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REVIVAL AND METAMORPHOSES OF THE GODS IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE

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LECTURE V

OLYMPUS PARODIED AND THE JEWELLED GODS

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In the years between 1850 and 1860, there was a controversy, or rather a series of controversies, about mythological subjects in art. The critics of the *Salons* kept asking the general question: "are heroic or religious themes still acceptable?" "Is a return to these themes really possible, and desirable? Castagnary wondered at the Salon of 1857, is humanity finished with these two sources of inspiration? If there is to be a religious or mythological art of the future, it should present new motifs, full of intimate and penetrating poetry.

That Salon of 1857 was in fact considered as the cradle of the so-called humanitarian art "le berceau de l'art humanitaire." From now on, humanity should be the only symbol, the only religion. No complex symbolism of pagan or Christian art, no more understandable to the Chinese than their dragons and fantastic monsters are for the western man. Pagan and catholic allegories are impenetrable to foreigners, and equally indifferent to the modern spirit of the people which they serve.

Courbet, writing in 1866, was even more explicit. He spoke of course as the founder of realism – now realistic art was essentially – in Courbet's own words – a protest, a reaction against paganism. Greek and Roman art, the Renaissance, Catholicism, the gods and the demi-gods. There is no room, in short, in human and social art, for any deity.

Littérateurs who still took their inspiration from mythology were also under attack. The most virulent one was launched by Baudelaire himself as early as 1851 against what he called *the pagan school* – that is, the Parnasse. Maxime du Camp in his *Chants modernes* (1855) urged

the poets to renounce mythological inspiration once and for all, to get rid of the gods: “Délivrez-nous enfin de la mythologie!”

Baudelaire again complained that he was a personal victim of mythology: “Gods are raining down on my head, he said, as chimney pots.” At the time when Egyptomania was the fashion, he had already expressed his irritation with the Egyptian gods. He claimed to have met on the boulevard, a man carrying under his arm a load of hieroglyphic books, and bearing an ecstatic smile on his face. “My dear fellow, the man said, I have just dug up some exciting information about the marriage of Isis and Osiris.”

It is therefore with a revengeful pleasure that Baudelaire welcomed Daumier’s famous set of caricatures: *Histoire ancienne*.

This is, he wrote, the best paraphrase of the famous line: Qui nous délivrera des Grecs et des Romains? Daumier has pounced upon antiquity, and spat on it, and the impetuous Achilles, the prudent Ulysses, the wise Penelope and that great booby of Telemachus, and Helen who brought about the ruin of Troy, all of them appeared at last as what they are – a bunch of old hams….

It was (Baudelaire goes on) an amusing satire – and a useful one too. I remember, however, that a friend of mine, a poet of the pagan school, was indignant. He called Daumier’s caricatures sacrilegious; he talked about Helen, *la belle Hélène*, as other people talked about the Virgin Mary; but those of use who do not feel such reverence toward the Olympus were, of course, delighted.

The truth is that Daumier’s satire was aimed not so much at mythology itself as at the academic treatment of classical subjects, and particularly at the traditions of the Ecole des Beaux Arts, where these subjects were *de rigueur,* ever since David.

I give you a few examples.

● This is *Oedipus and the Sphinx*, as pictured by Ingres, and ● this is the same subject, in Daumier’s interpretation. To make it worse, Daumier added a caption. You remember that the Sphinx proposes an enigma to Oedipus, a riddle which he must solve – otherwise he will be devoured, like his unfortunate predecessors.

The question is: Why can’t you lean against the Pyramids? Oedipus finds the answer: because they are *Near Cairo* – “Near Cairo” in French is *près Caire*, which sounds of course like *precarious*, a pretty bad pun, as you see.

● Here now is Pygmalion, the sculptor. He had fashioned the statue of a woman. He fell in love with it, and the statue came alive. The first thing she does, in Daumier’s picture, is to take a pinch of snuff.

● You recognize *Endymion*, visited by the moon in his sleep [oral: in this picture [by Girodet].

● Daumier’s *Endymion* needs no comment.

● Here is Chiron, the centaur who was the preceptor of Achilles; this is how he teaches his pupil to read.

● Finally, these two characters are Menelaus, the victorious general in the Trojan war – followed by his wife, who was no other than Helen, *la belle Hélène* herself. She is thumbing her nose at her husband, behind his back. The gesture is eloquent; it augurs the fate of Menelaus when the handsome Paris will appear on the scene.

This leads us straight to the most famous parody of all, Offenbach's operetta [*La Belle Hélène*], performed in 1865, with enormous success.

Not a unanimous success, however. There were still, at that date, some lingering lovers of classical antiquity, some worshippers of the gods, who again spoke of blasphemy. Théophile Gautier, for one, was shocked by this irreverence.

What those critics seem to have forgotten is that the ancients, the ancients themselves, made fun of their gods, and of their heroes. There were even precedents of *La Belle Hélène* in antiquity, as you will hear presently.

Lucian, who was born around 120 A.D., dedicated one of his comic, [orally: hilariously funny], *Dialogues of the gods* to the *Judgment of Paris*.

Zeus summons his messenger, Hermes, and the three goddesses, Hera, Athena and Aphrodite (or if you prefer, Juno, Minerva and Venus).

[*Seznec then read aloud from Lucian's* Dialogue*, offering spontaneous asides, using the translation in the Loeb Classical Library. The story begins with Zeus' charge, continues with the goddesses' bribes, and ends with Paris' decision in favour of Aphrodite.*]

> ZEUS: Hermes, take this apple, and go with it to Phrygia; on the Gargaran peak of Ida you will find Priam's son, the herdsman. Give him this message: 'Paris, because you are handsome, and wise in the things of love, Zeus commands you to judge between the Goddesses, and say which is the most beautiful. And the prize shall be this apple.'
>
> …
>
> APHRODITE: I promise that you shall have Helen to wife; that she shall follow you, and make Troy her home; and I will be present with you, and help you in all.
>
> PARIS: And bring Love, and Desire, and the Graces?
>
> APHRODITE: Assuredly; and Passion and Hymen as well.
>
> PARIS: Take the apple; it is yours.

Now listen to the same episode in the operetta.

Paris himself is giving the story of the judgment. He describes the contest, and tells how he was bribed by the three contestants. He keeps repeating (this is the *refrain*): You must admit that these goddesses have strange ways of coaxing the boys ("Évohé, que ces déesses, / pour enjôler les garçons, / évohé, que ces déesses, ont de drôles de façons!").

And now for Offenbach. [***Musical extract follows***.]

You will agree, I hope, that the spirit of Offenbach is pretty close to that of Lucian.

* * *

Now for *the jewelled gods*.

I should perhaps begin by explaining where I found this expression.

I found it in Degas. Degas and Gustave Moreau disliked each other's works and style. Moreau could not stand Degas' favourite subject: ballet dancers. M. Degas, he said one day, do you pretend to renovate art through dancing? What about you? Degas replies. Do you pretend to renovate it through jewelry? ("M. Degas vous avez donc la prétention de restaurer l'art par la danse?" "Et vous, M. Moreau, prétendez-vous le rénover par la bijouterie?")

That man, Degas commented, would have us believe that the gods used to wear watch chains. ("Cet homme là veut nous faire croire que les dieux portaient des chaînes de montre.")

● This is a magnificent piece of Moreau's jewelry: *Jupiter and Semele*.

Jupiter's association with Semele aroused the jealousy of his wife, Juno. Juno, perfidious goddess as she was, persuaded Semele to test the divinity of her lover by bidding him to come to her in his true shape, that is, with all his divine attributes and in his true splendour, complete with thunderbolts, etc.

Semele then persuaded Jupiter to give whatever she would ask, and he was thus tricked into granting a request which he knew would result in her death. He appeared, and his thunderbolts killed her. But the baby whom she was expecting at the time survived and became immortal: it was Bacchus.

The story gave Moreau an opportunity to display flashing, glittering effects – he took full advantage of it. The gigantic Jupiter is literally encrusted with jewels. Accretions of decorative detail, like frozen pastry, adhere to every surface.

● Here is another dazzling rendering of another mythological episode, which truly called for it: Phaeton. Phaeton was the son of Helios, the sun-god. Learning who his father was, he set out to the East to find him, and arriving at his palace he asked him for a boon. The sun granted him in advance anything he liked (one of these dangerous promises again).

Phaeton then asked for permission to guide the solar chariot for a day. Unfortunately, he was too weak to manage the immortal horses, which bolted with him and were about to set the world afire. Zeus (or Jupiter) had then to interrupt – and he killed Phaeton with one of this thunderbolts.

In this picture, we have most interesting comment by another painter, Odilon Redon.

Moreau's *Phaeton* is a truly great work.

As I look at it, I cannot fail to remember Delacroix' magnificent sketch: such is its dazzling boldness and the newness of the vision.

It is a picture of Chaos, but who has ever imagined Chaos in that way? I don't know; but nowhere has the plastic expression of the fable reached such a truthful accent. There is, in the brilliancy of these clouds, in the audacious divergence of the lines, in the harsh and pungent quality of the colours, a grandeur, a pathetic power that produces, so to speak, a new astonishment.

You may look among the numberless illustration of his fable for some one who has interpreted it in this way. I dare you to find under the cold vaults of the academic temple, a mind capable of rejuvenating antiquity in this manner, with such freedom and vehemence.

Moreau, from the start of his career, has kept dealing with the legends of pagan antiquity and presenting them under a new light. Why? Because his vision is modern, essentially, and profoundly modern.

On this picture, we also have Moreau's own commentary on the way it was conceived:

> "I composed this scene of Phaeton and I felt, in creating it, that it stirred in me old memories of a certain poetic description. It is 35 years since I read that passage in Ovid which, *without my realizing it*, had so flavoured and kindled my imagination that I could reproduce it almost verbatim after so long an interval, but yet in a quite different way than if I had worked on the inspiration of the moment. This would be a great lesson to those who think it enough to read a scene at the moment when you wish to represent it in order to render it well. The very reverse is true. I can only paint well because all the seeds have sprouted in my brain, so that I am like a man who is simply making up an imaginative fable; and I do so for purposes of my own, which spring from the transfigured memories of my readings and meditations."

The Centaur has found the corpse of the poet who used to charm his heart, and to curb his passions. In a pious gesture, he carries him to a sacred place he has just reached on a deserted summit.

The thin body of Orpheus seems to be asleep on the shoulder of the Centaur, who bends his head sadly. He is well aware of the value of his divine burden. His instinctive, savage nature has been tamed, attuned by the songs of the poet who is no ore, but who had introduced him to a new life, a harmonious life, ordered by a new pace, and a new rhythm.

At the tomb of Eurydice

"The great voice is silent, the lyra vibrates no longer. Nature is in mourning, hushed, except for a withered tree, whose dead branches are wailing.

The soul is alone. It has lost everything that was strong and beautiful and sweet. It is weeping over itself, in its inconsolable loneliness.

All is quiet in the moonlight. No sound – only the faint dripping of dew – a hardly perceptible sign of life in this deadly silence"

Moreau's solemn description of his own work is, as you can see, a sort of poem, suggesting the feeling which pervades the whole scene. But that feeling is conveyed through pictorial means.

It is ultimately from colour that a picture receives its power of suggestion and evocation, as it appeals to the most intimate part of the spectator's soul.

I should like to end by showing you another Moreau picture – which, however, is all white. *Leda and the Swan*. In order to appreciate its originality it would be a good idea, I think, to show you first a few examples of the treatment of a theme which attracted many poets – from Ovid and Ronsard to Yeats – and major artists

among them Michelangelo, whose monumental *Leda*, inspired by an antique relief, looks strongly like his *Night* in the Medici chapel.

Here now is Leonardo's graceful Leda: she has already laid her eggs – three of them. One contains the twins, Castor and Pollux; the second, Clytemnestra; the third – Helena, the future Belle Hélène

A delightfully playful Leda is that of Correggio. She does not know what the bird is after.

There is an XVIIIth century Leda, a visibly French one: Boucher's Leda.

Now comes Moreau. The mood is very different, as you can see: grave and solemn. It is a truly sacred marriage, *hierogamos*, between a mortal woman and a god.

Moreau's own commentary emphasizes this hieratic character.

The swan king, his head laid against that of the chosen woman, in his sovereign attitude incarnates in her his whiteness and divinity.

Attentive, living out her dreams, she remains motionless in its divine spell. Hers is the august slumber that goes before a transfiguration. She is all grace in her very power and strength – a white camellia beneath the white lily.

Two spirits carry the diadem and the thunderbolt, living caryatids presenting Leda with the emblems of power. Farther off, its hands outstretched and open in token of possession, victorious love soars away from the conquest of the world. The intermediate divinities fauns, satyrs, dryads, hamadryads, nymphs of the woods and the waters, come to commune at this altar of whiteness and toward the horizon, kneeling in an attitude of worship, the great Pan takes part, sanctifying with all nature this apotheosis of eternal beauty.

What happened?

Moreau, by a process of syncretism, assimilated the erotic theme to the annunciation. The angels bringing a crown [cross?]:

The arabesque of the swan's neck, surrounded with a halo of light above the head of Leda, taking the place of the dove.

This is the queerest metamorphosis of all: Leda has been turned into a Virgin Mary. The swan has been turned into the Holy Spirit.