



LODGE VEGAS # 32

Orpheus, or Philosophy

Explained of Natural and Moral Philosophy

INTRODUCTION –

The fable of Orpheus, though trite and common, has never been well interpreted, and seems to hold out a picture of universal philosophy; for to this sense may be easily transferred what is said of his being a wonderful and perfectly, divine person, skilled in all kinds of harmony, subduing and drawing all things after him by sweet and gentle methods and modulations. For the labours of Orpheus exceed the labours of Hercules, both in power and dignity, as the works of knowledge exceed the works of strength.

FABLE –

Orpheus having his beloved wife snatched from him by sudden death, resolved upon descending to the infernal regions, to try if, by the power of his harp, he could reobtain her. And, in effect, he so appeased and soothed the infernal powers by the melody and sweetness of his harp and voice, that they indulged him the liberty of taking her back, on condition that she should follow him behind, and he not turn to look upon her till they came into open day; but he, through the impatience of his care and affection, and thinking himself almost past danger, at length looked behind him, whereby the condition was violated, and she again precipitated to Pluto's regions. From this time Orpheus grew pensive and sad, a hater of the sex, and went into solitude, where, by the same sweetness of his harp and voice, he first drew the wild beasts of all sorts about him; so that, forgetting their natures, they were neither actuated by revenge, cruelty, lust, hunger, or the desire of prey, but stood gazing about him, in a tame and gentle manner, listening attentively to his music. Nay, so great was the power and efficacy of his harmony, that it even caused the trees and stones to remove, and place themselves in a regular manner about him. When he had for a time, and with great admiration, continued to do this, at length the Thracian women, raised by the instigation of Bacchus, first blew a deep and hoarse-sounding horn, in such an outrageous manner, that it quite drowned the music of Orpheus. And thus the power which, as the link of their society, held all things in order,

being dissolved, disturbance reigned anew; each creature returned to its own nature, and pursued and preyed upon its fellow, as before. The rocks and woods also started back to their former places; and even Orpheus himself was at last torn to pieces by these female furies, and his limbs scattered all over the desert. But, in sorrow and revenge for his death, the river Helicon, sacred to the Muses, hid its waters under ground, and rose again in other places.

EXPLANATION –

The fable receives this explanation. The music of Orpheus is of two kinds; one that appeases the infernal powers, and the other that draws together the wild beasts and trees. The former properly relates to natural, and the latter to moral philosophy, or civil society. The reinstatement and restoration of corruptible things is the noblest work of natural philosophy; and, in a less degree, the preservation of bodies in their own state, or a prevention of their dissolution and corruption. And if this be possible, it can certainly be effected no other way than by proper and exquisite attemperations of nature; as it were by the harmony and fine touching of the harp. But as this is a thing of exceeding great difficulty, the end is seldom obtained; and that, probably, for no reason more than a curious and unseasonable impatience and solicitude.

And, therefore, philosophy, being almost unequal to the task, has cause to grow sad, and hence betakes itself to human affair, insinuating into men's minds the love of virtue, equity, and peace, by means of eloquence and persuasion; thus forming men into societies; bringing them under laws and regulations; and making them forget their unbridled passions and affections, so long as they hearken to precepts and submit to discipline. And thus they soon after build themselves habitations, form cities, cultivate lands, plant orchards, gardens, &c. So that they may not improperly be said to remove and call the trees and stones together.

And this regard to civil affairs is justly and regularly placed after diligent trial made for restoring the mortal body; the attempt being frustrated in the end - because the unavoidable necessity of death, thus evidently laid before mankind, animates them to seek a kind of eternity by works of perpetuity, character, and fame.

It is also prudently added, that Orpheus was afterwards averse to women and wedlock, because the indulgence of a married state, and the natural affections which men have for their children, often prevent them from entering upon any grand, noble, or meritorious enterprise for the public good; as thinking it sufficient to obtain immortality by their descendants, without endeavoring at great actions.

And even the works of knowledge, though the most excellent among human things, have their periods; for after kingdoms and commonwealths have flourished for a time, disturbances, seditions, and wars, often arise, in the din thereof: first the laws are silent, and not heard; and then men return to their own depraved natures - whence cultivated lands and cities soon become desolate and waste. And if this disorder continues, learning

and philosophy is infallibly torn to pieces; so that only some scattered fragments thereof can afterwards be found up and down, in a few places, like planks after a shipwreck. And barbarous times succeeding, the river Helicon dips under-ground; that is, letters are buried, till things having undergone their due course of changes, learning rises again, and show its head, though seldom in the same place, but in some other nation.

From The Wisdom of the Ancients

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