

DRINKING FROM THE
WELL OF THE PAST: A
REFLECTION ON THE ROLE
OF HISTORY IN LITERATURE
& PHILOSOPHY FOR THE
MODERN WORLD

Ted Wright on the Function of History

Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless? Bottomless indeed, if -- and perhaps only if -- the past we mean is the past merely of the life of mankind, that riddling essence of which our own normally unsatisfied and quite abnormally wretched existences form a part; whose mystery, of course, includes our own and is the alpha and omega of all our questions, lending burning immediacy to all we say, and significance to all our striving. For the deeper we sound, the further down into the lower world of the past we probe and press, the more do we find that the

earliest foundations of humanity, its history and culture, reveal themselves unfathomable.

For the essence of life is presentness, and only in a mythical sense does its mystery appear in the time-forms of past and future. They are the way, so to speak, in which life reveals itself to the folk . . . For it is, always is, however much we may say it was. Thus speaks the myth which is only the garment of mystery.

- Thomas Mann, "Prologue," *Joseph and His Brothers*¹

Nobel Prize winning author Thomas Mann's epic novel, *Joseph and His Brothers* was originally published in four parts. It was written between 1933-1943. Mann's retelling of the biblical story of Joseph is set in the Amarna period of Egyptian history during the reign of Amenhotep IV (1353-1336 B.C.). In the prologue, Mann reflects on the symbolic meaning, and the mythical significance of history as

¹ Thomas Mann, trans. John E. Woods, *Joseph and His Brothers* (New York, London: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 3. I am greatly indebted to my dear friend, colleague, and historical archaeologist Jack D. Elliott, Jr., who first introduced me to Thomas Mann's great novel, and to the work of Eric Voegelin. I was first introduced to Mann's profound "Prologue" in Jack's penetrating article of the same title, where he applied many of the same ideas to historic preservation in architecture. For more see, Jack D. Elliott, "Drinking from the Well of the Past: Historic Preservation and the Sacred," in *Historic Preservation Forum*, Vol. 8, May/June 1994, pp. 26-35.

young Joseph looks up from the bottom of a well where his jealous brothers had thrown him (Gen. 37:12-36).

This article will briefly explore some of the themes in Mann's thought-provoking "Prologue" while paying particular attention to how history can function (even fictional history) as a symbol in literature. It is not meant to be an exhaustive treatment on the subject. It is only intended to be a brief reflection on some of the truths which can be discovered while pondering the mythical, literary, philosophical, and the theological significance of history.

History as Symbol

The word 'history' itself entered the English language via the Greek writer Herodotus. Writing in the fifth-century B.C., Herodotus sought to discover "what caused the Greeks and non-Greeks to go to war." He sought an his answer to this question through *historia* (ἱστορία) which is often translated as "enquiry" or "investigation."² Ever since Herodotus, the idea of *history* has come to take on

² For more, see, John P.A. Gould, "Herodotus," in Simon Hornblower and Anthony Spawforth, eds, *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 338-39.

multifaceted and complex meanings. The following list is an oversimplified version (for brevity's sake) of how history has been viewed by various thinkers in history.

Theories of History³

- History as investigation-science (Herodotus, the Greeks)
- History as a record of human experience (Eric Voegelin, Thomas Mann)⁴
- History as a record of God's acts (St. Augustine)⁵
- History as a record of human development (J.H. Breasted)⁶

³ For a more extensive and exhaustive treatment see, Ernst Breisach's, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, Modern* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), Keith Windschuttle's, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996).

⁴ See, Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* (University of Missouri Press), originally published between 1951-1957. Voegelin's work also relies heavily on St. Augustine's psychological theory of time as is outlined in the last three books in his *Confessions*, Bks. XI-XIII.

⁵ See, St. Augustine, *The City of God*, Translated by Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1950).

⁶ The Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago was founded in 1919 by American Egyptologist, James Henry Breasted. Breasted envisioned an institute to study the history and development of the earliest human civilizations which predated the Greeks and Romans.

- History as a record of the development mind (Hegel)⁷
- History as a record of class struggle (Marx)⁸
- History as hermeneutics (Hans Georg Gadamer, Michel Foucault)⁹

The German philosopher of history Eric Voegelin considers Mann's novel to be one of the greatest philosophies of history in all of literature -- especially the "Prologue." Voegelin biographer, Eugene Webb, explains that,

Mann's symbol of history as a deep, perhaps bottomless well that we attempt to sound in order to discover the deep sources from which our life rises to us expresses precisely the intimate and paradoxical relation that Voegelin, too,

⁷ M.J. Inwood, Editor, *Hegel Selections* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989), see especially, pp. 331-370, "Philosophy of History: Introduction."

⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002).

⁹ "Hans-Georg Gadamer: Hermeneutical Foundations," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Stanford University, Last modified, September 17, 2018, accessed August, 15, 2021, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gadamer/#HerFou> (see especially Section 3, Philosophical Hermeneutics).

sees between the study of the past and that of the depths of man.¹⁰

Both Mann and Voegelin see history as a vast storehouse of human experience, and human nature -- a rich symbol of our quest for ultimate reality and/or the divine. As Paul Ricoeur has put it, "The philosopher does not speak from nowhere, but from the depths of his Greek memory, from which rises the question, *ti to on?* what is being?"¹¹

Some of Voegelin's core ideas on history as a symbol were influenced by St. Augustine. Writing four centuries earlier in his *Confessions*, Augustine outlined four significations of time: *psychological time*, *physical time*, *moral time*, and *historical time*. What Augustine is wrestling with in his closing chapters of *Confessions* is time's relationship vis a vis eternity. In his psychological view of time, Augustine held that the past, present, and future are always "present with us." We are always (psychologically) "standing" as it were, at the intersection of these points. In Book XI Augustine shows that the future, past and present exist in the

¹⁰ Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1981), 17.

¹¹ Webb, "Eric Voegelin," 18.

soul by psychic acts.¹² Perhaps here, Augustine was drawing on Plato writing much earlier in *The Symposium*, who termed this tension, ‘*metaxy*’, or “between.”¹³ The word ‘*metaxy*’, as Eugene Webb describes [was], “Plato’s symbol of the experience of human existence as ‘between’ lower and upper poles: man and the divine, imperfection and perfection, ignorance and knowledge, and so on.”¹⁴

I offer the following article in hopes of demonstrating that history can be both a rich literary symbol -- a record of human *experience* (via St. Augustine, Mann, and Voegelin), and also a form of *knowledge* which can be gained through investigation-science (via Herodotus), and that these two ideas are not *contrary*, but actually *complementary* to one another. Ultimately, history’s power as a symbol must come from reality itself -- from what *is*, and not from our subjective experience alone.

¹² See St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book XI, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 221-245. See also, John M. Quinn, “Time,” in Allan D. Fitzgerald, General Editor, *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishers, 1999), 832-834.

¹³ See Plato, *The Symposium*, Translated with an Introduction by Christopher Gill (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

¹⁴ Webb, “Eric Voegelin,” 284.

History, Myth & The Transcendent

The main point of Mann's "Prologue" in *Joseph and His Brothers* is to state a simple but profound truth about history: paradoxically, although history is in the *past*, it is also *present*. There is an existential component of history that most secular and materialistic historians do not account for. This is especially true of Enlightenment historians who sought to demythologize and de-sacralize all history of its transcendent or religious elements.

As philosopher Karl Löwith states:

The term 'philosophy of history' was invented by Voltaire, who used it for the first time in the modern sense, as distinct from the theological interpretation of history. In Voltaire's *Essai sur les mœurs et l' esprit des nations* the leading principle was no longer the will of God and divine providence but the will of man and human reason.¹⁵

Having been detached, as it were, from God, a materialistic view of mankind (human nature) has been a dominant theme in historical thought throughout the modern age (circa 1700-present). There have been historians, however, such as

¹⁵ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), 1.

Christopher Dawson and others, who have rebelled against these notions and correctly pointed out that world history indeed reveals that man is by nature *religious* -- in search of the divine, the transcendent, and the numinous.¹⁶ In his Gifford Lectures, originally given at the University of Edinburgh in 1947-1948, Dawson highlights some of the religious and transcendent elements that have driven human history:

In all ages the first creative works of a culture are due to a religious inspiration and dedicated to a religious end. The temples of the gods are the most enduring works of man. Religion stands at the threshold of all the great literatures of the world. Philosophy is its offspring and is a child which constantly returns to its parent. And the same is true of social institutions. Kingship and law are religious institutions and even today they have not entirely divested themselves of their numinous character.¹⁷

¹⁶ A theme also echoed by religious philosophers such as Rudolph Otto in *The Idea of the Holy*, and Mircea Eliade in his incisive, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religious Myth, Symbolism, and Ritual within Life and Culture* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1987).

¹⁷ Christopher Dawson, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1950), 50.

History today has devolved into an arena of partisan politics, social-struggle, and crass tribalism.

In his excellent book, *The Killing of History*, historian Keith Windschuttle writes:

In the 1990's, the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all. They claim we can only see the past through the perspective of our own culture and, hence, what we see in history are our own interests and concerns reflected back at us.¹⁸

Yet for St. Augustine, Mann, Voegelin, the ancient Greeks, and I would also say, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis as well, history reveals its power as a rich symbol, with mythical overtones. Joseph Pierce, commenting on the origin 'stories' in Tolkien and Lewis's most well known fictional works, states:

And so it is that J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis are tellers of truth and masters of myth. The Ainulindalë in *The Silmarillion* is a hymn of praise to the Great Music of

¹⁸ Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 1996), x.

God's Creation, as is Aslan's singing Narnia into Being in *The Magician's Nephew*. In their powerful and poetic evocation of the beauty and harmony at the heart of the cosmos, Tolkien and Lewis are singing in creative harmony with Dante's vision of Paradise and Lorenzo's reverence for the Music of the Spheres in *The Merchant of Venice*."¹⁹

A philosophical study of history can also point to our search for ultimate meaning and significance in God, in the Being whose image we were created. Simply put, if we study history, we can see that human nature only finds its fulfillment and satisfaction in the Divine alone. As Lewis put it, "Human history is the long terrible story of man trying to find something other than God which will make him happy."²⁰

History & The Garment of Mystery

Thomas Mann's novel about Joseph begins with a prologue describing Joseph's descent into a well (or cistern). The well was, and is a real place in time and space, and yet also for Mann, a rich symbol. The

¹⁹ Joseph Pierce, *Beauteous Truth: Faith, Reason, Literature and Culture* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2014), 217.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 49.

biblical story in the Old Testament was set in ancient Shechem, near Jacob's well, incidentally the site of another historical event of profound theological significance -- the encounter of Christ with the Samaritan woman (in John 4).

Joseph's presence in the well in Mann's novel is appropriately titled, *Descent into Hell* (Hades, or the Grave). It is Mann's way of pointing his reader to a spiritual world of great depths, both in terms of history, as well as human nature and psychology. In the prologue, Mann weaves a rich and complex tapestry in which Joseph's story reaches back and plumbs the depths of his ancestor Abraham who came from Mesopotamia. Abraham's ancestral land had its own mythic past reaching back to the beginnings of human history itself in works such as the *Myth of Atrahasis*, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* which explores such themes as mortality, death, and the meaning of life. The site of ancient Ur of the Chaldees where Abraham left to follow God on his epic journey to Canaan (Genesis 12) is one of the world's earliest cities. And, if one traces Joseph's plumb line in the Pentateuch, it reaches back ultimately to God himself (Genesis 1:1), who is himself, the eternal Creator.

In Mann's prologue, he speaks of a "garment of mystery." What exactly does Mann mean by this

phrase? I would suggest that the phrase seems to hint at the idea in which characters on the stage of myth and history are imbued with mythical and philosophical significance. This “garment of mystery” is woven with three main threads: the *past*, *present* and *future*. As Mann states,

For the essence of life is presentness, and only in a mythical sense does its mystery appear in the time-forms of past and future. They are the way, so to speak, in which life reveals itself to the folk . . . For it is, always is, however much we may say It was. Thus speaks the myth which is only the garment of mystery.²¹

The thread of the past is the history of Joseph’s ancestors reaching back ultimately to his creator, God (Gen. 1:1). This thread was *with* and *in* Joseph as he sat in the well looking up to the sunlight above. The thread of the present is the moment Joseph discovers himself thrown down into the well. With his coat of many colors stripped from him by his brothers, Joseph now found himself cloaked in a garment of mystery. One can also think of Mann’s “garment of mystery,” this way: at any given moment of time in the story, Joseph, and the destiny

²¹ Mann, *Joseph and His Brothers*, “Prologue.”

of his entire family-nation stands at a crossroads, or to use Plato's term, *metaxy*, "between," or "middle ground." Joseph knows the past, as well as who he is, and where he came from, but he doesn't know the thread of the future. The three threads of *past*, *present*, and *future* lay draped across his shoulders. As Joseph's story unfolds in actual history (in space and time), and in the story, we see both human nature, and divine Providence dramatically played out on the stage of time. Mann's phrase "garment of mystery" not only holds true for Joseph in Genesis, but also to other great characters in literature, and history as well: David, Jeremiah, Achilles, Hector, Odysseus, Winston Churchill, Frodo, and many others.

Symbolic History in Homer & the Greeks

It is not only in historical novels such as Mann's that history can be seen to take on literary and theological significance, it can also be found in some of the greatest literary works in the ancient world, beginning with the Greeks and Romans. The significance of the past is reflected in the geography of ancient Greco-Roman myth. The Roman poet Ovid describes one of the five rivers of the underworld (or, Hades) which is called *Lethe*, or the river of "forgetfulness," or "oblivion." Hesiod's

Theogony states that Lethe was one of the daughters of Eris or “strife.” In the *Aeneid*, Virgil states that the spirits of the dead were required to drink from the waters of Lethe before they were reincarnated, so that they could forget the past.²²

In Bronze Age Anatolia, near the Dardanelles, an epic war sent reverberations throughout the ancient Mediterranean world, and an obscure Greek poet named Homer sung and eventually recorded the story of a great battle between the Greeks and the Trojans. Most of what we know today about the story of the Trojan War comes primarily from Homer’s *Iliad*. For centuries, Greeks and Romans alike drank deeply from the well of Homer’s song. Like a clear reflection in a pool, they could see themselves, their struggles, and their hopes in the epic he wrote. As Joseph Pierce so eloquently observes:

In a true reading of the timeless myths of antiquity we do not find distance and dissonance between ourselves and our ancestors but resolution and resonance. We can be at home with Homer because Homer is as homely as we are. He experiences the exile of life and desires the community and communion of Home, in

²² Virgil, *The Aeneid*, VI., 703-751.

its physical and metaphysical sense. The relativist [on the other hand] is not at home with Homer because he believes that man's homelessness is not due to exile but to the non-existence of Home. Homer knew better; so did Virgil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Tolkien. They knew the connection between Everyman and the Everlasting Man.²³

Clothed in this “garment of mystery,” actors on the stage of both history and literature take on *symbolic* and *providential* significance. In the actual Trojan War itself, and in Homer's *Iliad*, it is often difficult to distinguish between the myth and reality of the heroes of Greek memory. In his epic five volume *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, one of twentieth-century's most brilliant theologians, Hans Urs von Balthassar, fully explores the idea of the World Stage. For Balthassar, it was the ancient Greeks who first germinated these ideas.

Here it all begins with the world drama on the Trojan strand, where the heroes, representatives of mankind, struggle for victory, before the eyes of Zeus and the entire world of gods. “Zeus never shifted his bright eyes from the scene.” As he looks, he ponders how he is to guide the

²³ Pierce, *Beauteous Truth*, 53.

mortals' destinies. The gods are primarily spectators, of course, but spectators who are very much involved. Many of them take an active part in the battles, all of them, and Zeus most of all, follow men's fates with their hearts in an indefinable mixture of divine superiority and compassionate concern.²⁴

Balthassar was right. It was with the ancient Greeks that we were able to stand outside of ourselves (as it were), and view events, whether historic or mythic, as spectators. In the literary symbol of history, human nature and divine action are played out in vivid detail that is sometimes tragic and at other times comic. The dynamic principle of Mann's "garment of mystery" is a part and parcel of all great stories from Homer to Dostoevsky. Without a deep well of historical memory, stories can only be two-dimensional and devoid of their potential numinous and transcendent character.

²⁴ Hans Urs von Balthassar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory, Vol. 1. Prolegomena* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 135-36.

Tolkien and the Deep Mythic History of Middle Earth

As a profound writer, lexicographer, and mythicist, Tolkien instinctively embodied the numinous significance of history in his epic tale of Frodo and Sam and their quest to destroy the One Ring. Not only did he create complex and beautiful languages, complete with their own grammar and syntax, he also placed them in a deep well of fictional legendarium (a mythic history). Tolkien's *Silmarillion* was published in 1977, many years after the original *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy was released. It was edited and compiled by his son, Christopher Tolkien, who was assisted by Guy Kay. In the forward, Christopher Tolkien explains that,

The Silmarillion relate[s] [to] the events of a far earlier time than those of *The Lord of the Rings* . . . it became long ago a fixed tradition and background to later writings . . . [and] the depository of his profoundest reflections. In his later writing mythology and poetry sank down behind his theological and philosophical speculations.²⁵

²⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, Christopher Tolkien, ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin Publishers, 1977), 7.

The story of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is set in the Third Age which, according to the *Silmarillion*, lasts for 3,021 years. At the very beginning of Tolkien's legendarium there is a cosmology in which Eru Ilúvatar (or "All Father") speaks Eä (the material universe) into existence, like the opening verses of Genesis which state that God spoke the universe into existence. "And God said, let there be light, and there was light . . ." (Genesis 1:3) Also, as in Genesis 1:27, Ilúvatar creates beings after his likeness.

Now the Children of Ilúvatar are Elves and Men, the Firstborn and Followers. And amid all the splendours of the World, its vast halls and spaces, and its wheeling fires, Ilúvatar chose a place for their habitation in the Deeps of Time and in the midst of innumerable stars.²⁶

In his legendary and fictional history of Middle earth, Tolkien not only drew upon his Christian faith, but also from the myths, tales and sagas of Pre-Christian England and Scandinavia. Commenting on the rich Nordic mythology to which Tolkien heavily drew, historian and scholar H.R. Ellis Davidson notes,

²⁶ Tolkien, *The Silmarillion*, 18.

We learn from their literature that they had a keen sense of the dignity of man, and the sanctity of human relationships. The record of early Christian saints and scholars in Anglo-Saxon England -- women as well as men -- bears witness to their quick intelligence and aptitude for mystical thought as well as tough intellectual achievement. The group of 'novels' which we call the Icelandic Sagas shows appreciation for both tragedy and comedy in the lives of ordinary folk, at a time long before Hardy and Ibsen.²⁷

It is difficult to imagine Tolkien's epic trilogy without actual historical, mythical, and linguistic influences distilled into the story. It is the very historic character of Tolkien's story that gives it such depth and richness, but also its numinous and transcendent character. Without mentioning God explicitly in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien nevertheless manages to convey transcendence through the invisible hand of Providence that guides Frodo's quest to destroy the One Ring. To use Mann's phraseology, like the biblical Joseph, Frodo Baggins was cloaked in a "garment of mystery." The entire future of Middle-earth, with all that had taken place

²⁷ H.R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 10.

thousands of years in the past, now rested in Frodo's fateful mission.

From a literary and character development point of view, there are some interesting parallels between biblical Joseph and Frodo Baggins. Joseph and Frodo are both unlikely heroes. Joseph was the youngest of twelve brothers, and Frodo was a young Hobbit from a small village (the Shire). They would both embark on journeys which would eventually determine the fate of nations. The past, present, and future of their respective worlds rested on their shoulders. The success of their mission was uncertain. Joseph found himself cast into a well, sold into slavery, and then eventually in an Egyptian prison. Joseph's father thought he was dead. Frodo was relentlessly pursued by the creature Gollum who sought the One Ring, as well as demonic Ringwraiths who also sought to kill Frodo and get the Ring. He was also stung by a giant spider named Shelob and presumed dead by his companion. Both Joseph and Frodo gained success, guided by an invisible hand of grace and Providence.

With the elements of history, mythical languages, and cosmology (in *The Silmarillion*), Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy are excellent examples of Mann and Voegelin's idea of history as symbol, even though they are literary

in nature. The ultimate question, however, is “what is the relationship between a symbolic, or a mythical understanding of the nature of history, and history as *investigation* about actual events?”

The Bottom of the Well: Grounding History’s Symbolic Meaning

Questions about the nature of history as a rich literary and mythical symbol, versus history as a source of knowledge through investigation (via Herodotus) all converge in the life and work of German archaeologist and businessman Heinrich Schliemann. In the 19th century, Schliemann spent his life and fortune searching for archaeological evidence of the lost city of Troy -- the glorious city which figures large in Homer’s heroic tale of love and war. In 1863, Charles McLaren wrote that,

the “Ilium [of Homer’s *Iliad*] was for a considerable period to the Heathen world, what Jerusalem is now to the Christian, a ‘sacred’ city which attracted pilgrims by the fame of its wars and its woes, and by the shadow of ancient sanctity reposing upon it. Without abusing language, we may say that a voice speaking from this hill, three thousand years ago sent its utterances over the whole ancient world,

as its echoes still reverberate over the modern.²⁸

Whatever happened at ancient Troy impacted the Western mind for centuries, as historian Michael Wood observes.

In western culture, in the languages and memory of what we call the Indo-European races, it is perhaps the most famous of all cities; and all because of one story, the story of the siege and destruction, the death of its heroes, including Hector, at the hand of Agamemnon, Achilles and the Achaian Greeks -- all for the sake of Helen, "the face that launched a thousand ships." The tale is in the bedrock of western culture. From Homer to Virgil, Chaucer and Shakespeare, Berlioz, Yeats and the rest, it has become a metaphor. Trojan horses, Achilles' heels and Odysseys have become figures of speech in many languages.²⁹

The question remains, however -- did the events written down in the *Iliad* actually take place? The modern science of archaeology actually got its start attempting to answer this question. Having been

²⁸ Charles Maclaren, *The Plains of Troy Described*, (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1863), 222.

²⁹ Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (New York: Facts on File, 1985), 15.

given a copy of Homer's *Iliad* as a boy by his father, Schliemann became obsessed to find evidence of Troy's actual existence. In 1868 he traveled to Greece and then eventually Turkey. With his well-worn copy of Homer under his arm, utilizing descriptions found in the epic, Schliemann set out to find the ruins of the "topless towers of Ilium." His quest led him to a number of sites that had been previously suggested by other explorers. Eventually he met an American named Frank Calvert who was serving as U.S. Vice Consul to Turkey. As it turned out, Calvert was also searching for the ruins of Troy and had actually identified the most promising site -- a mound called *Hissarlik* which means, "Palace of Fortresses." Calvert was, in fact, so convinced that the archaeological mound called *Hissarlik* was ancient Troy that he purchased it and the land around it. Calvert was limited on funds, however, and excavating was expensive. So, he partnered with the wealthy Schliemann to begin excavation of the site. Historians of Schliemann's day believed that his quest to find ancient Troy was Quixotic at best. As Archaeologist, Eric Cline notes,

Most classical scholars of nineteenth-century Europe were convinced that the Trojan War had not taken place and that it was completely made up by Homer. Thus,

when Heinrich Schliemann, a complete amateur in the field of archaeology, decided that he would search for the site of Troy, he was going against the thinking of most of the scholars of his day.³⁰

In April of 1870, Schliemann and Calvert began their excavations at *Hissarlik*. In May of 1873, Schliemann's workers uncovered a copper pot which then led to other discoveries that included golden vessels and a hoard of jewelry -- a veritable king's treasure. Later that year, Schliemann announced to the world that he had in fact found Priam's Treasure. In actuality, the stratigraphic level where the artifacts were discovered were far too early to date to the time of the Trojan War. What IS true, however, is that later excavators of Hissarlik *did* discover that there was an actual historical event that took place around 1180 B.C., during the Late Bronze Age which very likely served as the historic basis of the Homeric epic.³¹

In the person of Heinrich Schliemann, myth and history; fact and fiction met head on. Homer's epic tale of brave Hector, mighty Achilles, beautiful

³⁰ Eric Cline, *Three Stones Make a Wall: The Story of Archaeology* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 26-27.

³¹ For more on the modern archaeological search for ancient Troy see, Michael Wood's, *In Search of the Trojan War* (New York: Facts on File, 1985).

Helen and wily Odysseus had an actual basis in reality.

Meaning and Existence: Existence or essence?

The symbolic and literary significance of historical events is not diminished by time as Ernest Curtius stated in a speech given in memory of Schliemann. Curtius said, "It is irrelevant how many centuries may separate us from a bygone age. What matters is the importance of the past to our intellectual and spiritual existence."³²

While this is certainly true, it is equally important that *meaning* (whether it is literary, mythical, or historical) also be grounded in reality -- to *being* (to what *is*). Ultimately, faith and reason must live in harmony with one another, and it is a mistake to ascribe to the great literary tradition of the Western world a rift between the two. As Pierce so astutely observes,

There was [and is] no schism between *fides et ratio* [faith and reason], or between myth and reason, in the eyes of Homer, Aeschylus and Sophocles, or in the eyes of Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates, or for that

³² As quoted in Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (New York, Oxford, Facts on File, 1985), Introduction.

matter, in the eyes of Virgil, Dante, and Shakespeare, or Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastics. The whole legacy of civilized culture down the ages has been a synthesizing of art and philosophy in the service of reality.³³

In the early 20th Century when existentialist writers and thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, Dostoevsky, Heidegger, and others were highlighting the personal *experience* of truth and reality, there was an implicit disconnection from reality itself. Personal, subjective *experience* became the hallmark of truth.³⁴

One of the potential pitfalls in wholeheartedly adopting Mann and Voegelin's conception of history as a [literary] symbol of human nature and search for meaning is that it can become disconnected from reality (from Being itself). Voegelin's very own method is itself loosely tied to Heidegger and is thus *existential* -- emphasizing personal subjective experience. But at what cost? According to French

³³ Pierce, *Beauteous Truth*, 52.

³⁴ For additional information, and a critique of modern, relativistic epistemology see, Mortimer J. Adler's excellent book, *Intellect: Mind Over Matter* (New York: Collier Books, 1990), and Etienne Gilson's, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937).

Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain, the cost is *existence* itself.

In 1948, Maritain published a book titled, *Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism* to address the existentialism of his day versus the existentialism of St. Thomas Aquinas. According to Maritain, there are basically two forms of existentialism: (1) *Authentic*, and (2) *Apocryphal*. According to Maritain,

Let it be said right off that there are two fundamentally different ways of interpreting the word existentialism. One way is to affirm the primacy of existence, but as implying and preserving essences or natures and as manifesting the supreme victory of the intellect and intelligibility. This is what I consider to be authentic existentialism. The other way is to affirm the primacy of existence but as destroying or abolishing essences or natures and as manifesting the supreme defeat of the intellect and of intelligibility. This is what I consider to be apocryphal existentialism, the current kind, which no longer signifies anything at all.³⁵

³⁵ Jacques Maritain, *Existence and the Existent: An Essay on Christian Existentialism* (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1956), 13.

Maritain's distinction is very helpful here. His main concern is that in our search for meaning, our personal, subjective experience should not be the arbitrating factor in our understanding of reality. While it is certainly true that everyone has different experiences, at the basic philosophical level, there are real things and we can know them. Or to use a phrase from Aquinas himself, *Veritas sequitur esse rerum*, "Truth follows upon the existence of things."³⁶

If history is to retain its role as a powerful and rich symbol for exploring the depths of human nature and reality, then reality itself (*esse*) must not get lost in the process. Mann's image of a bottomless well is a beautiful image of the endless philosophical, and theological questions posed by the great works of literature and history. From Joseph's story in Genesis, to Homer's *Iliad*, to historian Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, they are all reminders that history is still "present." It is with us now. Mann is right. It is a deep well which raises the most fundamental questions of human existence and meaning, pointing us ultimately to the divine.

³⁶ Maritain, *Existence and the Existent.*, as quoted by Maritain, pg. 21.

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