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

by

JEAN SEZNEC

The Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature, Emeritus
University of Oxford

LECTURE II

AFTER STRANGE GODS

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Literature – and art – were invaded in the XIXth century, by an exotic mythology. Before examining where this invasion came from, and through what channels, we must ask ourselves: what happened to the traditional mythology, the classical one?

One would think that the Romantics had done with it, precisely because it was one of the most conventional features of that classicism which they were eager to destroy. Chateaubriand in his *Génie du Christianisme*, had already condemned this horde of ridiculous greco-roman gods, whose omnipresence in art and literature has the effect of narrowing nature, leaving no room for the immensity of god. Young Hugo starts with echoing Chateaubriand – he too complains that mythology is a *un interprète diminuant de la creation*.

Yet it is the same Hugo who, many years later, in a text entitled: *Promontorium somnii*, the name of a mountain on the moon, pronounced an eloquent and even moving defense of classical mythology.

He admits that for three centuries this mythology has been a sort of mania. The Renaissance infected Europe with the pagan craze – thereby generating a taste for the *galant* and the pastoral, a fictitiously arcadian civilization. He cites Ronsard, Rubens, La Fontaine, the court of Elizabeth and that of Louis XIV, both transformed into a Parnassus, or an Olympus – with the king himself disguised as a sun-god. This taste, spreading through education, made mythology all too familiar: it became banal, and tiresome.

But this was only the surface. There is another dimension to it, and a deeper meaning.

The trouble is, Hugo explained, that peoples, amused as they used to be by the fiction, the fable, did not pay attention to the myth: they still did not take pagan symbolism seriously – the did not perceive the inner sense beyond the appearance.

Here Hugo speaks almost like Vico, who considered myth as the primitive and poetic conception of the divine, and emphasized its place – the place of imagination – in religious consciousness. Mount Olympus is a truly sacred mount. A light radiates from its summit, a light that falls on man, animal and tree, that illuminates nature, and life, and destiny.

In short, Hugo concludes, whoever studies polytheism in depth experiences a feeling of discovery. Mythology is no longer a conventional rhetoric; it regains its freshness and its vitality: *ces dieux si connus, si usés, semblent autres.*

This is well said. But let us see how Hugo himself, in his own poems, tried to bring the gods back to life. An unfortunate attempt, as he succeeded only in distorting, or perverting their symbolic meaning for his own purposes. This was in the late fifties. Hugo was in exile, and Napoleon III on the throne of France.

Let us open the *Légende des Siècles*. Two full sections of that great epic are dedicated to mythology. One, called *Renaissance-Paganisme*, contains a poem entitled: *Le Satyre*. The other section, called *Entre géants et dieux*, contains *Le Titan*. In both sections, in both poems, the meaning of Mount Olympus has changed again: it is now the citadel of autocracy. The Titan and the Satyre are two demagogues who thunder forth, interminably, against tyrants, kings and – of course – emperors.

In the meantime, mythology had indeed been renovated by contemporary scholarly studies, not by political pamphlets – and we must now go back to the early years of the century. During this period, a new science has been born: comparative religion, - and the results of these studies had been reaching the general public – which, at the same time, had been offered another revelation: the figures of the Greek gods in their genuine beauty: the British Museum had acquired the Elgin marbles, and the Venus of Milo had entered the Louvre. But this was also the time when *other* gods had appeared, and no longer from the classical lands. Some had been coming from the North; others, from the East.

First, the northern gods.

You remember Mme. de Staël's famous pronouncement, in her book *De la littérature*, which appeared in 1800:

“There are two distinct literatures: the one that comes up from the South, the one that comes down from the North. The former has Homer as its first source; the latter, Ossian.”

The Greeks, the Latins, the Italians, the Spaniards, the French of the XVIIth century, all belong to Southern literature; the English works, the German, the Swedish, the Danish ones must be classified under northern literature – the literature which started with the Scottish bards, the Icelandic fables, and the Scandinavian poems.

“The Germans and the English literature did borrow, at times, [Mme. de Staël admits], from Classical sources; but their original beauties all bear the unmistakable imprint of northern

mythology: a poetic grandeur, and melancholy for which Ossian provided the prototype. Northern imagination delights in the murmur of the sea, in the sound of winds blowing over wild heath, but its aspiration lies beyond the limits of the land (hence the melancholy which is its keynote) it takes flight through the clouds that border its horizon.”

The *clouds* – the difference between the two literature rests, ultimately, on a difference of climate – between the luminous Midi, and the nebulous North.

Now Ossian’s works (or rather the fragments of ancient poems which had been given as such by McPherson in the 1760’s) were translated into several European languages, including French – the official interpreter of the Bard in France was Baron Lormion. As a result, Ossian became a major influence on French Romanticism – and not on literature only, but on art as well.

David himself, at first, recommended ossianesque subjects – far from opposing Ossian to Homer, he declared that their works were equally suitable – as they were both primitive; their works spring from pure sources – David said, therefore, it is there that we shall find an inspiration capable to regenerate our souls , and to put our talent to noble use. “C’est dans Homère et dans Ossian dans les scènes et les peintures des peuples primitifs, que nous trouverons de quoi régénérer notre âme et notre esprit, et donner un noble emploi à nos talents.”

- Among the most famous illustrations of Ossian we find Gros who painted *Malvina bewailing the death of Oscar*,

- Ingres, who painted the *Dream of Ossian*, which was originally destined to decorate Napoleon’s room in the Quirinale in Rome – the picture is properly misty, as required in any ossianesque picture. In fact another painter who had dealt with an ossianesque subject was reproached for having neglected that official ingredient: the fog – for “les brouillards sont une condition essentielle de tout paysage ossianique.”

- But the more memorable productions in that genre were due to Gérard, and Girodet.

Bonaparte, a devotee of Ossian long before he became Napoleon, had asked the architect Fontaine to decorate the Malmaison. Fontaine commissioned Gérard and Girodet to paint, each for the great drawing room of the chateau, “le salon de réception”, a *picture taken from Scandinavian mythology*.

Gérard painted Ossian conjuring up the ghosts.

- Girodet went one better: he painted the French heroes, or rather their shadows, paying a visit, *in the clouds*, to the shadows of Ossian and his warriors: *Les ombres des héros français vinrent visiter, dans leurs nuages, les ombres d’Ossian et de ses guerriers*.

Bonaparte was pleased: you had a great idea, he said to Fontaine. The critics praised the artists for having dared to embellish history by their new mythology. David, however, was not pleased with Girodet’s picture, not because of the subject, but because of the execution.

What is the matter with Girodet? he exclaimed. Is he going crazy? His figures seem to be made of crystal glass!

The public itself, after a while, got tired of ossianesque pictures, too monotonous and colourless.

- Before leaving Girodet, I should like to point out that one of the female deities [the one on the left there] helping Ossian to welcome the French generals was to lend her graceful shape to a lady in one of Balzac's novels.

A constant practice of Balzac when presenting a new character is – in order to suggest its physical appearance – to borrow features from a work of art – painting, sculpture: he would compare, for instance, Gobseck, the implacable usurer, to one of the roman senators in Lethière's picture: *Brutus condemning his son to death*; or again he would compare Josepha, the singer, to Judith, as painted by Allori: she looked exactly like Allori's Judith – even her hairdo and her dressing gown were the same.

Now another lady, Mlle. de Longueville, was, according to Balzac, the perfect image of one of Girodet's deities.

- Another Girodet, incidentally, *The Sleeping Endymion visited by the Moon*, served as a model for yet another Balzacian character, Lucien de Rubenpré, the hero of *Les Illusions perdues*, a handsome, too handsome, young man whose association with the convict Vautrin led to a tragic end.

Endymion is a Greek figure this time, but the mood, the spirit in which Girodet dealt with it – not coldly classical, but suave and dreamy – goes a long way to illustrate Baudelaire's remark: You can make romantics even from the Greeks, and from the Romans, provided you are a romantic yourself.

- Among the so-called Nordic countries, Germany deserves a special mention. *Mythologie germanique* is the title of a book published later in the century, in 1842. The author was Saintine, whose real name was Boniface; what is more interesting is that the illustrator was Gustave Doré.

The first plate shows Old Father Rhine mounting guard on the border of Germany to prevent the country from being invaded by the Roman gods, those frivolous and suspicious characters, that set of rococo mischievers. The only classical gods to be admitted through the frontier are the Titans, because their name is close to the Teutons. The Rhine itself is of course a river-god, but instead of pouring water from an urn, as do the classical river gods, he is of course pouring beer. He is also smoking a pipe, as a good German.

Mythologie germanique, then, was obviously a satire – but in fact, Germany made a serious contribution to the reinterpretation and renewal of mythology. As Douglas Bush observes in his great study on *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition*, mythology of all kinds gained there a new depth and inwardness. For the German philosophes, as for Quinet (who was indeed very much under their influence) mythology was not only a primitive, but a permanently fruitful phase in the religious evolution of mankind; and this passionate conviction had behind it all the momentum of the Storm and Stress.

Furthermore, German scholars, archaeologists and philologists played a capital part in the founding of that new science, *comparative mythology*. They recorded and analyzed the great discoveries which, as I told you yesterday, had taken place mostly since the turn of the century and which had opened new perspectives to the European mind, and widened their horizon – in particular, the revelation and deciphering of the sacred books of the East. They were, in that way, largely responsible for what Quinet called: *la Renaissance orientale*.

In France, too, people were becoming aware of the importance of the East in the history of civilization – and, as a result, in the light of these discoveries, the role of greco-roman culture in that history now appeared of only relative importance.

This idea was expressed – significantly – by an art critic, Thoré, in his review of the Salon of 1844: The Greek and Roman periods, Thoré observed, do not possess in the history of the world the exaggerated and almost exclusive importance which people have attributed to them. The greco-roman world is a splendid flower which blossomed on one *eccentric* branch of the human tradition.

The tree of civilization has its roots further to the East, in *Egypt* and *India*; and it seems indeed that the branches of the modern world stem more directly from them.

Egypt – India. These are now becoming two new poles of attraction – for *littérateurs*, as well as for artists.

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Of Egypt I shall speak at some length, when we come to discuss the Resurrection of Isis. I will only remind you that after Bonaparte's conquest a monumental book was printed under the title: *Description de l'Égypte*. The first volume appeared in 1809. Bonaparte by then had become Napoleon. It went into twenty-four volumes, with magnificent plates in colour. ● Here is the frontispiece [*Seznec describes it.*] ● Here is one of the plates, which presents the special interest of having been described by Flaubert, and copied by young Degas. It is a painted relief from a palace. The victorious Pharaoh is watching the mutilation of the prisoners. The scribes, scrupulous accountants, as ever, record the number of the pitiful trophies, neatly arranged in heaps: three thousand genitals, three thousand hands: the Pharaoh congratulates his army, and above all himself – an inscription translated by Champollion in the most glowing terms.

● Now Flaubert saw the original of this relief when he went to Egypt in 1849 with his friend Du Camp – who had been commissioned by the French government to take photographs of monuments – almost the first photographs ever taken in Egypt. Flaubert of course was particularly enchanted, as he had been engaged in writing his *Temptation of St. Anthony* which is set in the Thebaid. This is Flaubert, photographed by Du Camp in Cairo, in front of the house where the two friends had their lodgings. He is disguised as a Nubian, with a long robe and a sort of turban. I look very oriental, he said proudly: “j’ai une boule très orientale.”

● Later on, he went on the Nile as far as Nubia, and Abu-Simbel. This little character seated on the head of one of the giant statues of the temple may be, again, Flaubert. The statues were at the time half buried in the sand; as you know, in recent years they have been saved from destruction, and restored to their primitive splendour.

Flaubert never went to India, although he never ceased to dream about it [*Seznec digresses*]; but the Indian gods, as well as the Egyptian ones, appear in his *Tentation [de Saint Antoine]*. They are the first in the mournful procession which passes in front of the good hermit. Where did Flaubert get his documentation? This figure, from a German book, Creuzer's *Symbolik*, translated by Guigniaut under the title: *Les Religions de l'antiquité considérées dans leur formes symboliques et mythologiques*: ten volumes published between 1825 and 1851, plus one volume of plates. The work – an illustrated repertory of all the ancient gods – is a mine of accurate information. • This is where Flaubert found the goddess Ganga, • the gigantic tortoise with elephants on its back, the huge serpent biting its own tail... All he had to do was to transform in his description the rather dull lines of these engravings into frescoes of strange beauty. This is for instance what he makes of the picture of Vichnu. • [I read out Flaubert's text in English.]

“In the middle of a sea of milk floats a long cradle formed by the coils of a serpent, all whose heads, bending forward at the same time, overshadow a god who lies there, asleep. He is young, beardless, more beautiful than a girl, and covered with diaphanous veils. The pearls of his tiara shine softly, like moons; a chapelet of stars winds itself many times around his breast – and with one hand under his head and the other arm extended, he reposes with a dreamy, ecstatic air. – A woman squatted before his feet awaits his awakening... Under the navel of the god a stalk of lotus has grown – and in its calyx another god appears, with three faces.”

Flaubert was not content with this graphic source. He read, pen in hand and taking notes, the book of specialists such as Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du buddhisme indien*, and above all the Indian texts themselves, the Pouranas, the Rig Veda, the Baghavad Gita which had appeared since 1842, in French, in Pouthier's collection: *Les Livres sacrés de l'Orient*. He read also a Sanskrit drama, Kalidasa's *Reconnaissance de Sakountala* in Chézy's translation.

Nor was Creuzer the only illustrated handbook of mythology he could have consulted; other repertories of this type had been drawn up, by other scholars, for the convenience of writers, and artists, for instance, Millin's *Galerie mythologique, Recueil de monuments pour servir à l'étude de l'antiquité figurée et du langage allégorique des anciens*. More and more, as it seems, artists and writers were feeling the need to control their imagination, to ground it on genuine sources, on authentic documents. This is obvious in the case of Flaubert; but, as he himself observed, it was the general tendency of the new generation: *nous devenons historiens, archéologues, savants*. Poets themselves must become scholars. So said the head of the Parnassian school, Leconte de Lisle, in whose *Poèmes barbares*, published after his *Poèmes antiques*, the strangest deities are given a place of honour.

• A striking example can be found in *La Paix des dieux* – another variation on the theme of the Passing of the Gods. One of these dying gods is an Egyptian one, Ammon-Râ. This is how he is pictured: in funeral wrappings, his eyes closed by the eternal sleep, seated stiffly between the four apes, and drawn by jackals on the bark of the Sun:

Amon-Râ ceint de funèbres linges,
Avec ses longs yeux clos par l'éternel sommeil
Les reins roides, assis entre les quatre singes,

Traîné par des chacals sur la nef du Soleil.

Where do these features come from? From the coffer of a mummy. This mummy, studied by Champollion, was that of a priest, Petamenoph.

On the right side of the coffer, the solar disk is painted; it is carried on the sacred ship, drawn by jackals, in the middle of which Amon the god is pictured, worshiped by four cynocephali.

Leconte de Lisle's evocation, as you can see, is strictly conform to the document: *Le poète doit être un savant.*

However, can the gods be revived by learning, and by learning alone? Can they be conjured up by archaeology?

This is going to be our next problem.