

The Messenger Lectures  
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**REVIVAL AND METAMORPHOSES OF THE GODS  
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE**

by

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**LECTURE I**

**THE PASSING OF THE GODS**

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*Two versions of the lecture "The Passing of the Gods" survive. That delivered as the first of the Messenger Lectures is preserved only on tape. It opens: "This first lecture is an introduction, a simple introduction to an intricate and perhaps disconcerting subject which calls for clarification." Seznec instead preserved a different (handwritten) version, one with overlapping content going under the same title. Whether this was an earlier or later lecture is uncertain, but presumably it is the version that would have served as the basis of the intended publication. This preferred version is here transcribed.*

In 1802 a book appeared in Paris: *Le Génie du Christianisme*, by Chateaubriand. In 1842, another book appeared: *Le Génie des Religions*, by Edgar Quinet. The variant in [the difference of titles] is significant: it reflects the [situation that developed in the interval] change of attitude towards religion which had taken place in the interval.

*Le Génie du Christianisme* was a work of apologetics – a defence of Christianity, which the XVIIIth century *philosophes* had denounced as a nest of superstition, kept up by impostors and fanatics. The work could not have appeared at a more propitious moment: 1892 is the year when Bonaparte restored Catholicism in France as the official religion. Forty years later, Quinet rehabilitated *all* religions as equally worthy of respect: They are moments in the conscience of mankind. As early as 1833, Quinet, in a sort of prose epic, *Ahasvérus*, had presented the

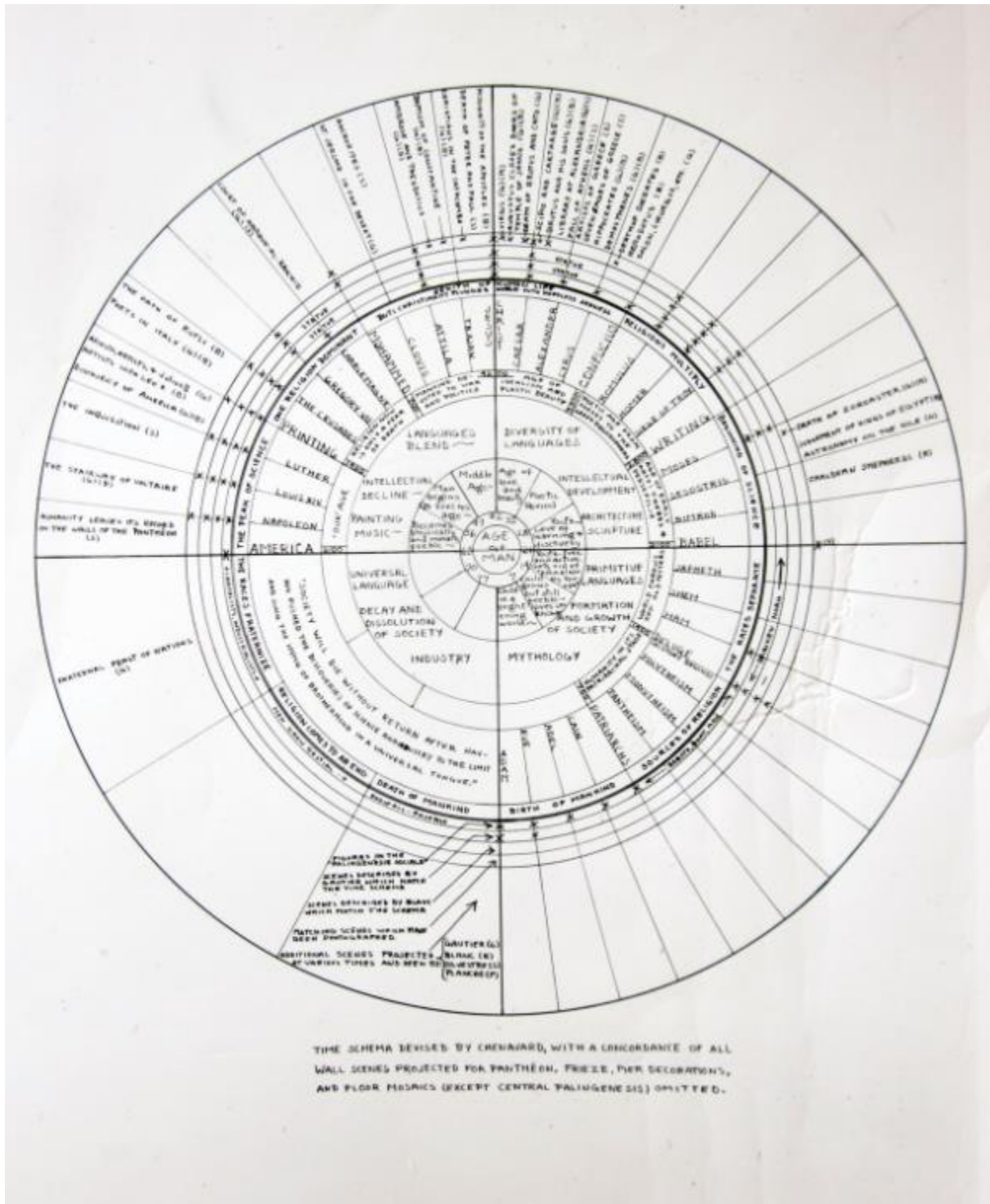
Wandering Jew of the legend as a symbol of humanity in search of a faith. He meets with the gods of all times and of all countries – only to see them decay and disappear in turn – for being linked, of necessity, with transient phases of civilization, they grow and vanish with them. The gods pass away. Quinet's own attitude in *Le Génie des Religions* is therefore one of reverence, and compassion. "In this pilgrimage through the cults of the past," he writes, "I do not propose – as a man imbued with the superiority of the modern age – to deride the misery of the forsaken gods. On the contrary, I shall ask the empty sanctuaries whether they still retain an echo of the Word of Life; I shall seek, among the divine dust, for some remnant of the Truth."

A few years later, Flaubert, in his *Tentation de Saint Antoine*, will conjure up a procession of the ancient gods lamenting their decline – which prompts the good hermit, as he watches them go by, to ponder: "And yet, there was a time when they were worshipped – all of them."

Quinet, however, as a historian, perceived the fundamental unity of religious traditions. He affirmed their central importance in the evolving of all forms of civilization – including social and political institutions, and he concluded: Religion alone provides the key to history.

This view was about to be expressed in art on a monumental scale. In April 1848, on the morrow of another French Revolution, and on the advent of the Second Republic, it was decided that the Pantheon – originally built as a church in the XVIIIth century, then dedicated by the first Revolution, as a shrine, to the great men of the nation (*Aux grands hommes la Patrie reconnaissante*) – should now display, in a series of murals, the progress of mankind looking, through the centuries, for a new order.

- The painter commissioned for this ambitious decoration was, appropriately, a friend and compatriot of Quinet, Paul Chenavard. As a summary of this "philosophy of history", Chenavard was to place, under the dome of the new Pantheon, \*a sort of panoramic view of the human adventure since the beginning of time, under the title: *Social Palingenesis* – a title borrowed from Ballanche. The scheme was a circular one. In the centre were recorded the ages of man, on the periphery the ages of mankind. It illustrated their development, physical and intellectual: the growth of the child, the invention of languages and their diffusion; the beginnings of arts, sciences, and industry; the formation of societies. The divisions of the circle were to correspond with the scenes to be represented on the walls of the edifice, where a huge procession would be seen to move round, consisting of initiators – lawgivers and rulers, poets and military commanders, explorers, philosophers, and religious leaders – for the scheme included religions, their birth, multiplication and decline, as religions, too, are [an] integral part of history – indeed, its most important element, since they are but the history of the human spirit in quest of the divine Truth. The quest is permanent, but the revelation is gradual, ever-increasing: "l'histoire est la révélation toujours croissante de l'Eternel". This accounts for the succession of theogonies: while the religious ideal is everlasting, religious forms are temporary. They can be described as shelters, or camping sites, along the road of the human caravan, or again as fossils, which have retained the stamp of old creeds, once alive – for, precisely because human creeds are transient, the gods have to die.



Schema devised by Chenavard for Panthéon (Jean Seznec Archive, Taylor Institution Library, source unknown)

• Another composition by Chenavard was exhibited at the Salon of 1869, as ambitious as the *Social Palingenesis*, and, for the public, equally obscure: *The Divine Tragedy*. The official

catalogue of the Exhibition had to explain the subject: "Towards the end of the ancient religions, and at the advent of the Christian Trinity, Death strikes the gods who must perish." They are all there – not only the classical ones, but the northern and the oriental ones as well. Maya, the Indian, weeps over the bodies of Jupiter – Ammon and Isis-Cybele. All are caught in the general disaster, including Christ Himself: He too expires, his arms stretched in the form of a cross, on the body of the Father, whose head is veiled by a cloud. Quite naturally, His presence came as a shock and a scandal to the public. In the words of the Catalogue, it was precisely His advent which had brought about the demise of the pagan gods. They had died, according to Milton's famous poem, "On the morning of Christ's nativity." From that morning, the oracles went dumb, and the temples were deserted. At this point, however, it is worth remembering that Quinet himself, in his *Ahasverus*, had placed Christ among the dying gods: he described him in his final agony, lamenting over His decadence, wondering what had happened to his home in Nazareth, to the gifts which the Magi had brought Him in His cradle; even his protecting angels had folded their wings, and His aureole had gone out.

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In the XIXth century, the great theme of the Passing of the Gods was to assume further dimension. The capital progress achieved, through the century, in the field of religious studies, was to generate a widening of perspectives, as well as to confirm the change of attitude already discernible in Quinet. The progress is summed up by Renan in an article published in 1853 on *Les Religions de l'Antiquité*, in which he registers "the works and theories that have renovated, since the beginning of this century, the knowledge and understanding of religions. The XVIIIth century looked at them as a mass of superstitions and puerilities. They have now become, in the new and more complete philosophy of history, the most interesting documents on the past of mankind. The study of religions, once it is established on a sound critical basis, will constitute the most beautiful chapter in the history of the human mind." Flaubert agreed: "The glory of our times will be to have inaugurated those studies." As for Baudelaire, he expressed the view that "religions are the most interesting things in the world."

Renan pays a special tribute to the Germans, "so close (much closer than the French) to the intuitions of the primitive ages", and "so rich in erudite contributions, which they had been piling up while the French were still sticking to the superficial criticism of the XVIIIth century." He quotes, among many German scholars who has studied the origin and evolution of religious thought, the founder of comparative mythology, Max Müller, who was also the editor of *The Sacred Books of the East* and who, in the light of the religions of India, suggested the fundamental identity of myths.

Renan's wish was that these treasures of erudition should be made available to France. The wish was partially fulfilled when Guigniaut published, from 1825 to 1851, a translation in ten volumes of Friedrich Creuzer's monumental *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker in Vorträgen und Entwürfen*. The French title was: *Religions de l'Antiquité, considérées principalement dans leurs formes symboliques et mythologiques, ouvrage traduit et refondu par J. D. Guigniaut*. It was, in fact, more than a translation. Guigniaut, as Renan observed, had

incorporated in it the results of parallel, and posterior, studies. He had decided to use the text of the *Symbolik* as the frame of a large synthesis, embracing all the more recent mythological studies produced in Germany – to make it, in short, a “Summa mythologica.”

Creuzer’s symbolic system of interpretation fitted with the reverent attitude of that French generation towards religious creeds which we have met in Quinet. It is no coincidence that Quinet should have visited Creuzer personally, and should have pictured him, in 1860, as a character in his novel, *Merlin l’Enchanteur* under the name of the wise Taliesin.

This formidable piece of scholarship found its way – rather unexpectedly – in French literature. It appears in Balzac’s *Louis Lambert*, and again in his *Illusions perdues*. One of the characters in that novel, Lousteau, discovers it in a bookshop in Paris; true, the volume is uncut, and the bookseller explains that it makes so hard reading that he is willing to let the customer have it free. Flaubert mentions it in an emotional context, in a letter dated April 1848. His close friend, Alfred Le Poittevin, has just died, while watching the corpse, on two successive nights, he reads Creuzer. “Alfred est mort à minuit. Je l’ai gardé pendant deux nuits. En le gardant, je lisais *Les Religions de l’Antiquité* de Creuzer. La fenêtre était ouverte, la nuit était superbe. On entendait les chants du coq, et un papillon de nuit voltigeait autour du flambeau. Jamais je n’oublierai tout cela.” He did not forget: Creuzer will become, on the following year, a capital source for his *Tentation de Saint Antoine*.

The truth is that Creuzer’s work had appeared, as we have seen, at an opportune moment. Taine was to compare this period of French history – the Napoleonic period and afterwards – to the last centuries of the Roman empire. The all-pervading sense of moral confusion following the turmoil and the catastrophes of the time generated seers and hierophants, whose prototype is Ballanche, new forms of Gnosticism and mysticism – in short, an atmosphere of religious ferment which again was favourable to the reexamination of ancient creeds and old fables, now thought to conceal profound teachings under symbolic forms.

[Here there is a break in the text, a new start on a new page, but continuous page numbering.]

You claim, Sainte-Beuve wrote in 1824, that this century is an ungodly one; it is not. It is, alas, rather a sickly one. Having just escaped from servitude, it keeps sighing – and hoping, craving for other skies and unknown prospects, towards which it proceeds, slowly, piously, like a son guided by his father.

Le siècle est, dites-vous, impie. Il ne l’est pas;  
Il est malade, hélas! Il soupire, il espère;  
Il sort de servitude, implorant d’autres cieux;  
Vers les lieux inconnus que lui marqua son Père,  
Il s’avance à pas lents et comme un fils pieux ...

Where will this new generation find its way to the future? In the distant past, in the oldest traditions – for this is where the ultimate meaning of history is to be looked for – under the veil of myths: they retrace the march of mankind and therefore they can teach to the present century its way and its ultimate destination.

Indeed the Romantic period has been compared, in that respect, to the last phase of the Roman empire: As Taine observed, never since the second century A.D. had the buzzing of metaphysical dreams been as strong, and as continuous. In such a climate, the progress of erudition, the discoveries and the scholarly works concerning the history of religions had their full impact.