

LITERATURE.

THE PROMETHEUS-MYTH IN AESCHYLUS.

III.

IN accordance with the plan sketched in our last number we shall now proceed to exhibit, as briefly as possible, the movement of the Prometheus-trilogy. That, as we saw, is essentially the unfolding of the process by which the Athenian fire-god, worshipped side by side with Hephæstus and Athene in the groves of Academe, is developed out of the rebellious Titan depicted by Hesiod. The wonderful creative vigour manifested in this splendid reconstruction, no less than the force of those formative ideas, religious and moral, around which it grew, will be obvious to anyone who for a moment sets it alongside of the naive story in Hesiod. Aeschylus breathes upon these dry bones; they receive flesh and blood before our eyes, they live and move. The remotest matter—the legend of Io, the fatal wedlock desired by Zeus to his own undoing—originally quite foreign to the myth, is summoned from the ends of the earth by the poet's magic into vital and quickening contact with it. And so by the compulsion of "thoughts that wander through eternity," the rude old-world tale is transfigured into a great drama of the gods, wherein the deepest problems of the universe receive a solution which is not without its interest and meaning to us even at this distance of time.

Prometheus the Titan, son of Themis the goddess, who fore-knows all things (called also Earth and by many another name), warned by the oracles of his mother, takes the side of Zeus against his kinsmen and Cronos, and by his wise counsels contributes much to the final issue of that warfare. The old regime of mere blind force yields to the sway of intelligence and order. Cronos calling upon the Erinyes, the dread powers with jurisdiction over all gods and men which vindicate the sanctity of the family ties, to revenge him on his violent son, is hurled from his time-honoured seats into the abyss of Tartarus. Zeus ascends the throne of heaven in triumph and at once proceeds to organize his empire after a rational plan, distributing among the various gods their functions and their honours. But after order had been consummated in heaven above, amid the billows of Amphitrite, and in the under world, there was one region where Zeus encountered an obstacle not easy to surmount. Every prospect pleased him and only man was vile. The earth was occupied by a blind and helpless creature of the old blind regime, "clogged with pithless feebleness like unto a dream," the one jarring note in the new "harmony of Zeus." "Having eyes they saw not, and ears they heard not, but lived a spectral dream-like life through all their days, con-

fusing all things without a plan. Of brick-built houses facing the sun or craft in wood-work they had no skill, but dwelt like tiny mice in the sunless depths of caves." What was to be done with this puny people whose futile dream-like days usurped the sun-light and disgraced the vital air, this blot upon creation? Zeus resolved to wipe him out and put in his place a new kind of man in consonance with his universe.

But the poor "creatures of a day" find a tough champion, one who though well aware through his seer's gift of all the dire consequences to himself is ready to go all lengths in defending and helping them. The purpose of Zeus is opposed and thwarted by his old ally the Titan Prometheus. Prometheus not only saves man from "going down to Hades thunder-riven" but makes his painful life more tolerable than it had been. In order to do so however he must have recourse to a very forceful expedient. He must steal "Hephæstus' flower, the flashing fire-mother of all arts," which he conveys to his proteges in the hollow of a reed teaching them its many uses with all manner of other dexterities and sciences; the signs of the seasons, skill in every kind of soothsaying, the appliance of the brute's strength to lighten their labours, the virtues of healing herbs, the working of metal, the sailing of ships. Besides he confers on them this "precious boon." He removes that paralysis of their energies which the constant vision of death before their eyes had formerly wrought, by causing "blind hopes to dwell amongst them." This one spiritual touch is the single reminiscence selected and transformed by Aeschylus out of the legend of Pandora.

In thus aiding man however Prometheus has incurred a double guilt. Not only has he resisted the sovereign will of Zeus and implicitly laid claim to a wisdom and goodness greater than the supreme god's; he has also feloniously encroached on the divine privileges and done violence to the natural order of things. The subtle spiritual element of fire purloined by him belongs peculiarly to the heaven of heavens; it is a sacred thing, defiled by being turned to earthly uses. It was a well-known custom in Greece on certain occasions to extinguish the household fires and draw afresh the unpolluted stream from the altar of Apollo at Delphi. Punishment therefore severe in proportion to the offence is inevitable for the transgressor. Hephæstus who, though it is his own rights that have been invaded, hates the task which his office as divine craftsman thus imposes upon him, Might and Main Force the ruthless executioners of Zeus, "the hangman of creation," blindly obedient to his nod, as the thunderbolt to his hands, are commissioned to hale the malefactor to a desolate region in savage Scythia, at the uttermost ends of the earth, far from