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Stanley Edgar Hyman

THE GOLDEN BOUGH AS LITERATURE

When he assembled the third edition of *The Golden Bough* in the years before 1915, Frazer presented the book as a work of literature. With characteristic ambivalence, he denies that this means giving up its scientific pretensions. Frazer writes in the preface:

By discarding the austere form, without, I hope, sacrificing the solid substance, of a scientific treatise, I thought to cast my materials into a more artistic mould and so perhaps to attract readers, who might have been repelled by a more strictly logical and systematic arrangement of the facts.

More and more, Frazer began referring to his theories as playful fancies rather than as scientific conjectures, writing typically: "I put forward the hypothesis for no more than a web of conjectures woven from the gossamer threads of popular superstition." Brailsford saw this as primarily a matter of artistry, writing:

With a plodding industry that no Teutonic scholar ever surpassed, he managed to combine an artist's sense of form, and even when it grew into twelve big volumes, packed with innumerable notes, *The Golden Bough* moved from the intriguing question of its opening pages to the triumphant solution in its last book with a sureness and grace that resembled rather a musical composition in strict sonata form than a scientific treatise.

Others, like Ridgeway, saw it as primarily the renunciation of the views with which Frazer had been identified. Marett writes in his 1927 Frazer lecture:

Surely, of all the great pioneers of anthropology, Sir James Frazer has been the foremost in proclaiming the purely provisional character of his working principles. Not to speak of that drastic reconstruction of the

theoretical framework which caused the second edition of *The Golden Bough* when it replaced the first to read almost like a different work, I know nothing in the history of science more dramatic, and at the same time more indicative of the true spirit of research, than the *peripeteia* that awaits one in the third edition.

Frazer's *peripeteia* came when he decided that gods were not the embodiment of fertility rites but deified real men. As a consequence he decided to stop taking any theory seriously and to renounce the idea that these phenomena were ultimately explicable, at least by him. Frazer went back to being a literary man. It is interesting to contrast this with Freud's similar experience when he realized that his patients' stories of seduction by their fathers were not experiences but wishful fantasies. Freud remodeled his science as a science of the wishful fantasy, and went on with his work. But Frazer had already changed his mind so many times before. It seemed better to adopt an attitude of playfulness toward all theories.

Precisely what sort of literary form the book has gets as many different replies as the earlier question about what sort of social science it is. Frazer's first insistence is that he is writing an epic of humanity's ascent to rationality and perfection, a Paradise First-Gained rather than Regained. In the preface to the second edition, he speaks of "enabling us to follow the long march, the slow and toilsome ascent, of humanity from savagery to civilization." The assumption of unlimited perfectibility is never dealt with explicitly in *The Golden Bough*, but Frazer faced it later as the central theme of his two essays on the Marquis of Condorcet. In "Condorcet on Human Progress," in 1922, Frazer wrote: "He was among the first, perhaps the very first, to proclaim as a doctrine, and almost as a dogma, the endless perfectibility of human nature." Frazer adds: "He regarded perfectibility as a general law of nature applicable alike to all organic beings, whether animal or vegetable." In "Condorcet on the Progress of the Human Mind," in 1933, this was restated as: "The course which humanity may be expected to follow hereafter in its progress towards that goal of absolute perfection which it will continually approach without ever actually reaching."

What Frazer does face in *The Golden Bough* is man's limitations as a rational animal, that is, the problem he calls "superstition." "Even in Europe many people still believe," is his characteristic introduction to a superstition, and "So indestructible are the crude fancies of our savage forefathers" is his characteristic conclusion. Frazer's tone is generally

mocking and sarcastic, with such comments as "So hard is it for the straining wings of fancy to outstrip the folly of mankind." Here is his typical irony:

It would be superfluous to point out in detail how admirably these measures are calculated to arrest the ravages of disease; but for the sake of those, if there are any, to whom the medicinal effect of crawling through a hole on hands and knees is not at once apparent, I shall merely say that the procedure in question is one of the most powerful specifics which the wit of man has devised for maladies of all sorts.

Frazer finished the third edition of *The Golden Bough* on the eve of the first World War, and some of his disquiet about man as a rational animal apparently came from those gathering tensions. Bishop writes:

Sir James Frazer, writing before the war of 1914-1918, was aware as were few living men of the primitive substructure of modern civilization. But what was frightening in the aftermath of the war was not that the conflict shattering the walls had revealed old and almost forgotten foundations; it was that an advancing civilization should so terribly emulate savagery. It was society in its most modern form that had insisted on returning to that democracy in arms of savage tribes. It was the advance in technics that had made troglodytes of armies. If we were dying, it was not from our vices but from an excess of our virtues. If there was a revolt from reason, it was not against reasoning as an instrument of living, but against the rationalism of the eighteenth century which, after being transformed into the materialism of the nineteenth century, had in our own become dynamism. A faith in progress had become a most unreasonable faith in motion for its own sake. And its works were not good.

Unnerved about his paradise in the present and unsure of it in the future, Frazer violently wrenches it out of time and history entirely, to produce a Platonic idea or ideal of culture. Epic is not history, Frazer had reminded us in *Passages of the Bible*. In this Platonic view, culture-contact does not result in a changing shape for the culture, but in the destruction of the record. In a key metaphor, Frazer writes:

We are like heirs to a fortune which has been handed down for so many ages that the memory of those who built it up is lost, and its possessors

for the time being regard it as having been an original and unalterable possession of their race since the beginning of the world.

The title-deed is almost indecipherable, an evolutionary palimpsest, but the epic Frazer records is the quest for that grail of culture, and we inherit both the fortune and the traditions about it. Like all mythic quests, this involves a timeless essentializing out of history. Frazer's primary evolution of human thought in *The Golden Bough*, "from magic through religion to science," is not a development in history, but a temporalizing of essence. As far back as the reviews of the second edition of *The Golden Bough* in *Folk-Lore* in 1901, F. B. Jevons wrote: "That magic is distinct from religion, I hold with Dr. Frazer. But that magic is prior to religion, Dr. Frazer produces no evidence to show." Forty years later, with Frazer dead, Malinowski found himself repeating the same basic truth:

In all this we find that evolution, as a metamorphosis of one type of belief or activity into an entirely different one, is not acceptable. We have to assume here, as in many other evolutionary problems, the existence of all the fundamental principles of human thought, belief, custom, and organization from the very beginnings of culture. Magic, religion, and science must be examined as active forces in human society, in organized cult and behavior, and in human psychology. In this we follow Frazer when he affirms that the simple truths derived from observation of nature have always been known to man.

Frazer knew realistically, as Malinowski says, that primitive tribes did not evolve from one to the other, but the essence of these modes was that of a graded series, and their Platonic ideas so evolved. Man, not any men, had progressed from magic through religion to science, and *The Golden Bough* is the epic of that idealized ascent as *The Aeneid* is the similar epic idealization of the rise of Rome.

When Frazer actually came to describe the ascent, he sometimes saw the tragic features more sharply than the hopeful. He writes:

We may feel some natural regret at the disappearance of quaint customs and picturesque ceremonies, which have preserved to an age often deemed dull and prosaic something of the flavour and freshness of the olden time, some breath of the springtime of the world; yet our regret will be lessened when we remember that these pretty pageants, these

now innocent diversions, had their origin in ignorance and superstition; that if they are a record of human endeavor, they are also a monument of fruitless ingenuity, of wasted labour, and of blighted hopes and that for all their gay trappings—their flowers, their ribbons, and their music—they partake far more of tragedy than of farce.

In the preface to the last part, *Balder the Beautiful*, Frazer writes of “the long tragedy of human folly and suffering which has unrolled itself before the readers of these volumes, and on which the curtain is now about to fall.” He concludes the preface more hopefully, promising in future books “fresh subjects of laughter and tears drawn from the comedy and the tragedy of man’s endless quest after happiness and truth.” By 1937, when he published *Aftermath: A Supplement to The Golden Bough*, Frazer was back to identifying the whole work as “a dark, a tragic chronicle of human error and folly, of fruitless endeavour, wasted time, and blighted hopes.”

The imaginative design of the work is built around several key metaphors for the ascent to rationality and its dangers. The most dramatic of these is one that runs through Frazer’s earlier writing, the volcano underfoot. In *The Golden Bough* we see its fullest development:

It is not our business here to consider what bearing the permanent existence of such a solid layer of savagery beneath the surface of society, and unaffected by the superficial changes of religion and culture, has upon the future of humanity. The dispassionate observer, whose studies have led him to plumb its depths, can hardly regard it otherwise than as a standing menace to civilization. We seem to move on a thin crust which may at any moment be rent by the subterranean forces slumbering below. From time to time a hollow murmur underground or a sudden spirit of flame into the air tells of what is going on beneath our feet.

By the preface to *Balder the Beautiful*, this metaphor has modified into a vision of man himself deceptively masked. Frazer writes:

The truth seems to be that to this day the peasant remains a pagan and savage at heart; his civilization is merely a thin veneer which the hard knocks of life soon abrade, exposing a solid core of paganism and savagery beneath. The danger created by a bottomless layer of ignorance and superstition under the crust of civilised society. . . .

"He knew, as he often said," Brailford wrote of Frazer in 1941, conscious of Hitler and the war, "that the primitive savage whose thinking he traced in our still surviving superstitions is alive in the dark places of our hearts." Frazer's common image for culture is of a great fabric. He writes of having touched only the fringe, having "fingered only a few of the countless threads that compose the mighty web." In this fabric, if magic is the darkness of ignorance, religion is the crimson stain of blood. In the penultimate paragraph of the book, obviously influenced by Darwin's great tree, Frazer extends the fabric metaphor:

Without dipping so far into the future, we may illustrate the course which thought has hitherto run by likening it to a web woven of three different threads—the black thread of magic, the red thread of religion, and the white thread of science, if under science we may include those simple truths, drawn from observation of nature, of which men in all ages have possessed a store. Could we then survey the web of thought from the beginning, we should probably perceive it to be at first a chequer of black and white, a patchwork of true and false notions, hardly tinged as yet by the red thread of religion. But carry your eye further along the fabric and you will remark that, while the black and white chequer still runs through it, there rests on the middle portion of the web, where religion has entered most deeply into its texture, a dark crimson stain, which shades off insensibly into a lighter tint as the white thread of science is woven more and more into the tissue. To a web thus chequered and stained, thus shot with threads of diverse hues, but gradually changing colour the farther it is unrolled, the state of modern thought, with all its divergent aims and conflicting tendencies, may be compared. Will the great movement which for centuries has been slowly altering the complexion of thought be continued in the near future? or will a reaction set in which may arrest progress and even undo much that has been done? To keep up our parable, what will be the colour of the web which the Fates are now weaving on the humming loom of time? will it be white or red? We cannot tell. A faint glimmering light illumines the backward portion of the web. Clouds and thick darkness hide the other end.

As the last sentences make clear, a Manichaeian conflict between light and dark pervades the book. The dark ages were literally so, "a dark cloud" over "the intellectual horizon of Europe." Before us is a "yawn-

ing chasm," or a prospect seen fitfully "whenever the mist rises and unfolds the far horizon." Frazer writes:

The domain of primitive superstition, in spite of the encroachments of science, is indeed still to a great extent a trackless wilderness, a tangled maze, in the gloomy recesses of which the forlorn explorer may wander for ever without a light and without a clue.

Of the primitive thinker:

In attempting to track his devious thought through the jungle of crass ignorance and blind fear, we must always remember that we are treading enchanted ground, and must beware of taking for solid realities the cloudy shapes that cross our path or hover and gibber at us through the gloom.

At other times Frazer writes of plunging "into the labyrinth of magic." If ignorance, magic and superstition are dark, gloomy, misted over trackless jungle, and tangled maze or labyrinth, so science, truth and rationality are light, clearings or pathways, clues. Sometimes the book combines imagery of a path with that of light. Here it is not very hopeful:

It is unlikely that the student's search-light will ever pierce the mists that hang over these remote ages. All that we can do is to follow the lines of evidence backward as far as they can be traced, till, after growing fainter and fainter, they are lost altogether in the darkness.

Many of Frazer's reservations throughout the book show this dual imagery. He writes:

However, I am fully sensible of the slipperiness and uncertainty of the ground I am treading, and it is with great diffidence that I submit these speculations to the judgment of my readers. The subject of ancient mythology is involved in dense mists which it is not always possible to penetrate and illumine even with the lamp of the Comparative Method.

Sometimes there is no path, but light itself makes a clearing in the jungle, or does not. "Drawing together the scattered rays of light,"

Frazer writes, he proposes "to turn them on the dark figure of the priest of Nemi." Elsewhere he writes:

The circle of human knowledge, illuminated by the pale cold light of reason, is so infinitesimally small, the dark regions of human ignorance which lie beyond that luminous ring are so immeasurably vast, that imagination is fain to step up to the border line and send the warm richly coloured beams of her fairy lantern streaming out into the darkness; and so, peering into the gloom, she is apt to mistake the shadowy reflections of her own figure for real beings moving in the abyss.

Frazer speaks of Demeter and Persephone, "one of the few myths in which the sunshine and clarity of the Greek genius are crossed by the shadow and mystery of death." Great ideas radiate from great minds "like shafts of light from high towers." "In every age," Frazer writes, "cities have been the centres and as it were the lighthouses from which ideas radiate into the surrounding darkness, kindled by the friction of mind with mind in the crowded haunts of men; and it is natural that at these beacons of intellectual light all should partake in some measure of the general illumination." At other times there is no light, and the image is only of a clearing or path. Frazer writes:

To recur to a metaphor which I have already made use of, we of this age are only pioneers hewing lanes and clearings in the forest where others will hereafter sow and reap.

He begins the book's last chapter:

We are at the end of our enquiry, but as often happens in the search after truth, if we have answered one question, we have raised many more; if we have followed one track home, we have had to pass by others that opened off it and led, or seemed to lead, to far other goals than the sacred grove at Nemi. Some of these paths we have followed a little way; others, if fortune should be kind, the writer and the reader may one day pursue together. For the present we have journeyed far enough together, and it is time to part.

In 1936, when he wrote the preface to *Aftermath*, Frazer saw *The Golden Bough* primarily as a clue in the maze. He wrote:

At the best the chronicle may serve as a warning, as a sort of Ariadne's thread, to help the forlorn wayfarer to shun some of the snares and pitfalls into which his fellows have fallen before him in the labyrinth of life.

In Frazer's epic of ascent, two other metaphors seem significant. One is the use of electricity or explosive for the dangerous powers of magic or *mana*. The savage regards his chiefs and kings, Frazer writes, "as charged with a mysterious spiritual force which so to say explodes at contact." Elsewhere: "In short, primitive man believes that what is sacred is dangerous; it is pervaded by a sort of electrical sanctity which communicates a shock to, even if it does not kill, whatever comes in contact with it." More elaborately:

Apparently holiness, magic virtue, taboo, or whatever we may call that mysterious quality which is supposed to pervade sacred or tabooed persons, is conceived by the primitive philosopher as a physical substance or fluid, with which the sacred man is charged just as a Leyden jar is charged with electricity; and exactly as the electricity in the jar can be discharged by contact with a good conductor, so the holiness or magic virtue in the man can be discharged and drained away by contact with the earth, which on this theory serves as an excellent conductor for the magical fluid.

The other metaphor is a military one, and involves no less than a war against Giant Superstition. Frazer writes in the preface to the second edition:

Yet sooner or later it is inevitable that the battery of the comparative method should breach these venerable walls, mantled over with the ivy and mosses and wild flowers of a thousand tender and sacred associations. At present we are only dragging the guns into position: they have hardly yet begun to speak.

In the new preface to *Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild* in 1912, still hopeful, Frazer writes of various things that "combine to draw men into communities, to drill them into regiments, and to set them marching on the road to progress with a concentrated force to which the loose skirmishers of mere anarchy and individualism can never hope to oppose a permanent resistance."

Running all through *The Golden Bough* is a sniping at Christianity, particularly in its Roman Catholic form. If the volcano underfoot is pagan superstition, the bloodstain of religion in the fabric is Christian history, and the darkness and mist, the trackless forest and labyrinth, the dangerous force or besieged enemy, are as apt to be the one as the other. "We must follow truth along," Frazer writes in the preface to the second edition, opposing it to the Cross; "It is our only guiding star: *hoc signo vinces*." Sometimes Frazer makes his point against Christianity by suggestion. In India a human god started in life "as the son of a carpenter." Of an absurd remark by the divine king of Iddah in Nigeria: "But such confusion, or rather obscurity, is almost inseparable from any attempt to define with philosophic precision the profound mystery of incarnation." Of the early Romans, "Thus the doctrine of the divine birth of kings presents no serious difficulty to people who believe that god may be made flesh in a man, and that a virgin may conceive and bear him a son."

Sometimes Frazer points more directly at Christianity. Lumping together temple prostitutes and nuns, "It is thus that the folly of mankind finds vent in opposite extremes alike harmful and deplorable." Frazer writes generally:

In the light of the foregoing evidence, stories of the miraculous birth of gods and heroes from virgin mothers lose much of the glamour that encircled them in days of old, and we view them simply as relics of superstition surviving like fossils to tell us of a bygone age of childlike ignorance and credulity.

Or:

Such tales of virgin mothers are relics of an age of childish ignorance when men had not yet recognized the intercourse of the sexes as the true cause of offspring.

Delighted to learn that the religion of Attis centered in Vatican Hill in Rome, Frazer writes: "From the Vatican as a centre this barbarous system of superstition seems to have spread to other parts of the Roman empire." After describing the unselfish social values of the ancient world, Frazer continues:

All this was changed by the spread of Oriental religions which inculcated the communion of the soul with God and its eternal salvation

as the only objects worth living for, objects in comparison with which the prosperity and even the existence of the state sank into insignificance. The inevitable result of this selfish and immoral doctrine was to withdraw the devotee more and more from the public service, to concentrate his thoughts on his own spiritual emotions, and to breed in him a contempt for the present life which he regarded merely as a probation for a better and an eternal. The saint and the recluse, disdainful of earth and rapt in ecstatic contemplation of heaven, became in popular opinion the highest ideal of humanity, displacing the old ideal of the patriot and hero who, forgetful of self, lives and is ready to die for the good of his country. The earthly city seemed poor and contemptible to men whose eyes beheld the City of God coming in the clouds of heaven. Thus the centre of gravity, so to say, was shifted from the present to a future life, and however much the other world may have gained, there can be little doubt that this one lost heavily by the change.

Citing an example of god-eating by a pariah caste in India, Frazer writes, without mentioning the Eucharist:

In Europe the Catholic Church has resorted to similar means for enabling the pious to enjoy the ineffable privilege of eating the persons of the Infant God and his Mother. For this purpose images of the Madonna are printed on some soluble and harmless substance and sold in sheets like postage stamps. The worshipper buys as many of these sacred emblems as he has occasion for, and affixing one or more of them to his food swallows the bolus.

Some pages later he gets more direct:

Yet a time comes when reasonable men find it hard to understand how any one in his senses can suppose that by eating bread or drinking wine he consumes the body or blood of a deity. 'When we call corn Ceres and wine Bacchus,' says Cicero, 'we use a common figure of speech; but do you imagine that anybody is so insane as to believe that the thing he feeds upon is a god?' In writing thus the Roman philosopher little foresaw that in Rome itself, and in the countries which have derived their creed from her, the belief which he here stigmatises as insane was destined to persist for thousands of years, as a cardinal doctrine of religion, among peoples who pride themselves on their religious enlightenment by comparison with the blind superstitions of pagan antiquity. So little

can even the greatest minds of one generation foresee the devious track which the religious faith of mankind will pursue in after ages.

Bishop paraphrases a statement of Murray's to the effect that *The Golden Bough* "represented the most devastating attack anyone had made on Christianity since William Godwin." Bishop agrees that it does, and does so deliberately. "The author's strategy is conceived with great cunning and carried out with great art," he writes:

For however wide we wander, however deep we delve into the records of the past, we are always coming up against one being, the Vegetable God, who as the decapitated Texcatlipoca or the dismembered Osiris is strange, but who is not strange at all, once our astonished gaze has recognized the likeness, as Jesus.

Christianity is seldom mentioned; there is no need it should be, for Sir James naturally assumes that the main articles of the Christian faith are known to his readers.

Bishop's rejoinder to Murray is that for Bishop's generation *The Golden Bough* has not demolished Christianity, but glamorized it. He writes:

For it is also possible for us, regarding Christianity in the light cast from the sacred tree at Nemi, to find that it has gained as much as it has lost. Since it had already forfeited in our minds any special claims it may once have had as a supernatural revelation, these should be counted an inconsiderable loss. By extending its existence into the dark backward and abysm of time, it has gained, not only the respectability of age, but another authenticity. A religion less than two thousand years old had always troubled us; but now its tradition stretches as far as any imaginable race of man. It is shown as a heritage, not from Judea and Greece only, but from the earth.

If Frazer read Bishop's article in 1936, one wonders what his reaction was. To have written his epic of humanity's ascent to rationality, climbing past the superstition and folly of Christianity, only to discover that he was preaching a more attractive syncretistic Christianity, might well have given him pause.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article on Frazer, as well as the study of Charles Darwin which appeared in *New Mexico Quarterly*, Vol. XXIX, No. 3, are part of Stanley Edgar Hyman's preparation of a book, announced by Atheneum, New York, as *The Tangled Bank: Darwin, Marx, Frazer, and Freud as Imaginative Writers*.