

***Steven Monte***

### **The Late Pagans**

Paganism

*Paganus* — pagan — basically meant “hick”:  
city-Christians, or at least the urbane,  
invented paganism in its wane,  
and in the Latin West the name would stick.

And yet, the “Hellenes” wouldn’t go down quick  
or undefended: from Syria to Spain  
they mustered arguments and would remain  
for centuries a force Christ couldn’t lick.

Their time would come. Or it would soon be gone.  
Or both. Antiquity was moving on.  
There was the Way, and they were in the way.

What can they tell us? Their defeat abides.  
We would do well to listen. And besides,  
the Roman pagans have much more to say.

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## Signs of the time

Most Christians looked down on earth; Gnostics, too;  
mystery cults; many a Platonist:  
as Rome wound down, more factions would insist  
the world was a place we must suffer through.

Had they lost nerve, then? Perhaps. In their view,  
the body was a cage. They shook a fist  
at those who said the soul dissolves like mist:  
all things that pass away were never true.

They had a point. And though it was no given  
that pagans loved the earth, we'd be forgiven  
for thinking so, while most sects dwelt on sin

and how the world was cut from one dark cloth —  
or how the earth was fire, the soul a moth,  
and how, come Constantine, their sign would win.

## The Neoplatonist (Plotinus)

If asked, he'd have sworn there was nothing new  
about his Platonism: he deferred  
to custom (taking Plato "at his word")  
and clarified and spelled out what was true.

Still, it seems clear Plotinus took his cue  
from his own time: philosophy had spurred  
its high horse upward; few felt it absurd  
to fashion heavens out of which souls flew

and to which souls were able to return.  
His soul, however, took a strange new turn:  
it stayed in heaven *while* it was on earth.

The undescended soul (call it "the self")  
had all it needed and could be itself —  
in *this* world, even at the hour of birth.

The Allegorist (Porphyry)

A student of Plotinus, Porphyry  
not only wrote about his teacher's life  
but edited his writings, taking the knife  
to volumes that he didn't always see

eye-to-eye on, and stitched them so that we  
might read them in them his own order, rife  
with contradictions (or not) — a midwife  
to metaphysics and symbology.

Strangely, even his anti-Christian tracts  
became beloved of Christians. And the ax  
he wielded over them would boomerang

in time to a defense. For in his lore,  
tales like the cave of nymphs were nothing more  
than allegory. And this song, he sang.

Allegory

Much virtue can be found in metaphor.  
And vice: the *Odyssey* is beautiful  
and treacherous, the moment it is full  
of all the meanings it held long in store.

Some would say that's what poetry is for —  
that Jesus often taught in parable.  
And soon the Word of God exerted pull  
toward allegory: in a word, toward *more*.

So when both Christians and pagans began  
to read into each other, meanings ran  
in parallel, if not in harmony.

It wouldn't last. There had to be a wrong  
and right. Some meanings wouldn't get along.  
Some understandings were not meant to be.

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A vanishing truth

The pagans went. But did they disappear?  
The argument for: Christians set their sights  
on doing everything they could do here  
to root out sin and occupy its heights.

The argument against: customs and rites  
strangely persisting, half pagan, half not,  
and threadbare banners, raised in rearguard fights:  
a sense of something lost but not forgot.

Meanwhile, the whole world would change, a whole lot,  
with intersecting lines of friend and foe.  
Christians and pagans slipped into a knot  
they couldn't untie — though neither said so —

leaving to later pagan Christians the aha  
that Christmas was the Solstice-Saturnalia.

The Ritualist (Iamblichus)

And Porphyry begat Iamblichus —  
not literally, of course: they disagreed  
on theurgy, and thereby sowed the seed  
of magic thought that later grew on us.

Or magical thinking. Incredulous  
of prayers and spells that didn't somehow bleed  
into reality, the magus freed  
himself (the world?) of much Platonic fuss.

Then kept on fussing, adding scheme on scheme  
of daemon-spirits. For it was his dream  
to reach to heaven. What Plotinus said

was wishful thinking, if not outright wrong.  
The right ingredients were needed. Song  
would unearth power, even from the dead.

### The Arch-Heretics

“Heresy” just meant “choice.” At least at first,  
Christians could wander through the schools of thought  
and choose their lesson. All they really sought  
was wider vision. Few beliefs were cursed.

Through that tide of thought, though, the damned would burst.  
Councils built walls, and shepherds would be caught  
outside the fold. Great battles would be fought  
on small grounds. Priests went straight from good to worst.

Forget about lapse or honest mistake;  
they might as well be pagan, for Christ’s sake.  
Those with large flocks became the stuff of myth:

Arius, Marcion, Nestorius,  
and even Mani would come down to us  
as through a dark mass — names to conjure with.

### The Apostate (Julian)

Could his foray in turning Rome’s clock back  
ever have succeeded? Most would say “no.”  
But he died young, so we may never know.

Even the pagans were taken aback  
at orders to revive blood sacrifice.  
Surely some words and incense would suffice?

But he was out for blood. Make no mistake:  
the Galileans hurt him; they’d smart too.  
That sickly sect could now look forward to  
much harsher edicts (none of which would take).

The rank and file loved him, and in their wake,  
latter-day pagans. Everyone who threw  
their hat into his ring was working through  
nightmares from which they never would awake.

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The Convert (Augustine)

Christian at last, but first a Manichee:  
the fight was on with evil and with good.  
From the start, then, Augustine understood  
the high stakes of belief: we couldn't be

neutral if honest. He could also see  
how passions led us into a dark wood  
we couldn't leave alone. How *all we would*  
was wishful thinking. And yet we were free.

Rome didn't fall for its abandoning  
the old gods. That was just the sort of thing  
the pagans said — routinely. By his lights,

the sack of Rome had simply bared our need  
for the eternal. Take him up and read:  
pagans had spurred him to his greatest heights.

Twilight of the gods (Athena and Proclus)

Athena was removed from the Parthenon  
sometime in the fifth century, it seems.  
As paganism died out, Wisdom's dreams  
became increasingly vague. Thereupon,

Proclus declared that he would be the one  
to house the goddess. And in his strict schemes  
she dwelt within his home, not by the streams  
that flowed through Athens, but there, in the sun

that bathed the world yet stayed forever dark.  
A war's survivor, nourishing a spark  
to build a fire that might keep all warm,

she lived beneath the Areopagus  
patiently waiting — but for what? for us? —  
bracing herself against the future's storm.

Epilogue: the Heathens

In the year 1000, or 999,  
Iceland converted to Christianity.  
To avoid bloodshed, pagans were left free  
to pray in private — if they made no sign

that they had done so. The law drew a line  
between the actions everyone could see  
and testify to, and activity  
beyond them. Faith and deeds might not align.

But did, sort of. Pagans went to the heath,  
forming a circle like a Christmas wreath  
and chanted out of sight of other folk.

Their songs resounded in the hills. “Oh those  
heathens” drew laughter. And yet still some chose  
to be both in and not in on the joke.

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### **Days of '84 and '87**

A memory from a lifetime ago  
came back to me last night: 1984,  
blood, pain — but first the later and before,  
the after-memory at Chenonceau,

that fairy-castle built upon a stream,  
solid and flowing, as we feel life is.  
The second time there, then, whose emphasis  
gave meaning to the first — it was no dream:

I lay awake remembering events  
connected in themselves and in my making.  
They happened, then. And there was no mistaking  
that, even then, I planned coincidence

as if life were a poem. And all along  
I was right to do so. And yet so wrong.

The town is Chenonceaux — there is no X  
in the castle. The year is '87.  
Summer again. A cloudless azure heaven  
hangs over everything. Nothing complex

about this picture: I'm back at the scene  
of the no-crime, in a tourist bus, no less.  
But I have seen the castle, more or less  
restored; in the allotted time, I mean

to go exploring; I strike out alone.  
I know I know this place; a family  
that lives close by (I believe) hosted me  
three years ago. Now I'm here on my own.

If memory serves, I came here the first day;  
in broken French, I explained my delay.



I want to break away now. I go out  
and past the gardens. Human voices fade.  
I'm in a kind of forest. I evade  
the iron fences walling it about

until I meet a fence I can't not mind —  
a high barred gate above a little brook.  
As in a story, every path I took  
has led me to here, left others behind.

To go on, it is up or under now —  
menacing spikes at either end. I bet  
if I go under it, I will get wet.  
Over, then. As if springing from a bough,

my youthful body leaps — and then contorts  
and clears the top — a climbing-vault of sorts

that puts me on the forest's other side.  
In retrospect, I'm startled by the ease  
and instinct of my actions. Up in the trees  
I glimpse blue sky. Putting heaven aside,

I walk ahead, feet firmly on the ground.  
The next hour (ten minutes?) is paradise.  
I can't have gone far, except in my eyes.  
The stealth of it, and no one being around —

no doubt these played a role in what I felt.  
But all good things (and evil) have their ends.  
The bus is waiting. All my tourist friends  
will be impatient. We were only dealt

two hours per castle. I must get back.  
I start up quickly, as if put to the rack.

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The journey home is the most difficult.  
Or so they say. In my case, that is fair.  
The first event was easy. A fence was there;  
I vaulted it as if releasing a bolt.

Only this time, my hands are not as clean:  
I come away with green moss on my fingers.  
I wash them quickly. But a green stain lingers  
like a patina; I must leave this scene.

I'm almost back. But now I am confronted  
with irony: I've lost my glasses somewhere.  
Is there time to go back? I wish I were  
somewhere else, yet I feel that nothing's wanted

except resolve to do what must be done.  
I will go back. I have to. I will run.

And run like hell. I am back at the fence.  
Hoping against hope, I glance right and left.  
There, on the surface of the brook, is left  
what I am looking for: it makes no sense

and every sense — my glasses floating there  
in equilibrium, the current holding  
them up and back, and all my life unfolding  
before me, more than I wanted to bear

and would bear, whether I liked it or no.  
And I have lied this whole time, keeping back  
events of '84 threatening to crack  
open a poem like this, set long ago,

in which something like an X marks the spot  
for what did/didn't happen. Was and was not.

Yet everything I've said so far is true,  
all too true. It may also be misleading.  
I made the bus. And last night, I was reading  
("last night" now meaning "something pointing to

the present") how we avoid who we are.  
All is on schedule. I'll soon be in France  
for the first time. Arrangements in advance  
of my stay are confirmed. Nothing will bar

my departure. Nothing, that is, but life.  
Life intervenes: I have a hydrocele.  
But all shall be well. Post-op, it will heal  
in more than time, and I won't feel the knife.

The first part's true — procedure with no hitches.  
The follow-up — simply remove the stitches.

But life refused simplicity this time.  
I went in. The day was warm; the physician,  
friendly, confident. A man of decision.  
"Let's see how things are?" he smiles. I climb

onto the table, disrobed or pants down —  
I can't remember — and, looking away  
from what he was seeing or about to say,  
I stared at the wall, sweating, looking down

and then across an anatomy chart —  
a standard office poster, even today.  
(Today, writing, I want to find a way  
to make it something else. To use my art

to see eye-doctor letters, not flesh and bone —  
avoid my body.) I lay there, alone.

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The doctor was there though, albeit silent  
for an excruciating time. He tried  
to take the stitches out, but they defied  
his best skill. Blood dripped. Then the most violent

pain I have felt and hope will ever feel:  
tweezering the drain in my scrotum free,  
the doctor re-opened the wound. Surgery  
without anesthetic. Soon they would wheel

me to another operating table.  
This time, I would go under, wake up dazed.  
Two drugged weeks later, I would be amazed,  
heading to France, and now glad to be able

to go at all, and just a few days late.  
The family knew nothing. That could wait.

It may just be a trick of memory:  
I flew in early, was put on a train  
to the Loire, attempted to explain;  
suddenly Chenonceaux. All this to me

transpired in a very (very) short order.  
I checked my letters today. I got this right:  
the '87 information is tight.  
'84 has vanished. Exists on the border

of myth and fact, though I've tried to be true.  
The pain was real. I know that, and it made  
me more empathetic and less afraid  
of physical hurt: I knew what I knew.

And when I came again to Chenonceau,  
I struck out alone. I knew where to go.

But Time's loops do not form such perfect ties,  
even assuming every detail's right.  
It is not just a matter of all that might  
be true, historically or otherwise,

but what is left behind and doesn't square  
with lessons learned, the sense of "having closure."  
I remain unhealed of a fear of exposure,  
especially in this age of *put it out there* —

perhaps that's healthy, but I damn well know  
it's not all good. And there are other things  
that must have slipped my mind. (My cellphone rings.  
I decline the call.) It was touch and go

if you'd reach someone then. Best make a plan  
and stick to it. I'm back where I began.

Which is to say, making poetic sense  
of not exactly nonsense and only fact  
(in today's shifting terms) by being backed  
by stores of personal experience.

Again I am avoiding the obvious:  
how hurt I was, and how anxious and tense  
and eager for life, long held in suspense —  
my glasses on the brook. I missed the bus

not in reality, but in my mind,  
and I've been playing catch-up ever since.  
I know I've said enough to make you wince.  
I know in many ways I must be blind.

But let that be. My only argument:  
what I had to say, I've said. And always meant.