FRANCIS MACDONALD CORNFORD

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1874–1943

IN the death of Mr. F. M. Cornford the study of antiquity has lost one of the most powerful minds among its votaries as well as a character of singular distinction. He combined great personal charm and courtesy with a certain aloofness and apparent indifference to worldly values and received opinions. A rather lonely thinker, he pursued a particular path of research which at first was not fully defined even to himself, but from tentative beginnings became gradually clearer and gave a unity to his intellectual life.

Son of the Rev. James Cornford, he was born in 1874, had his education at St. Paul's School, and won a classical scholarship at Trinity College, Cambridge. He became a Fellow of Trinity in 1899 and a member of the staff in 1904. He was appointed the first holder of the new Chair of Ancient Philosophy in 1931. He lived almost uninterruptedly at Cambridge the whole of his life, except for a Course of Lectures at Harvard in 1928 and an inevitable uprooting in 1914, when his friends were somewhat surprised to hear of him as a Serjeant Major and Musketry Instructor at Grantham. They had not known that he was a first-class shot and had distinguished himself at Bisley. Later in the war he was transferred to the Ministry of Munitions. He married in 1909 Frances, the daughter of Sir Francis Darwin, whom he had met as a pupil of Dr. Jane Harrison, and whose poetry had already made an impression on her contemporaries.

The influence of Jane Harrison cannot be overlooked in any account of Cornford's work. It was in her rooms that the present writer first met him, listening intently to the lively discussions, meditative, admiring, and critical, seldom arguing but always—so one felt—taking ideas away with him to think over and re-examine. Jane Harrison was a teacher who combined certain minor defects, due in part to a lack of early training in the drudgery of exact scholarship and in part to a natural impulsiveness, with a width of learning, a force of historical imagination, and an infectious interest in her subject which amounted to genius. Her influence on her younger contemporaries was immense. It would be hard to overrate the effect on the whole study of Greek Religion of the first chapters of her *Prolegomena* with their analysis of the three

great Attic Festivals. They showed once for all how the base of any sound study of Greek religion must no longer be the fictional and largely artificial figures of the Olympian gods, but the actual rites in which the religion expressed itself and, so far as we can divine them, the implications of those rites.

Perhaps the secret of Miss Harrison's influence over the young was in part the generosity of sympathy with which she discussed and criticized and helped forward their immature suggestions; in part, I think, it was that, like the keenest of the young themselves, she seemed always to be seeking for the key to the universe, or, if that is too much to say, for some deep-hidden and thrilling reality underneath the thick surface of conventions and unanalysed phrases. She was in pursuit of what the Greeks, or their primitive ancestors, really thought; and seemed at times to have a subconscious hope that, by finding that, one might make some approach to discovering what was really true.

In Cornford's work this seed ripened into critical maturity. His first book, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (1907), was still groping towards a method. Historians were somewhat indignant with it. Some of its historical arguments, they said, could be definitely disproved; while most of the problems it raised seemed to them irrelevant. The philosophers were more favourable, and one well-established Oxford scholar is reported to have said: 'Much of the book is wrong, but I have learnt more from it than from any book I have read for years.' The essential problem of the book was to see how a highly scientific and logical mind, like that of Thucydides, expressed itself in a language which did not yet possess a scientific or logical vocabulary. The result is sometimes confusion—as between αἰτία and πρόφασις—sometimes a sort of mythological language, as in the personification of Ἔρως and Ἐλπίς. In particular it made for the first time the important observation that Thucydides, Herodotus, the tragedians, and indeed all fifth-century writers, tend to see life in what has been called 'the tragic pattern', much as modern writers see it in terms of evolution. Life to them is a story of Growth, Hubris, Downfall; it is so with the day, with the year, with all plants and beasts and the human body; though often the first stage is taken for granted and attention concentrated on Pride and its Punishment. The conception that all things that live and grow must in the due course of time 'make atonement for their injustice' by perishing was not peculiar to Anaximander but was part of a common

atmosphere of thought. The book may be accused of over-emphasizing its argument and demanding of Thucydides a rigidity of scientific method which even modern philosophers, after centuries of scientific training, could hardly maintain. But the idea was a fruitful one, and the singular beauty of the writing made the book memorable.

In 1912 came *From Religion to Philosophy*, a book which formulated and to a great extent succeeded in answering the main problem on which Cornford was to spend his life. 'The origin of philosophy', he writes, 'cannot be understood without a study of the representations which philosophy inherits from religion,' and which, as he shows, religion itself mostly inherited from the social order of the primitive tribe. Such ideas as Moira, Nomos, Phusis, Nemesis, are here analysed. Originating in the social group as a system of Moirai, each with its Nomoi—group functions which must be performed and territories which must not be overstepped—these ideas are transferred to the system of nature as a whole. The Ionian or 'scientific' tradition in one way, the 'mystical' tradition in another, are both still haunted by these ideas, the former working with the four elements, with genesis by a union of opposites, and the spatial idea of Μοῖρα, the latter with Δίκη and Time and unity. In later studies Cornford demurred to the description of the Ionian schools as 'scientific'. As the late Professor Alexander puts it, 'It is the vaguer, simpler, and more comprehensive problems which excite men's mind first, when special knowledge is more limited'. Anaximander and Anaximenes and even Thales made comparatively little use of experiment or detailed observation; they plunged straight into the question of what the world is, what it is made of, and how it works, and their answers are all expressed in terms derivable from these primitive religious traditions.

All human thought is conditioned by inherited concepts and beliefs and methods of thinking. The impact of new facts, new discoveries, and of conscious experiment and reflection, makes changes on the surface, but the vast mass of unconscious and therefore uncriticized assumptions lies beneath, undisturbed and profoundly influential. We see, so to speak, the peaks of the iceberg which gleam in the sun but cannot see the great mass which lies under water.

If we ask what exactly was new in this treatment of ancient problems we may say it was largely a question of emphasis. Cornford owed much, for example, to Glotz and Durkheim. Every competent scholar admits the importance of the historical

imagination, especially in pure 'semantics'. It has been well said: '*Pater* does not mean the same thing as *father* or *père*. It means something that no longer exists in the world.' The same point can be put less paradoxically: '*Pater* is the Latin for *father*, but a Roman father had all sorts of relations to his society which a modern father has not.' Historians were ready to explain that Greek δημοκρατία was not the same thing as modern democracy. But it was among the weaknesses of traditional scholarship that it too often forgot to use the historical imagination continuously and effectively. Historians would duly note the documentary evidence showing the difference between ancient Athenian democracy and that of modern Europe, but would often not realize that almost every sentence in a classical Greek writer, after it has been what we call 'correctly translated', needs further interpretation if we want to know what it really means. Cornford was always searching for the real meaning as distinct from the defensible construe.

Jane Harrison had been vividly conscious of this obstacle to our understanding of ancient thought and speech. She would sometimes exclaim that 'semantics' were all that mattered, and that what was called 'sound scholarship' in itself, unilluminated by imagination, 'got you nowhere'. It was a dangerous doctrine, easily capable of being misunderstood and leading to remarks about glass houses. But she did with patient research and great imaginative insight pursue the 'real meaning' of names, phrases, and rites which the average archaeologist was content to leave unanalysed. She may sometimes have been insufficiently critical in her use of anthropological analogies; but critics like Malinowski have remarked on the soundness of her anthropological understanding, and anyone who is disposed to doubt the value of such analogies would do well to compare the elaborate discussion of mysteries and initiations in Lobeck's *Aglaophamus* with the treatment of the same subject in *Themis*. *Themis* had the main key to the problem and could give an answer in accordance with it; Lobeck's magnificent learning and scrupulous treatment of masses of apparent evidence could reach no answer, simply because he lacked the key. Something similar may be said of Miss Harrison's analysis of the *Kouros* and of what she called 'the *Eniautos Daimon*', denoting common elements which recur in countless different worships associated with various particular gods. It must be admitted, no doubt, that she had the vices of her qualities. She was so eager to penetrate beneath the surface that she almost grew to

dislike the surface itself and to love what lay below—and the deeper below the better. The radiant Olympian became a mere obstacle to be swept away; if treated as a thing of value in himself his radiance became in her eyes too like the self-satisfaction of a person far too easily pleased with himself. The primitive helpless *Urdummheit*, full of craving and terror, and a sense of its utter dependence on the placation of Powers infinitely formidable and beyond its comprehension, roused her to a sort of protective sympathy. She at times seemed to feel that in them she had reached a bed-rock; she had found at last something 'real'.

Cornford with his 'sound scholarship' and his calm philosophic insight took from this teaching just what he wanted and threw aside what he did not want. He obtained a constant and vivid awareness of the world of assumptions and ways of thought which lies under the surface of ancient philosophy and poetry, and indeed of ancient language itself; but he used that awareness of the undercurrents as an instrument for the fuller understanding of upper streams. To understand Heraclitus or Anaximander, to understand even Plato and Aristotle, it was necessary to realize the atmosphere of thought and feeling in which they lived, and the habits of thought which they had accepted by inheritance and without criticism from primitive ages. The search for the undercurrents fascinated him, particularly no doubt in the Pre-Socratics, who were unintelligible without it. Almost every sentence quoted from them, every opinion attributed to them by the Doxographi, is a riddle. This is recognized in the case of Heraclitus, but it is true of the others as well. And the best key to the riddle is a patient imaginative attempt at understanding the mental atmosphere which they breathed. To attain this a student must constantly remind himself, not merely that words like Μοῖρα, Ὕβρις, Ἐρινύς, have no exact English equivalent, but also that ἥλιος does not mean 'sun', or γῆ 'earth', or θεός 'god', as we use those words. To understand this perfectly is no doubt a goal beyond our reach. One is not surprised that Cornford after a lecture on the Pre-Socratics was heard to murmur: 'I find these people *inexhaustibly* interesting'. And again: 'How different everything must have been when one really believed the stars were animals!' Here too was an abiding principle of Miss Harrison's: 'No subject is ever worked out.'

Similar methods applied to a different subject led to his remarkable book on *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914), in which

he traced—to my mind convincingly—various fixed elements in Comedy to the fertility ritual of Dionysus as vegetation spirit or Year God. It is perhaps unsuitable for me to comment on the main theory of this book as it is in part a confirmation or development of a suggestion of my own about the ritual sequence, corresponding exactly to the wheat-ritual of Osiris, which is found in one type of tragedy; but in re-reading certain chapters which seemed *bahnbrechend* in 1914, one feels almost surprised that it should have been necessary to argue at length that the Drama performed by the Διονύσου τεχνῖται at the Dionysia in the Theatron of Dionysus should have had as its base the actual 'doings and sufferings' of that god. The subject is certainly not yet 'worked out', but traces of the fertility ritual in its different forms can with little doubt be found in Tragedy, Old Comedy, and New Comedy. Cornford carried his analysis further into a study of the stock masks or traditional characters of Comedy, a matter which also would repay further research. He followed up this study many years later in a lecture on Comedy to the Workers' Educational Association, comparing the Aristotelian concept of κάθαρσις with the Freudian 'release', and supporting the view that Aristotle's theory, which, owing to the fragmentary state of the *Poetics*, we associate always with Tragedy may have been first formed to explain Comedy, which it suits so much more simply.

In 1927 occurred an incident which to Cornford was a source of great interest and considerable labour, and perhaps had an effect upon the form of his later writings. The venerable Dr. Philip Wicksteed had been working for some years at a translation, with introduction and commentary, of Aristotle's *Physics*, but was overtaken by paralysis and symptoms of approaching death. His mind, which was still quite lucid, was stored with material for finishing the book, but he could no longer write and no one in his circle of friends had anything like adequate knowledge of his abstruse subject of study to be able to help him. Wicksteed had a vivid conception of what he wanted to do with the *Physics*. He saw that Aristotle was operating with concepts of place, space, movement, and the like, quite different from ours, and he believed that modern physics, on the philosophic side, might learn something from those concepts, much as modern mathematics are said to have learnt new ideas from Plato. He was determined to translate the *Physics* very boldly, trying to express the 'real meaning' of the Greek in whatever

phrases seemed to represent it most clearly in untechnical English. This is, of course, an extraordinarily difficult task. If the word κίνησις has a meaning wider than 'motion' but not so wide as 'change', Wicksteed translates it 'motion or progress from this to that'. There is awkwardness here, and perhaps Ross is wiser in saying simply: 'As the lesser of two evils I have adopted the translation 'motion' or 'movement'... this rendering should be recognised as being to some extent conventional.' This implies a definite demand on the Greekless reader to make an effort of the imagination; and probably without that effort it is impossible to understand the *Physics* at all. Wicksteed's own Greek scholarship was at times open to criticism, but his great knowledge of medieval philosophy often enabled him to see points which many a finer scholar would have missed. It was a hard blow to him when it seemed that his work was to be fruitless. It will be seen at once how similar this approach to ancient thought was to that which Cornford himself was following, and when he heard what Wicksteed needed, he, with an unselfishness extraordinary even for him, put his own work aside and offered his services. The dying man greeted him with the words, 'This is the greatest kindness I have ever received in my life.' Day by day, sometimes for nearly an hour at a time, Wicksteed would dictate very slowly but almost without any hesitation large parts of the introduction while Cornford 'wrote as fast as the pencil would travel'. It was a strange collaboration. 'I have the impression', wrote Cornford, 'that his mind has become independent of his body, untouched by the physical discomforts, and able to draw upon some spiritual force at will.'

The revision of another man's manuscript is always apt to be a heavier job than it appears at first sight. Much work was necessary and it was not till 1929 that the first volume of the *Physics* was published in the Loeb collection and the second not till 1934. In one way it diverted Cornford from his principal interests; in another perhaps it gave him some useful practice in the method followed in his later Platonic work. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*, containing 'a translation of the *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* with a running commentary', was published in 1935 and was followed by similar treatments of the *Timaeus* in 1937, and the *Parmenides* in 1939.

Of these three remarkable books one may notice, first, the vehicle of their publication. They all appeared in the International Library of Psychology. They were meant to appeal in

the first place not to the classical scholar interested in Plato's language, but to the psychological student who wanted to understand Plato's thought. The thought rather than the language was his main concern, though doubtless that concern could only be satisfied by specially careful linguistic study. Secondly, the translation, like Wicksteed's translation of the *Physics*, was definitely meant to serve this purpose. Compared with the usual translations Cornford and Wicksteed were both guided by the same ideal, though Cornford's own beauty of style and exact scholarship, together perhaps with a due sense of the difference between Plato's writing and Aristotle's, had their natural effect. Again, the 'current commentary', taking each stage of the argument as it came and carefully discussing and analysing its meaning, was also the method of Wicksteed's *Physics*.

Lastly, it has been well observed about these books that they show the progress '*From Religion to Philosophy*' in Cornford's own mind; that is to say, having long and deeply studied the inevitable presuppositions inherited by the Greek philosophers from the primitive past, he now focused his interest on the philosophy itself. For this purpose he studied certain other presuppositions; in particular the contemporary science and mathematics which formed, as it were, the frame of the philosophers' conception of the world. If Plato required ten years of strict mathematical study as a preliminary to philosophy proper, and laid down for the Academy the rule μηδεὶς ἀγεωμέτρητος εἰσίτω, it seems reasonable to suppose that in order to understand Platonic philosophy at the present day one should not merely understand mathematics but more particularly should understand the mathematics that Plato taught. Cornford spent a long time in a very serious study of ancient Greek mathematics from the elusive fragments of the early Pythagoreans down to the fully accessible but misleading commentaries of Proclus, and made at least a vigorous attempt to master the general *Weltanschauung* of ancient science. Thus equipped he could expound the *Parmenides* and the *Timaeus* as serious and intelligible contributions to the dialectic of ancient thought. He was justly intolerant of critics of the *Parmenides* who thought the more mathematical parts of Plato could be left out as insignificant, and still more of those who treated arguments which by a modern standard seem captious or merely fantastic as intentional parodies, and thus 'charge the prince of philosophers with the most wearisome joke in all literature'. In his interpretation of the *Timaeus* he observed equally his principle of interpreting the mind of

his author by reference to the background of contemporary conceptions out of which his personal contributions to thought developed, with no importation of ideas which had, and could only have had, their birth in the environment of a later age. He considered that Taylor, for example, was mistaken in fathering on Plato certain Christian notions of the relation of God to man and the universe.

There can be little doubt as to the great value of these three 'running commentaries' to the elucidation of ancient thought. But they were difficult reading, and it is interesting to note how the same method, applied in a bolder and freer way, in the *Republic* produced what might almost be called a popular success. Owing to its subject, no doubt, the *Republic* has a much wider appeal than these other dialogues. The book had also been repeatedly translated before—there were four quite recent translations into English—which gave the new translator a certain sense of freedom. He was not bound to be as meticulously precise as he would be in interpreting a strange or little-known document. He could, for instance, translate the famous γενναῖον ψεῦδος as 'a bold flight of invention' with less compunction when he knew that the literal, though terribly misleading, translation, 'a noble lie', was current in the ordinary texts.

The *Republic*, 'translated with introduction and notes' (1941), though not his greatest intellectual achievement, represents the most mellow and mature fruit of his characteristic method of work. Never content with the superficial, he analysed, dug deep, used daringly his powers of language and historical imagination, in order to make the thought of his ancient author clear and intelligible to an ordinary educated reader, and in the *Republic* he achieved this aim most completely. The subject itself, the fine style of the original, and Cornford's own strong interest in the same problems as they recur in modern society, all contributed to this success.

His Platonic writings involved him in two controversies with a bearing on modern affairs. He protested strongly against a view of Greek philosophy which has been from time to time fashionable, which regards the Ionians from Thales to Democritus as really scientific thinkers, and consequently as generally 'advanced' or 'democratic' teachers, as contrasted with Plato, the superstitious oligarchic reactionary. In a paper read to the Hellenic and Roman Societies in 1942 he showed how much tradition and how little experiment there was in the great

Ionians. In an address to the Classical Association about the same time he vigorously defended Plato against the charges of such writers as Crossman. He was equally strong against the attempt made recently by a few clever scholars to discover the key to all ancient thought and history in 'economic determinism' and 'dialectic materialism'.

An idea which made a deep impression on his mind in his last years was derived from Mrs. Chadwick's lectures on *Poetry and Prophecy*. In the great history of the origins of literature projected by Professor Chadwick and his wife one important division was literature in, so to speak, its pre-natal stage, in societies which had no alphabet or art of writing. In that stage, they argue, strange as it may appear, there have been great achievements of intellect as well as of artistic beauty, and the poet, prophet, sage, *Shamán*, ἢ ὅτι δή ποτε χαίρει ὀνομαζόμενος, is everywhere a known and respected figure. His method is more inspirational than scientific, but it is by no means mere fraud nor yet nervous morbidity. Cornford felt the great importance of the Chadwicks' results for the understanding of early Greek 'wisdom' and, though we cannot suppose him to have attached much objective value to the visions and journeys of the ancient or modern *Shamáns*, he strongly insists on the importance of inspirational philosophy:

> Books on psychology have mostly been written by philosophers and men of science whose habits of thought are uncongenial to that poetic imagination (as we call it) which can 'see into the life of things' and lose the sense of separate existence in a communion of feeling with the whole of Nature. . . . It is not wise, or even genuinely scientific, to brush aside as idle fancy or outworn superstition the experience of the greatest poets because it is beyond the reach of the ordinary man and cannot be translated into terms of what he would call an 'explanation'.

This passage is taken from a book left unfinished at Cornford's death, a history of the development of Greek thought with special reference to the presence in Plato of both streams of intellectual effort.

Though almost all his teaching life was passed in Cambridge, his wide democratic sympathies were shown by his long connexion with the Working Men's College. It is calculated that for forty summers he never missed guiding the W.M.C. Summer Excursion round Cambridge. Moreover, some of his most interesting and characteristic lectures were given to the W.E.A. or similar bodies. One thinks especially of the sketch, *Before and After Socrates*, which by its combination of attractive style

and lucid structure provides a model of exposition for the non-specialist. This had its origin in four extension lectures at a summer school. One may class with it the paper on Comedy mentioned above, and another arguing that the ideas of space and time which seem to most of us simply obvious data of common sense are really a tradition from the theories of Greek philosophers; without those theories he thought it possible that the common man's ideas of space might just as easily have been almost 'Einsteinian' as Euclidean.

The serene and gentle charm of his nature in later life made even his oldest friends sometimes forget the lively reformer, at once idealist and satirist, of his early years at Cambridge. His *Microcosmographia Academica* (1908) is one of the few university satires that have outlived their occasion and even their generation. Less widely known was his brilliant account of the foundation of the Ministry of Munitions in the style of the first chapter of Genesis, with the contrary views of Jahvist and Elohist strongly marked in accordance with a burning controversy of the time. There are stories also of the Latin Valentines sent to his colleagues on appropriate occasions.

He never lost interest in University politics, but he soon ceased to take an active part in them. He felt more at home in the θεωρητικὸς βίος, in study and teaching, and in solitary reflection. It was sometimes remarked that he seldom 'talked things over' with his colleagues. He did not, as was a common practice at Trinity, hand round his compositions for their criticism. He did not care to put out his theories for preliminary discussion with friends. Some of those who knew him as a boy are disposed to attribute this solitariness, which seemed at times almost moroseness, to the prolonged overwork and strain of his later school years. But one must remember that an artist always hates to show his works to the world 'before they are ready'; and in Cornford the artist and poet was always lying in wait behind the savant.

The values by which his life was guided were, I should say, to a singular degree those of the artist and the philosopher. Music meant a very great deal to him. He even started learning to play the viola when he was fifty and the children were small, partly in the hope, so he said, of having in course of time a full family orchestra. Poetry meant even more, especially perhaps the poetry of the seventeenth century. He once described how his first discovery of Milton opened a new world to him. And no doubt the search for philosophic understand-

ing was the main occupation of his life. Yet he had practical gifts as well. In his own quiet circle one could feel the essential beauty of his character, the gentleness, the unselfishness, the utter remoteness from all that is worldly or violent. His wife's long illness brought out his infinite practical helpfulness and patience. His relations with a series of brilliant children, whose opinions were at times vehemently opposed to his own, and whom he encouraged 'to sail away like ships' in pursuit of their own ideals, were a model to those parents who believe in the supreme power of affection and the value of freedom.

GILBERT MURRAY