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"Fugitive Guests of Literature": Re-reading the First Chapter of Calasso's *Literature and the Gods*

Dr. Saurav Bhattacharyya

Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, P N College, Parsa (Saran), (A Constituent Unit of Jai Parkash University, Chapra), India

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Abstract— *This paper offers a detailed and interpretative reading of "The Pagan School," the first chapter of Roberto Calasso's* Literature and the Gods *(2001), a book that originated as a series of lectures at Oxford University and was later transcribed into prose. The chapter begins with Calasso's striking assertion that "The gods are the fugitive guests of literature" (3), a statement that encapsulates his lifelong meditation on myth, ritual, and their transformations in modernity. This paper analyses how Calasso's argument reframes literature as a site of displaced ritual, where the divine persists not as a stable theological presence but as an intermittent visitation. By focusing exclusively on this chapter, the paper traces Calasso's exploration of the sacrificial origins of literature, the ancient Greek understanding of* theos*, the nineteenth-century Oriental revival, Baudelaire's* École païenne*, and the shift from cultic ritual to the solitary act of reading as the last vestige of divine communion. Drawing upon additional scholarship from Catherine Bell, Walter Benjamin, Jonathan Z. Smith, and David Jasper, the paper situate Calasso's reflections within a broader discourse that links mythopoetic imagination, ritual theory, and literary modernism. This reading suggests that the first chapter is not merely introductory but programmatic, laying out Calasso's argument that literature has become the final sanctuary of gods—now fragmented, ironic, and "fugitive," yet still irreducibly present in texts.*

Keywords— ***Roberto Calasso, The Pagan School, fugitive gods, literature and ritual, mythopoesis, parody,* theos*, Baudelaire, Oriental revival, sacrificial origins of literature.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Roberto Calasso's *Literature and the Gods* (2001) cannot be easily classified. The seven essays that compose it originated as a series of lectures delivered as the prestigious Weidenfeld Lectures at Oxford University in 2000, yet the text reads less like a conventional lecture transcript and more like an elaborate intellectual meditation. Because of their oral origin, the prose carries an almost performative cadence—dense, elliptical, and yet deeply engaging. The first chapter, titled "The Pagan School," sets the tone for the entire work: elliptical, richly allusive, and unapologetically erudite. The chapter begins with an assertion: "The gods are the fugitive guests of literature" (Calasso 3). This claim is neither ornamental nor introductory but central, functioning as a kind of key to Calasso's overarching project: a lifelong investigation into myth, the sacred, and the modern world's uneasy relationship with both. Calasso is not concerned with systematizing literary history in a traditional sense; rather, he dramatizes ideas, drawing connections between mythology, literature, and philosophy with a kind of dazzling nonchalance.

Restricting focus to this opening chapter allows one to appreciate its rhetorical density and its unique status as a manifesto. Calasso's writing style is deeply personal; he writes as a reader steeped in Greek mythology, Vedic ritual, European literary history, and modern philosophy, often weaving these strands together without formal signposting. The chapter is neither a systematic history of literature nor a theological treatise. Rather, it is an extended meditation on the lingering vitality of gods in a literary tradition that has often proclaimed its secularism.

Literature, he suggests, remains haunted by its sacrificial origins, even if those origins are obscured by parody and irony. "By literature," Calasso means "contemporary literature," "because if you go back far enough, what we now call literature was inseparable from ritual and religion" (3). In other words, there was a time when stories weren't just entertainment; they were part of a larger act—a sacrifice, a ritual gesture, a way of speaking to the gods. But, as Calasso laments, this world disappeared. The elaborate system of rituals broke down over time, leaving behind only fragments: "All that remained were the stories that every ritual gesture implied" (3). This is how literature began, as residue, as the afterimage of a religious act. What was once an embodied performance turned into a written text. The gods didn't vanish completely, but they stopped being the center of the act. They became occasional figures, invoked more for effect than for devotion. Calasso writes that the gods, once central actors in ritual life, became characters in literature. In this transition, something profound was lost: the direct experience of the divine. Yet for Calasso, modern literature, bereft of ritual enactment, nevertheless preserves—and indeed relies upon—the intermittent, haunting presence of the divine in narrative form.

This chapter's importance lies in its insistence that gods are not mere mythological characters or symbols but presences that, though diminished, continue to appear through literature. The divine, in Calasso's terms, has not disappeared but has become intermittent, showing itself only through rare moments of revelation or "*theos*" a term he reclaims in its original sense. Calasso's theory of "*theos*" resonates with the work of religious theorists like Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade, both of whom sought to explain how the sacred reveals itself. Otto, in *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), famously described the divine as "mysterium tremendum et fascinans"—a mystery that both terrifies and attracts (Otto 12). For Otto, the encounter with the sacred is primarily experiential. It overwhelms, seizes, and transforms the human subject. Eliade, writing later, coined the term "*hierophany"* to describe "the act of manifestation of the sacred" (*The Sacred and the Profane* 11). In both frameworks, divine presence is an event, a rupture in ordinary reality. Calasso's gods, however, appear differently. In "The Pagan School," he suggests that the sacred's most enduring home today is literature, not ritual. He writes: "All the powers of the cult of gods have migrated into a single immobile and solitary act: reading" (22). This is a remarkable claim because it reverses traditional religious frameworks: where Otto and Eliade emphasize embodied encounter, Calasso situates divine experience in the imagination, in language itself. Reading becomes a sacred act, a vestige of ritual precision, where the mind replaces the altar. Calasso's meditation invites one to read literature as an ongoing ritual, a textual ceremony through which gods—now "fugitive guests"—enter and exit our cultural imagination.

II. THE FUGITIVE GUESTS OF LITERATURE

The phrase "fugitive guests" is both poetic and polemical. It implies displacement and estrangement, yet also survival. The gods, Calasso suggests, are neither dead nor fully present; they appear as visitors, momentary presences within texts that no longer serve as altars but as vessels of memory. He writes, "The combination of word and gesture… was likened to a sacrifice that gratified the gods and made the communion between the divine and the human possible" (3). Literature, from this position, is a residue of ritual—a symbolic artifact of a time when words were inseparable from gestures, offerings, and communal practices. Calasso's insight aligns with Mircea Eliade's argument that myth was once a "true story" that narrated sacred events occurring in primordial time, a narrative re-enacted through ritual (1959: 5). When the ritual dies, the myth survives as a memory but loses its transformative power. Calasso mourns this severance, noting that the divine presence has become so elusive that it now arrives as "a sudden revelation," a "hierophany," rather than an integral part of life (5).

Calasso's emphasis on sacrifice aligns with anthropological theories of ritual. Catherine Bell describes ritual as a "practice that structures and generates meaning through a controlled series of gestures, objects, and words" (Bell 74). For Calasso, literature is precisely such a controlled practice, but one stripped of its performative, physical dimension. What remains is the word alone, detached from the altar but still carrying the memory of sacrifice. Calasso's suggestion—that literature substitutes for ritual gesture—invites the readers to see narrative as a protected ritual space where the gods can still be summoned, albeit fleetingly. The "controlled destruction" becomes a literary analogue to sacrifice: it destroys meaning and creates it anew through symbolic exchange. The written word is no longer accompanied by a physical act of offering; instead, reading itself becomes the offering. This is why the gods are "guests"—present, but only in a form that lacks their original "majestas", their full splendor.

This understanding challenges the modern notion of literature as a secular institution. It insists on literature's religious genealogy, reminding one that myth and poetry were not originally separate from cultic practice. In this sense, the gods are "fugitive" not because they have vanished entirely, but because they have been relegated to

a medium that isolates them from their ritual context. They are present in texts, but their majesty is diminished; they are names on a page rather than deities encountered in sacrifice.

III. THE EVENT OF *THEOS*: REVELATION IN LITERATURE

Central to this chapter is Calasso's interpretation of *theos*, a Greek word often translated simply as "god." Calasso points out that *theos* refers not only to a divine being but to the very event of divine manifestation. The divine, in Greek thought, does not exist in a static sense; it flashes forth unpredictably, disrupting the ordinary. Quoting the Homeric Hymn to Demeter: "difficult are the gods for men to see" (5). Calasso emphasizes that gods reveal themselves selectively and rarely. This sense of revelation as event rather than status underscores the fragility of divine presence in literature. This vision aligns closely with Otto's description of the *numinous*: a feeling of being seized by an ineffable power, by something wholly "other" (Otto 25). For both Otto and Calasso, divine presence is not a rational concept but a shocking experience. This is crucial for Calasso's larger point: divine presence isn't constant. It's rare, unpredictable, and always mediated. In literature, the gods arrive in flashes, through symbols or moments of inspiration. They're not always meant to be understood. This makes sense when we think about mythological narratives: Zeus doesn't walk among mortals every day; Dionysus reveals himself in bursts of ecstasy or madness; Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita* shows his universal form only briefly to Arjuna (Gita 11.8). These moments are intense and transformative, and literature preserves them—but often at a distance. Thus Calasso departs from Otto's explicitly theological tone. While Otto frames the numinous as a theological category, Calasso reads it as a literary phenomenon: the gods appear through language, metaphor, and myth, becoming figures of imagination rather than objects of worship.

Mircea Eliade's notion of hierophany further illuminates Calasso's argument. For Eliade, the sacred always "reveals itself" by breaking through the profane (1959:12). Sacred spaces, symbols, and rituals are manifestations of this rupture. Calasso's insistence that literature itself has become a medium of hierophany suggests a secular reimagining of Eliade's theory. If the temple has been replaced by the text, then the act of reading itself becomes a hierophany—an encounter with something beyond the mundane. In this light, literature is more than a carrier of mythological reference; it becomes a space for the re-enactment of revelation. When a poet or novelist invokes a god, they do not merely cite a myth but stage a moment of *theos*—a glimpse of divine manifestation. Jonathan Z. Smith's observation that religion is often "constructed and imagined through texts" (Smith 23) resonates here, but Calasso goes further: for him, literature does not merely represent religious experiences; it becomes the primary site where such experiences occur in a secular age.

Thus, even the modern reader who approaches literature without faith may be participating in a ritual act. The act of reading becomes a kind of invocation, a summoning of presences that no longer have temples or sacrifices to sustain them. The gods are not "dead" but relocated, inhabiting texts rather than cultic spaces.

IV. THE ORIENTAL REVIVAL AND THE RETURN OF GODS

Calasso's chapter takes a historical turn when he discusses the nineteenth-century Oriental revival, which saw an influx of translations of Sanskrit, Persian, and other ancient texts into European languages. This scholarly movement coincided with a Romantic fascination for the exotic and the pagan, fueling a resurgence of mythological imagery in literature. After the Enlightenment's insistence on rationality and secularism, Romantic poets and thinkers rediscovered myth, reviving an interest in Greek, Roman, and even Eastern deities. John Banville summarizes Calasso's project succinctly: "What [Calasso] is urging on us is nothing less than our duty to recall the gods from banishment through the medium of literature" (qtd. in Calasso, *Literature and the Gods* xii). Calasso quotes Verlaine's sonnet "Les Dieux":

> "From the Koran, from the Vedas and from / Deuteronomy, / From every dogma, full of fury, all the gods / Have come out into the open…" (qtd. in Calasso 20).

This poetic vision of gods "out into the open" captures the paradox of the Oriental revival: the divine returns, but not as an object of worship; it returns as art, as scholarly knowledge, as poetry. Archaeology and philology, rather than priesthood, bring the gods back into view. Statues, amulets, and reliefs excavated from ruins inspire awe, but this awe is aesthetic rather than devotional. Here, Calasso's insights resonate with Eliade's theory of the "terror of history." In *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eliade argues that modernity's historical consciousness destroys myth's sacred time. Though Calasso talks about the return of gods, yet he suggests that the return is not glorious as "this composite tribe of gods now lives only in stories and scattered idol" (Calasso, 21). Calasso's gods live under this shadow: they are not timeless beings but "fugitive guests," literary phantoms animated by memory rather than worship.

Calasso links this moment to the emergence of Baudelaire's *École païenne*, a literary school that embraced pagan imagery and irony in equal measure. For Baudelaire and his contemporaries, gods became aesthetic resources rather than religious authorities. In his *École païenne*, Baudelaire links three elements that Calasso sees as foundational to modern literature: the revival of gods, parody, and what he calls "absolute literature" (21).Literary critic Harold Bloom, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, argues that modern writers struggle under the weight of tradition, yet also renew it through creative misreading. Bloom's emphasis on "creative misprision" resonates with Calasso's notion of gods returning not in full majesty but as fragmented figures, appropriated into aesthetic parody. The gods survive as figures of imaginative rebellion, symbolic rage, or existential ambivalence. Their majesty is replaced by beauty; their terror is reframed as fascination.

V. PARODY, IRONY, AND ABSOLUTE LITERATURE

Calasso identifies three intertwined phenomena in this literary revival: the reawakening of gods, the rise of parody, and the birth of "absolute literature." Parody, for Calasso, is not mere humor; it is a sign of distance, a symptom of a culture that has lost direct contact with the sacred but remains haunted by it. The gods are not absent, but their presence is mediated through irony. The Romantic and Symbolist poets—Baudelaire, Verlaine, Valéry—transform them into aesthetic devices, figures of imagination rather than faith. Walter Benjamin's argument that art loses its "aura" when detached from ritual (Benjamin 221) is particularly relevant here. In Benjamin's terms, parody and irony are inevitable in a secularized world where divine presence is mediated through mechanical reproduction, museums, and books. Yet parody does not negate the gods entirely. As David Jasper argues, parody has "a theological dimension: it points to the sacred by refusing to take it seriously, a refusal that paradoxically acknowledges its power" (Jasper 58). Calasso's reading of nineteenth-century literature demonstrates precisely this paradox: irony and parody do not erase the divine but testify to its lingering presence.

This is where Calasso introduces the concept of "absolute literature," a literature that is self-contained, autonomous, and disconnected from external reference points. Such literature treats myth not as religious truth but as material for artistic experimentation. Yet even in this absolute literature, gods remain present, albeit as fugitive figures, reduced to symbols yet still radiating an ancient power. In richly liturgical traditions like Hinduism, deities such as Varuṇa or Prajāpati have become obscure—embodied only in writing, not in living cult. Calasso writes: "all the powers of the cult of gods have migrated into a single immobile and solitary act: reading" (Calasso 22). This migration aligns with J.Z. Smith's thesis in *Imagining Religion,* where he argues that the modern understanding of religion is constructed through interpretive, textual frameworks, not lived communal sacrament. For Smith, religions are often known via their textual commentaries rather than through actual ritual contact. Calasso similarly suggests that literature preserves gods through a hermeneutic, literary medium, even as the sacramental fabric unravels.

Calasso's final claim in this chapter is perhaps the most provocative: "all the powers of the cult of gods have migrated into a single immobile and solitary act: reading" (22). In this view, reading itself becomes the modern equivalent of sacrifice. The solitary reader, with book in hand, replaces the priest at the altar. This image emphasizes the radical transformation of the sacred in modernity: the communal, performative aspects of ritual are replaced by a private, intellectual experience, yet the underlying dynamic of communion remains. Calasso's invocation of *manas*, the Vedic concept of the mind as a boundless, creative force, underlines the spiritual dimension of reading. The mind is not a passive receiver of text; it is an instrument of transformation, a means by which gods—now trapped within books—can be summoned. Even in an age of machines, Calasso laments, this inner "machine" of thought and imagination remains powerful but underappreciated.

This vision aligns with Benjamin's notion of the reader as a custodian of *aura*, as well as J.Z. Smith's insistence that religion is not a fixed object but a product of interpretation. Literature, for Calasso, is not merely an archive of myth but a living practice that keeps myth alive. The gods are no longer worshipped in temples, but they survive in books, awaiting readers willing to perform the ritual of interpretation.

VI. CONCLUSION

"The Pagan School" is a chapter that condenses a lifetime of reading and thinking about myth into a few dense pages. Its central claim—that "the gods are the fugitive guests of literature"—is not a rhetorical flourish but a guiding insight. Roberto Calasso invites the readers to see literature as haunted by divine absence—and illuminated by divine return. The gods, once active participants in ritual life, have become "fugitive guests" in literary texts, summoned through the hermeneutic gesture of reading. Yet their persistence—scattered, performative, and

aesthetic—attests to the secular world's hidden sacrality. Literature does not create gods, nor does it worship them in the old sacrificial sense; rather, it preserves the memory of communion and occasionally summons the *theos* anew. Calasso's deliberation shows that literature is inseparable from its sacrificial origins. In today's contemporary secular, technologically driven world, the divine still continues to haunt literary narratives, sometimes as a trace, sometimes as parody, sometimes as revelation. Reading, thus becomes an act of devotion, a way to summon forgotten powers into consciousness.

By focusing on this chapter alone, the paper deliberated upon Calasso's method: a tapestry woven from Greek mythology, Vedic ritual, nineteenth-century Orientalism, and modern literature, all tied together by the conviction that literature is a sanctuary for the divine. His insights invite one to approach reading not as a leisure activity or a cultural duty but as a ritual act, one that connects one to a world in which gods were not "guests" but hosts. In this sense, Calasso's work is not only literary criticism but a form of cultural theology, a reminder that society's most secular practices often conceal ancient structures of meaning. The gods may be fugitives, but they are not gone; they remain in texts, waiting for the reader to recognize them.

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