Painless or Impassive Tree, which bears all

kinds of seed, were said to stretch their roots into a large water. This reminds us of the wells or lakes near the roots of Yggdrasil.

The Painless Tree is also called the Eagle's Tree. At all events, some bird, eagle or falcon, sits in its top—even as in the Germanic World-Tree. Another bird is spoken of in the Iranian legend, which continually dwells with the Eagle. So, also, a hawk was said to dwell with the Eagle in Yggdrasil. In another respect, the smaller bird in the Persian myth—acting as a messenger between the Eagle's perch and the watery region below—reminds us of the squirrel which incessantly runs up and down the Teutonic Tree of Existence.

As in the Germanic tale, so in the Iranian, the first human pair grow out of a plant. We further find, in the Persian myth, an immortalising drink (*haoma*) that comes from the Tree of Life. It has some resemblance to the honeydew (*hunnungs-fall*)²⁰ that drops from Yggdrasil. Again, in the Persian myth, a powerful lizard, toad, or dragon-form, is mentioned, whom the malicious Ahriman sent for the annihilation of the mighty tree. When we remember that the Teutonic myth not only speaks of the Serpent Nidhogg being used for a similar purpose, but that the malicious Loki is at once the father of the dark Mistress of the Underworld, and of the great Midgard Serpent, the points of contact between the two circles of myths are remarkably strengthened.

Loki altogether resembles Ahri-

¹⁸ *Vendidad*; xx.:—'15. Then I, Ahura-Mazda, brought forth of holy trees. 16. many hundreds, many thousands, many ten-thousands. 17. all round the *one* tree Gaokerena.'

¹⁹ *Bundesh*; ix. From this same seed there grew up the tree All-seed in the sea Vourukasha; from which there come all kinds of plant-seed. And near this tree All-seed there stands the tree Gaokerena, to keep off misformed age, and as a manifold protection to the world. . . . xviii. The tree Gaokerena: *on the first day it was* that the tree called Gaokerena grew up in the sea Vourukasha, from the depths of the mountain. . . . The tree All-seed has grown in the midst of the sea Vourukasha; on it there is the seed of all plants. Some call it the good-healing; others, the strong-healing; others, the All-healing.

²⁰ *Gylfaginning*; 16.

man, or Angro-mainyus, in various ways. In connection with Angro-mainyus, a 'Serpent of evil seed' is mentioned. Ahriman himself once 'sprang like a serpent from Heaven, down beneath the earth,' being frightened out of heaven; he then 'came to the Water and worked beneath the Earth' in an evil way. Loki, the Serpent-father, also becomes an outcast from Heaven, and once remains during eight winters beneath the Earth, working out a birth;—'truly an Evil one's way,' as Odin remarks. In the Teutonic myth, the sojourn of Loki beneath the Earth precedes his ejection from Heaven; and these events are even disconnected. But such changes often take place in tales scattered far and wide.

Seeing all this, to which many other points might be easily added, the opinion that, in the matter of the Trees, a striking affinity exists between the Germanic, Iranian, and Hebrew systems of faith, is certainly not weakened. I cannot, therefore, fall in with the view expressed by Max Müller against Dr. Spiegel and Dr. Windischmann,²¹ that there is 'the same difference between one and two trees as there is between North and South.'²² Have not Freia (or Frigg) and Holda—to give but one example out of a thousand—arisen from the same single stem? And were they not often considered as distinct and different figures, until a happy chance brought to light, in a Latin Gothic record of Spain, the form 'Friga-Holda'?

X

TAKING all in all, it appears to me more likely than not, that an original single Aryan World-Tree gradually became differentiated into

two, and that floating mythological stories of this latter kind were, in course of time, spread over Iran and into Asia Minor.

On Assyrian and early Babylonian cylinders we see a Sacred Tree, with a seated figure on each side, and the Serpent in the background; and also a Sacred Tree, or Grove, with attendant Cherubim. A fragmentary account in the Babylonian inscriptions speaks of a dragon, Tiamat, or the Serpent of the Sea; 'evidently'—as Mr. George Smith says—'in the same relation as the Serpent, being concerned in bringing about the Fall.'²³

Now, Serpent powers, as representatives of the Evil principle, are traceable in the Brahmanic and the Persian systems of faith. A destructive Serpent power is also found in the Chaldean creed. I take occasion here to enter into a comparison between Chaldean and Germanic mythology, which I simply throw out as a hypothesis, but which to my mind carries with it a very great probability.

Tiamat, the Serpent of the Sea, is, in Mr. George Smith's words, 'an original spirit of chaos and disorder, a spirit opposed in principle to the Gods.' This description, I would submit, brings us back, once more, to the identical qualities of Loki,²⁴ the father of the Midgard Serpent. Tiamat, it is true, is the female principle; so that it might seem that the comparison with Loki ends there. But the hermaphroditic, or twofold, character of not a few deities, including Venus, at once disposes of this objection. Loki himself, it should not be forgotten, is actually a combination of the female and the male principle. In one instance he, for the sake of deception,

²¹ *Zoroastrische Studien*. Von Dr. F. Windischmann. Herausgegeben von Dr. Friedrich Spiegel.

²² *Chips from a German Workshop*; i. 157. ('Genesis and the Zend-Avesta.')

²³ *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, by George Smith; pp. 87, 89, and 91.

²⁴ *Vegtamskvidha*; 15.

changes outright into the female; namely, into a mare. He is described as 'spruce and beautiful of form,' but arch and very fickle. An evil-doing God as he is, the Goddesses regularly consult him. He borrows the winged robe of the Goddess of Love, in order to fly, as a maid, to the Giant's Home. In the same way, he travels in the falcon-dress of Odin's consort to Geir-rödsgard. He assumes the form of an old woman,²⁵ and in this shape even deceives Frigg. Having changed himself into a mare, he bears a foal.²⁶

That Loki, like Tiamat, had connection with the water or the Sea, is established by his changing into a salmon; by his having produced the Midgard Serpent which surrounds the earth—that is, the Ocean;²⁷ and by his coming, at the end of times, from over the Sea, as a leader of the fiery Hosts of Destruction. His character as a serpent-like tempter is recorded in the tale of his having lured Idun, the Goddess of Life, who originally dwelt in the Tree of Existence, away from Asgard, into a wood where he said he had found beautiful apples.²⁸

A Serpent-father tempting a woman with apples—how strangely like the Hebrew story!

A spirit of disorder, opposed to the Gods; a power of mischief connected with that 'producing mother of all,'²⁹ the Sea; a deity easily changing back into the female form—how very much like the Babylonian Tiamat!

Here we have a Germanic deity, whose character, qualities, and acts curiously combine much that we read of in the Hebrew and Babylonian stories about the original

principle of Evil. Remembering that Twelve Gods, representing twelve months, or the zodiac, are to be met with in Teutonic mythology, even as in the Etruscan, Chaldean, Egyptian, Indian, and other religions, it will be found less surprising that there should be such a remarkable coincidence.

Unfortunately, the clay tablets are too much broken to enable us to make a full comparison between the Hebrew and Babylonian accounts in regard to the Trees of Life and Knowledge. 'The loss of this portion of the Creation Legend'—says the author of *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*—'is unfortunate, as, however probable it may be that the Hebrew and Babylonian traditions agree about the Garden and Tree of Knowledge, we cannot now prove it. There is a second tree, the Tree of Life, in the Genesis account (ch. iii. 22), which certainly appears to correspond to the sacred grove of Anu, which a later fragment states was guarded by a sword turning to all the four points of the compass.' Mr. George Smith also remarks that, from the general body of Assyrian texts, Sir Henry Rawlinson has pointed out the agreement of the Babylonian region of Karduniyas, or Ganduniyas, with the Eden of the Bible.

Thus there is a strong probability of an agreement of the older Babylonian story with the later Hebrew text on the one hand, and with Indian, Persian, Greek, and Germanic myths on the other.³⁰ There can be little doubt that, in the countries near the Euphrates, Aryan, Semitic, and even Turanian, perhaps also Hamitic, circles of myths have become intermixed. Researches of the greatest value,

²⁵ *Gylfaginnng*; 49. ²⁶ *Oegisdrecca*; 23, 24, 33.

²⁷ Compare Herodotus (iv., 8, 9, and 36), where the view of the Skythians is mentioned, and ridiculed, that 'the Ocean flows round the whole earth,' and where also a Serpent-woman, 'half virgin, half viper,' tempts Herakles.

²⁸ *Bragaroedhur*; 56.

²⁹ See the first tablet of the Babylonian Creation Legend.

³⁰ Compare the dream of Nebuchadnezzar, in the Book of Daniel; c. 4.

which cannot be lightly set aside, render it more than probable that, in still earlier times, there was a close intercourse between Semitic and Indo-Germanic nations in parts of Asia, where they still live together even now.³¹ This intercourse seems to have taken place at a time before the ancestors of the Jewish race started from Central Asia for Canaan, and before India was entered by its Aryan conquerors. The partial dependence of Genesis on an Aryan source of belief is, therefore, far from unlikely.

‘Both the Indo-Germanic race and the Semites’—Dr. Friedrich Spiegel says—‘assume an original home of theirs, from which they wandered forth in ancient times, and which they place in the territories where the Oxus and the Jaxartes rise.’ And furthermore:—‘The ideas which we have found in the eleven first chapters of Genesis, show an affinity, not to be mistaken, with ideas of the Avesta; as has long been acknowledged by men like Ewald, Lassen, and Renan.’

Were some of the clay tablets complete, we might perhaps come upon fresh links, in the matter of the Sacred Tree or Trees, between an early Aryan creed of Central Asia and its later Semitic developments. In the present state of the mutilated materials at hand, we must leave this special point in suspense. At the same time, manifest points of contact, such as have been above indicated, do not, according to all the rules of comparative mythology, allow of being disregarded. Perhaps a new find in the Babylonian mounds will shed further light on this interesting subject.

The mythology of Germany proper, which until lately lay almost buried, and of which only stray fragments were recovered in old books and superstitions, has in a

great measure had to be rebuilt from Norse materials. The strict German origin of some of these is, however, partly indicated in the Edda and in some Sagas. In this way, putting this and that together, a grand structure has once more been reared out of broken pillars and scattered stones. The same work is now being done for the tracing out of the connection between apparently different systems of faith of races standing apart from each other.

And with all due deference to the learning of those who have laid bare the great lines of connection, I contend that the important links contained in the creed of our own forefathers have by far not been sufficiently investigated as yet. The Vedas and the Avesta, the creation stories and cosmogonies of the classic nations, as well as of Egypt, Babylon, and Judæa, are often suddenly illustrated in a striking manner by some story of the Edda, or by some lingering tale in German folklore.

XI

TURNING now to Hindostan, we find, both in the most ancient Vedic literature and in one of the latest works, the *Upanishads*, references to mystic Trees, which have been interpreted as world-trees, similar to Yggdrasil. The subject is, in some degree, an intricate one, surrounded, here and there, with certain difficulties of interpretation.

Still, we gather a notion of an ancient Indian belief in a tree standing near a lake, at an ageless stream—a tree at which to look makes one young again—a tree that bears all the fruits of the world. Idun’s apples of divine rejuvenescence are here easily brought to mind. We hear of a tree whose roots reach upwards, and whose branches hang down below—a tree that, like Yggdrasil, drops

³¹ *Erân, das Land zwischen dem Indus und Tigris.* Von Dr. Friedrich Spiegel. Berlin: 1863.

sweetness, and on whose boughs birds are settled that sing praises in honour of immortality.

Again, we find, as in the Teutonic and the Iranian tales, two birds sitting in the top of the wonderful tree. Beneath it, a Ruler of the Under-world dwells, in company with the Pitris, the divine progenitors of men -- a picture reminding us of Hel and her Hosts of Dead. We hear of Yama and the Pitris consuming an Ambrosian drink with the Gods under that mighty tree. Under Yggdrasil, too, the Aesir had their daily meeting-place. We also come upon the important poetical exclamation:— 'What wood, what tree was it, of which they made Heaven and Earth?' Or:— 'What wood, what tree was it, of which they made Heaven and Earth? Ye sages, inquire well in your mind what it is that preserves and protects all beings?'³²

This is very like the all-nourishing Teutonic Ash, the symbol of universal life and existence. We hear, in Indian mythology, the Tree whose roots reach upwards, and whose branches hang down below, described as an eternal tree, in which all the worlds repose; which is not surpassed by anything; and which is even identical with Brama, as well as with the heavenly ambrosia.³³ We hear the same tree described as the 'first being;' and it is further said that the leaves of that tree are Vedic metres, and that he who knows it knows the Vedas.³⁴

These passages have not, to my knowledge, been pointed out yet in connection with Odin's Runic Song in the Edda. I, for my part, cannot but think that they are the very source of those Eddic verses in which the Germanic All-father himself is identified with Yggdrasil and described as its bodily and ghostly

outgrowth. The runes which Odin learns, whilst bound up with the mighty tree; and the ambrosian drink that afterwards increases his knowledge, have their clear prototype in the Indian tree, which is at once the 'first being,' 'Brama,' and 'Amrita,' and whose very leaves are Vedic metres.

We further find that Agni, the Fire-god, who is sometimes conceived in the Vedas as a falcon or an eagle, seeks refuge from the community of the Gods in a mystic tree, assuming there the shape of a horse. Now, in Germanic mythology, Loki, whose name indicates his connection with fire, and who equally becomes an outcast from the divine community, also assumes once, as before mentioned, the shape of a mare. On another occasion he flies to the Home of the Giants in falcon guise, namely, in Freyja's feathery garments. And even as the Indian Fire-god sits, in the guise of a horse, in the tree *Açvattha*: so an eagle—interpreted by Simrock as a symbol of the Teutonic Fire-god—is perched on Yggdrasil, next to the clouds, from which Fire came.

I cannot conclude the references to Indian myth-lore without mentioning some remarkable suggestions, made to me since the first publication of this essay, by Professor E. P. Evans. In his opinion, the *Yûpa*, or sacrificial post, is a representative of the Tree of Existence. In the *Rig-Veda* (iii. 8) the *Yûpa* is celebrated as the Lord of the Forest; and there is much speculation about its functions and powers in the *Brahmanas*.³⁵ A noteworthy passage speaks of the going up of the Gods to the celestial world, when they strike the *Yûpa* in the Earth, turning its points downwards, as a means of deterring men from learning a great

³² *Rig-Veda*; x. 81, 4. ³³ *Kathaka-Upanishad*; vi. 1. ³⁴ *Bagavad-Gîtâ*; xv. 1.

³⁵ *The Aitareya Brahmanam of the Rig-Veda*. By Dr. Martin Haug. Book ii.; 1.

Secret. But on the Yûpa being reversed, the heavenly world is beheld. Again, in the Atharva-Veda,³⁶ there is a hymn to Skambha, the great prop of the Universe, in whom the Worlds, the divisions of Time, and Divine Thought are contained, and to whom all the Gods are joined, 'as the branches around the trunk of a tree.' This, too, seems to be a speculative image which has affinity with a Tree of Existence.

I must further mention some other remarkable points of analogy to which my attention has been drawn since. There is Kalpa-Taru, the Tree of Ages; and Pârijâta, the towering three-branched Tree of Paradise, which rises from the bosom of the water. They, also, appear to show traces of kinship with the picturesque fancies of the Northern myth.

XII

DISJOINTED and fragmentary as all these allusions may seem, they yet are very striking. The golden treasure of a primæval myth is often enough beaten out into a thousand leaves, scattered far and wide—perhaps even beyond the

Ocean, into Peru and Mexico. To suppose that the Germanic Ash had an early Aryan prototype, and that myths referring to such a tree had their counterpart in Greek, Persian, Indian, even Hebrew and Chaldean legends, is certainly not going against the ordinary rules of mythological evidence.

Were it otherwise, the credit would be all the higher for that Teutonic race, of which a Roman Emperor said 'that their bodies are great, but their souls even greater,' to have worked out the idea of a Tree of Existence into so comprehensive a form. But any one who will compare the Old German Wessobrunn Prayer with a well-known cosmogonic passage in the Edda, and again with similar classic, Persian, Vedic, and even Assyrian or Chaldean texts, in which the most striking concordance of thoughts and expressions occurs, will scarcely feel warranted to join in a doubt. He will rather be inclined to believe that the grand myth of the Tree of Existence is, in its earliest germs, at least a common property of the Aryan stock.

³⁶ *Atharva-Veda*; x. 7.

³⁷ *Harivansa*; ii. pp. 12-14. Traduit par M. A. Langlois.

