Introduction

The Gods in Exile

It's fairly uncommon to page through a book of philosophy without coming across at least one quotation by Plato. This is true not only for academic or scholarly works dedicated to ancient philosophy, but for philosophical writings in general. Philosophers are always conversing with Plato. In the same way, people interested in semiotics read Aristotle, alongside the works of Charles S. Pierce, and St. Augustine too. And even popular books about democracy (a critical topic these days), often find inspiration, for better or for worse, in the Greek forms of democracy, especially the one from Athens. I mention these facts in order to defend a rather obvious thesis: classical antiquity is not just a popular topic for professional classicists or students working their way through the *consecutio temporum*; it constitutes a source of inspiration, a living source, for contemporary cultural production.

This is clearly true in other fields spanning across literature (from Seamus Heaney to Derek Walcott), the visual arts (the numerous ancient works “re-envisioned” by contemporary artists), theater (new productions of Greek tragedies are often genuine
rewritings), up to the tenth muse of cinema. Even though the ancients will never know anything about it, they have been for the moderns the muses for whom they searched. I can safely claim that just as happened in the past—in the Middle Ages, in the Renaissance, and in the Age of Enlightenment or in the 1900s—Greek and Roman cultural creations remain relevant, and continue to provide food for thought for today’s culture. It is not my intention here to discuss how and to what extent this classical presence is still alive in the contemporary world, and even less to compare our times to those of the past. This is not my aim. I simply want to highlight how classical philosophy, politics, literature, art, and theater (that is, the vast majority of their cultural production) stay relevant not only as objects of study for Greek and Roman scholars, but how they interact daily with contemporary culture. And religion? Can we say the same about the many religions of classical antiquity? Do they play a similar role today?

These questions may sound bizarre, since according to conventional wisdom, religion is not considered a form of cultural production comparable to theater or art. Religion gives the impression of being “something else.” We really should know better, though, when we are discussing civilizations—especially the ancient ones—in which sculpture was intended to provide religious imagery, poetry was often construed as an offering to the gods on a par with material sacrifice, rituals were regularly accompanied by music and song, and ceremonies were carried out in buildings whose architecture is still admired today. And this doesn’t even begin to take into consideration that a large part of what we call classical literature could be categorized as stories about gods and heroes, and thus—from a certain point of view—as works of a “religious” character. There is no question, therefore, that religion in the ancient world was a legitimate
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cultural product; moreover, it was a locus in which multiple cultural forms were interlaced. The fact that religion is a fully cultural construct is fairly evident: if it weren’t, its practices and organization would not have changed so radically from one era to another, from one continent to another, or from one nation to another. Why, then, does ancient religion remain tightly closed behind the doors of university departments (those few in which it is still taught, incidentally) and provide material for scholarly conferences, yet never seems to interact with contemporary culture to the same degree as theater or philosophy?

The answer is predictable enough: because Christianity has, since its beginnings, gradually positioned itself against ancient religions, relegating them to the territory of falsehood and error. And Christianity is not only still alive and well, compared to the ancient religions, but it has earned a place as the dominant religion in many parts of the globe. More importantly, it even influences a large portion of the cultural perceptions of people who are no longer or have never been Christians, but who are nevertheless part of a post-Christian civilization. Although it is not explicitly stated anymore (and for obvious reasons, since the ancient gods lost their followers quite a long time ago), the original Christian censure remains present in the very words that are used to define the Greek and Roman religions: words such as “paganism,” “idolatry,” and “polytheism” itself (about which we will speak later). But in addition to this, in popular credence, ancient religion is seen as an obsolete religion, defeated by the advance of civilization as much as by Christianity itself. This idea, according to the evolutionary vision of religious phenomena, has been upheld not only by Christian theologians or philosophers, but also by past generations of historians of religion. But there’s one problem with this reconstruction, one that makes it rather difficult to accept this version of
the facts: to claim that Greek or Roman religion is obsolete is no different from declaring that the poems of Homer or Virgil are obsolete. This argument could have meant something during the period of the “querelle des anciens et des modernes,” but it would lose any such relevance today. We have long understood that cultural products cannot be judged on the scale of time or evolution, and this is equally true for religion. We are now well aware of the degree of colonialist and Eurocentric thought hiding under the cloak of certain evolutionary hierarchies. The Greek or Roman religion is simply another religion, or better yet, a religion, just like Shinto or Islam. And yet it is not ordinarily seen as such.

If we return to the theme of Christian censure, we see that whenever any aspect of the Greek or Roman religion managed to escape this censorship, it was only because it had changed its meaning or its identity. The gods who were honored and venerated by two civilizations, and who were at the center of quite complex social, cultural, and intellectual organizations, have been shrunk down, transformed into characters from a generic “mythology,” turned into mere actors within tales of fantasy. The results of this metamorphosis, carried out centuries ago, are still very much present in our culture. To take one example, the Wikipedia page about the goddess Juno is entitled “Juno (mythology).” Already in the early 1800s, the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi had understood how pointless any appeal to classical “mythology” was “since we haven’t inherited the Greek and Latin religion like we have their literature.” In a similar manner, ancient religious statues have been downgraded into generic works of art, an Aphrodite or a Dionysus whose beauty we contemplate and whose sculptors we admire without considering that these images were representations of divinities, not of characters in a “myth.” All the rest, the entire complex system of relationships that tied
people and gods to each other in the Greek and Roman world, has taken on the position of an academic subject—though in truth, this was a hard-earned status that only became completely autonomous in the early nineteenth century. In conclusion, we can agree with Heine that the ancient gods have indeed been “exiled,” although not into “the obscurity of dismantled temples or in enchanted groves,” as the German poet evocatively put it, but into universities and research institutes. This has happened to such an extent that, as far as we can tell, they have little chance to be reincarnated these days, contrary to what happened once upon a time to Dionysus/Denys l'Auxerrois and Apollo/Duke Carl von Rosenmold in Walter Pater’s “imaginary portraits”.6

Although the movie industry has revived many ancient gods, hybridizing them with Marvel characters, ancient polytheism (from this point forward I too will call it by this name) is not a source of living inspiration for modern and contemporary culture comparable to the Greek and Roman philosophy and theater. I do not mean to suggest that there have not been modern poets, philosophers, writers, or directors who celebrated the values of polytheism. But this is not the place to investigate the history of such a complex phenomenon. It is worth mentioning, though, that when we look more closely at the method and the perspective with which some of the most famous apologists of the ancient gods approached the subject, we notice that theirs was a mostly metaphorical polytheism: an enchanting medium brought into use to represent something that had very little to do with the real practice of ancient religion. In a letter to Max Jacobi, for example, Goethe declared that he felt “polytheist” as an artist (just as he felt “pantheist” as a scientist and “Christian” in terms of his morality). Goethe professed an artistic polytheism that, moreover, fell in line with the declarations contained
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in the mysterious “Program of German Idealism” found amongst Hegel’s papers and written (or transcribed) in his handwriting:

Poetry thereby obtains a higher dignity […]. At the same time we so often hear that the great multitude should have a sensual religion. Not only the great multitude, but even philosophy needs it. *Monotheism of reason and the heart, polytheism of the imagination and art, that is what we need!* […] we must have a new mythology; this mythology must, however, stand in the service of ideas, it must become a mythology of reason. Until we make ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythical, they hold no interest for the people, and conversely, before mythology is reasonable, the philosopher must be ashamed of it.

The “sensual religion” to which this programmatic “polytheism of the imagination and art” should provide nourishment is—in no uncertain terms—nothing other than poetry. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his anti-Christian polemics, makes an appeal to polytheism as a preparatory step toward the birth of individualism. “One god,” he wrote, “was not considered a denial of another god, nor blasphemy against him. It was here that the luxury of individuals was first permitted; it was here that one first honored the rights of individuals. The invention of gods, heroes, and overmen of all kinds […] was the inestimable preliminary exercise for the justification of the egoism and sovereignty of the individual.” Polytheism was the earliest origins of morality, in the Nietzshean sense, obviously.

During the 1900s, though, polytheism would begin to enjoy an important vibrancy as the representation (or rather, once again, as the metaphor) of psychological traits. Carl Gustav Jung wrote:

But the things we have outgrown are only the word-ghosts, *not the psychic facts which were responsible for the birth of the gods.* We are just as
much possessed by our autonomous psychic contents as if they were gods. Today they are called phobias, compulsions, etc., or briefly, neurotic symptoms. The gods have become diseases; not Zeus, but the solar plexus, now rules Olympus.11

The psychological project of James Hillman takes direct inspiration from Jung’s assertions (though perhaps not from their irony) when it makes an attempt to recognize

the Gods as themselves pathologized, the ‘infirmitas of the archetype.’ Without elaborating what is familiar to you, I think the main point is made if we recognize that Greek myths … require the odd, peculiar, extreme—the Abnormal Psychology of the Gods.12

And even without bringing in the subject of archetypes, Mallarmé had already recognized that “if the gods don’t do anything discreditable, then they are no longer gods.”13 At least Ezra Pound, who was in his own way an apologist for psychological polytheism, explicitly acknowledged the metaphorical quality of this return to the ancient gods. Perhaps because his Guide to Kulchur had not been written

for the over-fed. It is written for men who have not been able to afford a university education or for young men, whether or not threatened with universities, who want to know more at the age of fifty than I know today […].14

The Bard of Idaho, as he was called by Ford Madox Ford, would also write the following:

Eleusis did not distort truth by exaggerating the individual, neither could it have violated the individual spirit. Only in the high air and the great clarity can there be a just estimation of values. […] No apter metaphor having been found for certain emotional colors, I assert that the Gods exist. […] I assert that a great treasure of verity exists for all
mankind in Ovid and in the subject matter of Ovid’s long poem, and that only in this form could it be registered.15

In a different manner, polytheism would also work as an aesthetic metaphor for philosophers or poets, as a different perspective for viewing the world. This is what happens in the absorbing pages that Fernando Pessoa, under the heteronym of Antonio Mora (in his introduction to the even more unreal Alberto Caeiro), dedicated to *The Return of the Gods*, laying out a resolutely heated debate against “Christ-ism,” particularly in its Iberian version. The “paganism” that Pessoa/Mora preached had at its center an enigmatic verse by Caeiro, which Mora believed to be even more “pagan” that any pagan himself would have been able to write: “Nature is parts without a whole.”16

The much more recent essay by Odo Marquard, “In Praise of Polytheism,” in spite of its title, is more in praise of mythology than of ancient religion. Or perhaps it is better to call it an apology for the pluralism that can be found in tales of classical mythology, presented as examples of how “polymythical” thought can provide multiple solutions to experiences. This is in contrast to “monomythical” thought, defined as such because it is tied to a single unique tale, which is what characterizes monotheism.17 Compared to Marquard’s thinking, made fragile by yet another conflation between polytheism and mythology, I certainly prefer the following sentence from Antonio Tabucchi: “Doubt, like literature, is polytheist.”18

Perhaps it is only William James, as Amos Funkenstein pointed out, who turned to ancient polytheism in order to ask for something that offered a true immediacy towards life, to the concrete experience of people, and not for aesthetics or psychology.19 In his pragmatism, in fact, James evaluated the polytheist
hypothesis in terms of what it could mean for an individual: “cash-value,” the formula that was so crucial for him, and that he used even in his reflections on religion. As James reiterated many times, “the cash-value of any concept [...] was in how the concept helped the individual to cope, how it aided the individual in his or her actual, practical, and concrete experiences.” It is for this very reason, for the pragmatic, human, vital orientation that James brought to his thoughts about religion and to polytheism in general, that I too would like to borrow his concept: the cash-value of polytheism is definitively at the center of my work.

The reflections that follow will explore what ancient polytheism, and in particular Roman polytheism, could offer our society today, not in terms of aesthetics or philosophy, literature or psychology, but in terms of concrete experience, both individual and collective, simultaneously political and social. This is the principle that has both guided me through my studies and represented their purpose: bringing to light the repressed potential of polytheism, providing a space in which its way of constructing a relationship with the divine could furnish answers to some of the problems for which monotheistic religions—as we know them in and through the Western world—cannot find a solution, or which are created directly by monotheism itself. Taking examples that come mostly from the Roman religion, I have thus chosen to focus on the aspects of polytheism that, if they were assimilated by our societies, could help alleviate one of the many evils that continues to afflict us: religious conflict, and alongside this, that variegated specter of hostility, blame, and indifference that still today blinds “our” eyes toward “their” gods. But before setting out on this long voyage, I must pause for a brief clarification.
By favoring the specifically sociopolitical cash-value that ancient religions could provide to contemporary life, I certainly do not wish to ignore the other values, of a more intellectual character, that they could equally offer to my reflections—in particular, their ability to formulate the human experience by identifying and intermixing concepts, images, and actions in quite unexpected manners. Let’s try to picture in our minds, just for a moment, a culture in which a child’s life corresponds to a series of steps, each one accompanied by a god. Lucina brings children into the light, Vitumnus and Sentinus give them life and emotions, Vaticanus opens their mouths for their first cry, Levana lifts them from the ground, Cunina rocks them, Potina and Educa give them drink and food, Farinus gives them their first meaningful word, and so on—up to the two goddesses who will take care of them the moment they leave home: Iterduca in their going away, Domiduca to ensure their return. We are witnessing a sequence of “minuscule” gods, as the Romans called them, who not only oversee specific actions, but represent them as religious agents: divinities who function simultaneously as ways of doing and as cognitive categories. What I have just written here, though, constitutes only half of the intellectual process put into motion by the Roman religion in its representation and structuring of reality. If it tends to subdivide experience into a sequence of divine agents, it equally veers off in the opposite direction: grouping them together according to specific elements that for us would be considered absolutely disparate, under the name of a single god. Mars, for example, whom we all know as the god of war, can also be invoked to ensure a successful harvest or the well-being of animal stock. At first glance, these different attributions throw us off: why should we mix war, the fertility of the fields, and the health of oxen all together? Because these
moments have as their common denominator a single feature: danger. The dangers of war when you enter the battlefield, the dangers arising from natural calamities when the crops are growing, the dangers in the woods when the animals are out to pasture. This explains why in each of these cases the same god is called upon for intervention: warlike Mars. Going back in time to tease out this ancient web, cutting and reconstructing reality according to the guidelines indicated by classical religions, offers a precious incentive to anyone who wants to think about the world differently from how we have been taught.21

But let’s take another look at the religious conflicts plaguing contemporary societies and at the resources we could mine from ancient religions in these specific terms. In my opinion, if we truly seek the cash-value that polytheism can offer us today, we can find it especially in how it constructs a relationship with the gods of others. From this point of view ancient polytheism found its inspiration in ways of thinking22 decidedly different from those pertaining to monotheism. Throughout this study, then, I will move forward by comparing the polytheistic ways of thinking with those of monotheism along the lines of the different reactions (and different results) produced every time they react to the conundrum represented by other people’s gods. Why have I decided to use the comparative method? Because I am convinced that the exercise of comparison is the greatest tool for understanding cultural phenomena. As Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

One of the strangest failings of the human mind is its incapacity to understand objects, even observed in full sunlight, when they are not placed next to another object.23

This is why I will not hesitate to place cultural objects “side by side” throughout my study. Considering the spirit underlying
this work, it is unnecessary to add that I will shy away from using abstract themes interesting only from the perspective of theoretical or intellectual debate; rather, I will choose topics relevant to the world we live in. In this spirit I will refrain from making preliminary statements of principle about monotheism and polytheism (I’ll leave such an arduous task to others) as we start out on our journey, just as I will not interrogate today’s neo-pagan and neo-polytheist movements, so popular in society and on the web.24 I prefer to begin this story with two events from contemporary Italy, two moments that more than any others display the interaction between the cultural constructions that we intend to compare, side by side.

So now, diis iuvantibus, as the Romans would say: “may the gods help us.”