INTRODUCTION

Pas dan zal ik tegen hem zeggen dat ik denk dat het een schrijver bij ieder boek dat hij schrijft telkens weer overkomt dat hij bang zal zijn eraan te sterven, dat ik het niet zo'n gekke angst vind om te denken dat een boek je het leven kan kosten.

Connie Palmen *I.M*

WORDS OF GRATITUDE

This book is based on the Sather Lectures that I gave at the University of California at Berkeley in spring 1999. These words evoke happy memories and feelings of gratitude that merit further clarification. Even given the exceptional quality of its faculty, its wealth of material scholarly amenities, the grandeur of its campus and the splendour of the Bay Area, it cannot be an unqualified pleasure to serve the university of California at Berkeley as a member of the Department of Classics. The annual advent of yet another fresh Sather professor, who, going by the panegyric portrayal of the Sather chair in the letter of invitation, cannot be blamed for deeming herself the world's top mastermind, is only the briefest summary of a wide array of arduous obligations. Regular participation in the time consuming (as I am told) explorations of the Sather committee, followed by the departmental disputes concerning the qualifications of a new candidate, not seldom ending up in a screaming row (as I am told); a moral commitment to attending six Sather lectures—or at least some (or one) of them—on a subject miles out of one's own field of interest—; cheerfully complying with (as in my case) the request to mend the English of one or more lectures including the pronunciation; taking the genius out for lunch before one of his lectures or accommodating one of the receptions after it. All this prettied up with the bonus of having at least one certainty in life, namely, that a member of the department will never taste the glory of a Sather professorate. This bouquet of corollaries might easily deter scholars of a less noble and selfless disposition from joining the Berkeley Classics Department.

Hence, instead of detailing a long list of colleagues who showered me with their kindness and hospitality in any of the qualities just

listed (and hence not even commemorating the party at which I was regaled on a sizzling sucking pig on the spit), I feel that the best way of expressing my gratitude is by wholeheartedly thanking all colleagues present at the time for never having made me notice how demanding all these obligations must have been.

As to the participants in my seminar on ancient magic, I am still looking back with delight to those magical hours in the company of a fine and enthusiastic bunch of students. On being asked they hastened to instruct me that an A was the normal rating for normal fulfilment of normal assignments, while B and C were functionless folkloristic relics like the human appendix, never to be put into use. On sharing this—in Dutch perspective suspicious¹—information with the Chair he told me that indeed I was misinformed: besides A one could also give an A+.² This tip now proved very opportune. Albeit clearly more versed in Latin prose composition (*clausula* included) than in the intricacies of such magical strings as MASOLABEO MAMAXO-MAXO ENKOPTODIT, the class quickly adapted and it soon turned out that the rating A+ came in handy. If, on the other hand, not all participants struck me as being conspicuously more gifted than their Dutch colleagues, yet they all did display a remarkably greater eagerness to pronounce (and defend) an opinion (whatever opinion). I keep hoping that the sometimes hilarious fits of laughter during our sessions were not exclusively due to my more audacious ventures in the pronunciation of non-existent American words. In sum: Guys, thank you for putting up with me. I loved every day of my stay at Berkeley.

This, then, is the right moment for an exception to the rule by lauding two of the Berkeley friends for their invaluable help. Laura Gibbs, by common consent the pivot of the magic class, omniscient guide and generous rescuer in cases of emergency (very much including the intricacies of the computer), threatened to break off her friendship unless I sent her the manuscript of the book for inspection. Concentrating on the main text she showered me with suggestions, corrections, and heartening comments. In the meantime, Donald Mastronarde, hospitable and helpful chairman in my Berkeley year, had accepted the task to assess the book for publication on behalf of the Sather committee.

¹ For clarity's sake, the Dutch rating goes from 1 up to 10 and I have yet to meet the colleague who would favour putting 1 through 8 out of action.

² To be honest, he also suggested the option A-, which for rhetorical reasons I preferred to leave unmentioned in the main text.

Far exceeding this assignment he meticulously scrutinized the total text, including footnotes and punctuation, saving it from a hoard of typos and errors (the English preposition will always remain a treacherous pitfall to (for?) the non-native speaker) and an occasional very embarrassing misinterpretation of a Greek text. That his knowledge of the Greek language (including the accent) far excels mine is nothing to be ashamed of, but his corrections in French, German and other citations set me purple with shame. A magician on the computer, he also conjured my antiquated GreekKeys Universal into Unicode Greek. I have not been able to find the appropriate words to adequately express my gratitude for the efforts of these two magnanimous benefactors.

It should not be taken as a lack of gratitude, on the other hand, if I shall not comply with the modish lore of the preface to spend half its space on an exhaustive list of academic institutes, audiences and hosts due to whose hospitality and endurance I had the occasion of trying out each of my lectures more than once. One of the reasons for my reticence lies in what I believe to be the real function of such a *polynymia*, for which see p. 54 f. of this book. The ever increasing number of these guest lectures, I hasten to add, was directly related to the inordinate amount of time that has elapsed between giving and publishing my Sather lectures. I am particularly grateful for the fact that, besides stimulating correction, clarification, and above all reconsideration, these try-outs helped me to constantly keep in mind the necessity of publishing the book before the predicate after its title in the website list of Sather professors would shift from 'not yet published' into 'not published'. Recently this urge received some extra impetus from the wish to have the book out before Robert Parker publishes his Sather lectures.

On no account, however, may I omit to express *disertis verbis* my deep gratitude for the generous and enduring hospitality offered to me over the years by my friend Angelos Chaniotis, at New York University and above all at the Seminar für Alte Geschichte at Heidelberg. I realize that this book would never have been finished without the multiple, often extended, periods of my stay in this ideal ambiance and the personal stimulation by my host as well as by that other ambassador of Greek hospitality, Eftychia Stavrianopoulou.

That the present final words in the process of completing this book are being written at the Fondation Hardt, "that classicists' haven where a week's work equals a month's work at home," may be taken as symbolic. Numerous have been my visits over the years and they have

been seminal to the genesis of this book. One last time I sing a song of praise on—to restrict myself to the friends of old—unforgettable Suzanne, Bernard, and Heidi.

ON THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

When I received the frightening invitation for the Sather lectures in 1996, the one responsibility that did not really agitate me was that about the choice of the subject matter.³ After the ‘ritual craze’ of the second part of the last century (to which I confess complicity) I thought it might be time for a return to the gods of the Greeks. And as its title indicates that is what this book is about. Nearly all topics of the present book have a prehistory in my research or at least in my interest over the years since the seventies of the last century. In my *TER UNUS* of 1990 I expressed my aspiration to continue my research on modern reactions to dissonance and inconsistency as apparent in issues such as, first, the bewildering divergence in the assessments of polytheistic systems as exemplified by Jean-Pierre Vernant and Walter Burkert; secondly, the archaic Greek struggle with theodicy—divine arbitrariness versus divine justice—; and third, the divergent responses to divine rulership among both Greek contemporaries and modern scholars. My wish has been fulfilled and its upshot can be found in the present book. Polytheism had always had a prominent place in my teaching, but so far this had not resulted in a publication. My ideas can now be found in Chapter I. On the second topic mentioned I gave a paper at a Bristol conference “From Myth to Logos?” of 1996. I did not make it available for publication in the conference proceedings⁴ but reserved it for the Sather lectures: Chapter II is a radically revised and expanded version of that paper. On ruler cult I published one of my first articles (in Dutch). Particularly in this case I was happy to obtain an opportunity to rethink the whole issue, which now appears

³ Remaining feelings of anxiety were soothed away by a very reassuring passage from the Sather website (quoted from Joseph Fontenrose): “There are now [1970] about fifty volumes of Sather Lectures published, valuable contributions to their fields, although, as one might expect, some are better than others, and not many attain the eminence of,—for example, Dodds’s *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Shorey’s *Platonism*, Nilsson’s *The Mycenaean Origin of Greek Mythology*, Page’s *History and the Homeric Iliad*, Kirk’s *Myth*, Vermeule’s *The Greek View of Death*.”

⁴ R. Buxton, *From Myth to Reason? Studies in the Development of Greek Thought* (Oxford 1999). See for some background information below Ch. II n. 1.

as Chapter VI. Chapter III is the only one that in a more concise form has appeared in print (Porter 2000, 79–163).

That, over the years, insights on all these subjects have undergone sometimes considerable development and change, is a matter of course. Even during the fifteen years since I began my research for the present book the rapid progress in scholarship sometimes has caught up with my ideas as laid out in the lectures. This never necessitated radical modifications of my own ideas. It did mean, *inter alia*, that interpretive strategies similar to the ones I had initiated in my works on *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* (1990 and 1993) and which in a more elaborated form I continue putting to the test in the present book, in the meantime had independently found niches in the works of others.

To give a few examples (which all will be dealt with *in extenso* in the relevant chapters). Suggestions about the double (or multiple) nature of divine identities depending on the contexts in which they operated (Ch. I) were rather rare when I embarked on trying them out with my students in the seventies of the last century. Though initially not very popular due to the influence of the then so-called structuralistic approach of the ‘École de Paris’, they have been gaining ground since the nineties and are now widespread in recent scholarship. As will become apparent however, heated discussions continue to rage to the present day and hence validate further reflection. In the discussion on ruler cult (Ch. VI) a landslide has taken place. While a number of scholars including myself (1973) had already suggested that modern distinctions such as the ‘genuine’ versus the ‘political’ nature of its religiosity were leading into a deadlock, it was the study of Simon Price 1984 that turned the scales and opened new perspectives. However, by simultaneously launching his first crusade against the use of the modern term ‘belief/believe’ in the study of Greek religion he risked closing the door on upcoming new insights in and redefinitions of the notion ‘belief’. When, for the present occasion, I continued following my own track by introducing new approaches to an understanding of the religious overtones of ruler cult this called for a preliminary critical discussion of the now fashionable idea that, as one title has it, “The Athenians did not believe in their gods.” I soon found that recently scholars of different denominations have been testing alternative strategies concerning the notion ‘belief’ which turned out to be of great benefit to my own argument (the results can be found in Appendix IV). Comparably, recent trends in linguistic pragmatics

and speech-theory as well as in gnomic expression advanced my own understanding of what, in Ch. II, I had tried to argue before I spotted these new approaches, a gratifying experience indeed.

All the same it may occur that an approach which, fifteen years ago, might claim some originality, is not so 'wayward' anymore. Imagine my relief when I recently discovered that 'the least' the official Sather rules require is "a new synthesis." The more so since one of my major goals, particularly with the first three chapters, was to offer the reader (including, with any luck, both interested general readers and students in classics or religious studies) a more or less comprehensive introduction into some of the most seminal issues of ancient Greek religion. This may also justify their unusual size, which may perhaps be condoned by viewing them not as immoderate excrescences of chapters but as mercilessly pruned condensations of the monographs that their subject matter would have merited.

Turning to the contents of the present study, it first should be noted that the book may be understood as being divided into two parts even if it is not presented as such in visual form. The central theme of the first three chapters can be summarized as 'the systematics' or 'syntax' of the divine world: how did polytheism work, how did (the) Greeks make sense of the inscrutable divine meddling in and with human life, and how did monistic and pluralistic conceptions of the divine world relate? The latter three chapters are concerned with questions about divine nature and qualities, more especially with correspondences and tensions between human and divine features in the nature of the gods.

Chapter I. (MANY GODS) treats Greek polytheism. Since the lecture opened the last Sather series of the twentieth century I decided that it should at least present a brief comparative discussion of the positions of the two greatest late twentieth-century champions on Greek religion: Jean-Pierre Vernant and Walter Burkert. The first regards Greek polytheism as an orderly, transparent system, with well-defined boundaries and a symbolic meaning of each of the different divine 'powers' in meaningful relationship with others. The second characterizes Greek polytheism as "potentially chaotic." In this chapter it is argued that both views have their merits but each at a different level of discourse and viewed from a different perspective. If indeed a potential chaos prevailed, Greeks had their own ways of coping with it. They had an extensive range of divine images in store, and boasted an uncommon capacity of evoking different identities of a god in rapidly

shifting perspectives, generating (seemingly) incompatible statements to the distress of the modern observer. By switching between diverse registers of ordering, for instance (but not only) between the worlds of myth and cult, or between national (Hellenic), local (of the *polis*), and personal or group-religiosity (e.g. in henotheistic forms of religion), they managed to elude the chaotic potential of the Greek pantheon. For them the idea that there is one Zeus with many different epithets (predicates, functions, localities) was no less valid than the idea that there are many different Zeuses varying according to myth, cult, place. (Late) modern scholars as a rule have serious difficulties in handling such *coincidentiae oppositorum* and hence tend to ignore, downplay, smooth out or deny the inherent inconsistencies. Ancient Greeks, on the other hand, could cope with their inconsistent gods by avoiding mixing up their different contextual registers.

Chapter II. (THE GODS) examines the implications and complications of the well-known Greek tendency to attribute sudden changes in human life, either fortunate or, more often, catastrophic ones, to the interference of a supernatural power under the name of Zeus or anonymously referred to as ‘the gods’ or ‘the god’. Here it was inevitable to revive the great debate between two most successful Sather Professors, Eric Dodds and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, the first arguing for a gradual evolution from an a-moral (arbitrary) towards a more ethical, equitable, attitude in divine conduct, the other contending that the morality of justness has always, as early as Homer, been a dominant element in Greek theological reflection. My suggestion is that things are more complicated than this. There is an abundance of texts, from Homer into the Classical Period and beyond, that stage the two contrastive options of an a-moral arbitrary and a morally inspired just divine intervention as co-existent, sometimes even presented in peaceful contiguity. Quite often the two visions do not even seem to be differentiated in terms of sharp boundaries or explicit intellectually satisfying reconciliations. In other words, the ‘logical’ tension between the two different views does not seem to have been consistently *experienced* as tension. This picture of a ‘luxuriant multiplicity’ is best explained as a corollary of an endemic gnomic type of wisdom sayings characterized by an often asyndetic paratactic style. It pervades Greek literature of the Archaic and (early) Classical periods and belongs to the most characteristic traits of Greek theological expression. And it is precisely these testimonies of what *we* experience as contradiction, incongruity, and inconsistency in e.g. Homer, Solon, and Herodotus

from which modern hermeneuticians in their 'drive towards coherence' try to save their authors. I hope to show that in doing so they unconsciously claim their author for our modern paradigm and thus alienate him from his own. Recognition of this necessarily involves a reappraisal of the terms in which the dilemma has been conceived in earlier scholarly discussion.

Chapter III. (ONE GOD) discusses mono/henotheistic tendencies with a special focus on the remarkable and—again in our eyes dazzlingly inconsistent yet peaceful—co-existence of the belief in 'one god (who is all)' and the simultaneous continued existence of polytheistic forms of belief and religious practice. For the archaic period the focus is on Xenophanes' theology, for the classical period I examine (again) the notions 'the god' and 'the gods' but this time not on the motives behind their interventions, but on the way they are deemed to *be*: what is the difference between the 'many gods' as a polytheistic sum total of individual deities (as discussed in Ch. I and Appendix I) and the anonymous collective referred to as 'the gods' launched as an instrument for conveying sense to the inexplicable? For the Hellenistic period, finally, the notion of henotheism of gods such as Isis is explored. Throughout this chapter, as in others, strategies well-known from cognitive dissonance theory, as well as the concept of 'complementarity' (two contradictory predicates or qualities can both be experienced as true and valid) will be called in to shed light on the vexed problems concerning the coexistence of the one and the many. One of the conclusions is that there are several different types of oneness.

Chapter IV. (A GOD) opens with a discussion of the sacrificial scene in the beginning of the Homeric *Hymn to Hermes*, *inter alia* showing the significant cleft yawning between the interpretations of the structuralist (Paris) and the evolutionist/functionalist (Burkert) theories concerned. Next it sets out to devise the image of the god Hermes, arguing that contrary to some modish scholarly ideas gods do have individual identities, personalities, a distinctive description (in the sense of French/Dutch 'signalement'). Even though the literary (Homeric Hymn, the genre of the fable, comedy), visual (herms, vase paintings) and cultic/ritual (typical Hermaic forms of sacrifice) evidence on the god Hermes has received much attention in recent years, it has never been fully realized how revealingly all these different components mirrored, informed and supplemented each other, and thus co-operated in the construction of a recognizable personal image of the god, pervasive and consistent over a long period of time.

Altogether it will be shown that the construction of the god Hermes represents an extreme experiment in ambiguity: it pushes out frontiers in the amalgamation of divine and human traits in a god's nature. Culinary aspects play a major role in the central argument.

Chapter V. (GOD) elaborates upon one of the findings of Chapter IV namely that gods cannot live without a generous dash of (very) human ingredients in their nature, not only in mythical narrative, which thrives on this fact, but also in cult. While 'naturally' gods cannot be expected to consume human food, hence prefer nectar and ambrosia or a sniff of *knise*, no less naturally various types of sacrifices include diverse types of normal human food as eagerly partaken of by gods. Gods, and especially Zeus, are supposed to be all-seeing, yet they do not always see what happens behind their back. Gods are omnipresent, yet they are supposed to live 'right here,' in *this* temple. Ignoring or trivializing these commonplace oscillations between superhuman and human aspects in divine nature entails detrimental consequences.

A ubiquitous scholarly credo—common among all sorts of specialists, but especially popular among 'structuralists'—has it that polytheism by its very nature does not tolerate the idea of divine omnipotence, since each god has his/her own department. Texts that would seem to contradict this article of faith are either ignored or 'disarmed' as rhetorical excrescences. The truth, however, appears to be that a Greek god may alternatively be conceived of as being restricted in his potential, for instance by the limitations of his own specialization, or be acclaimed as being able to do anything he wishes. It all depends on context, perspective, discourse and the rhetorical or poetical flashes of the speaker or author, who can change his stance even within a few lines of a literary passage. This is amply illustrated by an exposé of the miracles of Epidaurian Asklepios, which exemplarily display the two sides of divine capacity: human power (or even powerlessness) versus superhuman omnipotence. Conclusion: Greek gods are omnipotent whenever it suits the interest of the human actor, most conspicuously in the situation of prayer.

Chapter VI. (PLAYING THE GOD) discusses the early stages of the deification of rulers from the fourth century onwards. In Chapters IV and V we have seen gods who are of necessity pictured with human features. In the present chapter it is human beings that claim a share in divine nature. The inevitable clashes between the two contrasting qualities within one (human) being and the strategies to cope with the problems are interpreted in the perspective of theories on ludism

and theatricality. Against modern trends in denying Greeks the notion of belief it is argued that the question “did the Greeks believe in the divinity of their rulers?” is fully justified. However, for an answer we must first reconsider—and where necessary revise—what we so far used to mean by the term ‘believe’. In this chapter we will try out concepts such as “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge), “sincere pretence” (Kellendonk), “honest hypocrisy,” while paying special attention to Greek *ὡς* (“as if”) in order to open new avenues towards sounding the religious over/undertones of ruler cult. To be sure, interpretations of the religious elements of ruler cult will never exceed the level of suggestion. Even so I hope that within these boundaries this approach will take us a step beyond the at the time revolutionary and still important assessment by Simon Price.

Four sections have been removed from their original setting (two of them from Chapter I, the other two from II and VI, respectively) and have found accommodation in appendices. All of them concern basic relevant issues, but none was immediately necessary for—hence would delay—the progress of the main argument. Moreover, three of them, being exceptions in this book in presenting my personal participation in an ongoing dispute, should better be set apart: readers who dislike critical discussion may ignore them.

Altogether the main themes of this book are, first, that monolithic, one-sided or universalist theories in the field of Greek theology by their very nature tend to be misleading since they illuminate only part of a complex and kaleidoscopic religious reality, which is neither fully transparent/structured nor entirely chaotic. Secondly, it is argued that ancient Greeks particularly in the field of religion or philosophy of life displayed a disquieting capacity to validate two (or more) dissonant, if not contradictory, representations as being complementary rather than mutually exclusive. They not only accept the validity of either one in its own right, but also allow them to co-exist in such a smooth and seemingly unreflected manner that it often shocks the modern mind.

Greeks certainly could acknowledge tensions, problematizing them for instance in tragedy, but surprisingly often they did not or did not in an explicit manner. This position constitutes both their similarity and their difference as compared to the modern reader (without, for that matter, making them “desperately alien”, as an all too fashionable expression claims). The modern reader recognizes the seduction of smoothing over logical dissonances (as we learn from theories of cognitive dissonance etc.), but is not able to really live with it, at least

not to the extent of consistently launching it as a strategy for “coping with the gods,” as I hope to show the Greeks did.

SOME QUESTIONS OF METHOD

For the hermeneutic principles that guide my interpretations I refer the reader to the introductory chapter of my *TER UNUS*, which was the first of two volumes under the collective title “Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion.” The present book may be seen as the third (and last) volume that rightfully might be subsumed under this collective title.⁵

In that Introduction I devoted a few remarks to the, then novel but soon widely welcomed, ‘desperately alien’ school, as I will refer to it in the present book. At that moment (1990) I could not foresee its enormous upcoming success, which, because of its relevance to the present book, induces me to briefly return to this issue. The idea goes back as far as Fustel de Coulange, who claimed that “Greece and Rome present themselves to us with an absolutely inimitable character. Nothing in our time resembles them. Nothing in the future will ever resemble them.”⁶ A century later the idea found a resonance in Paris where Paul Veyne claimed that: “Nothing is farther distanced from us than that ancient civilisation; it is exotic, what do I say, it is abolished.”⁷ It was the early “École de Paris” led by Jean-Pierre Vernant in particular that stressed the alienness of the Greeks, arguing that they were *others*, that Greek society was *different*, and that the Greek mind, being a product of that society, cannot be used as a mirror in which we view ourselves. Till the present day its partisans never tire of reminding us that the religion of the Greeks was ‘other’, ‘desperately foreign’ or ‘desperately alien’.⁸ The latter expression in particular is scattered lavishly throughout their works.

⁵ Hence my thanks to Pierre Bonnechère for his kind wish—in his review of Versnel 1993 (*LEC* 64 [1996] 105)—: “Bien que cet ouvrage soit théoriquement le dernier des *Inconsistencies*, espérons qu’Hendrik Versnel nous en dispense une troisième.”

⁶ N.D. Fustel de Coulanges, *La cité antique* (Paris 1923 = 1864) 4: “La Grèce et Rome se présentent à nous avec un caractère absolument inimitable. Rien dans les temps modernes ne leur ressemble. Rien dans l’avenir ne pourra leur ressembler.”

⁷ P. Veyne, *L’inventaire des différences* (Paris 1976) 13: “Rien n’est plus loin de nous que cette antique civilisation; elle est exotique, que dis je, elle est abolie.”

⁸ Bruit-Schmitt 1992, for instance, has this emphatically cumulative expression twice: xvii and 231.

Since Moses Finley, though quite a different type of scholar, held the very same opinion, deploying similar expressions such as “unbridgeable divide,” “fundamentally alien,” and again “desperately alien,”⁹ it will come as no surprise that one of his great admirors, Paul Cartledge, very much stimulated by the French connection, based a monograph with the title *The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others*¹⁰ precisely on the concept of ‘otherness’ as an instrument for definition or self-definition. Once more in this fine book the Greeks are foreign,¹¹ emphatically and desperately: “For me (...) the ancient Greeks are in crucial respects, ideological no less than institutional, ‘desperately foreign’” (p. 5). In his view one of the historian’s tasks is even to promote alienation: “one of my aims has been as it were to ‘defamiliarize’ Classical Greek civilization.”¹² Gradually, the reader gets the impression that being desperate about another’s otherness is not such a desperate position after all. On the contrary, those swept along in the current boom of *altérité*—and let me confess that I have enthusiastically exploited this notion myself—seem just to love it.

Inevitably however, slogans such as ‘desperately alien’, by their near ritual repetition—“the new orthodoxy of the foreignness of Greek

⁹ *Inter alia* in his Foreword to Easterling & Muir 1985. So does, in a different way, S.C. Humphries 2004, who took her point of departure in the works of Finley and Vernant, but since the early eighties sought inspiration in modern anthropology of religion and Foucault. The title of her recent book, “The Strangeness of Gods,” expresses her conviction that ‘religion’ is a modern construct and that we have to go even further than Chr. Sourvinou-Inwood (on whom see Appendix II) in “purifying our readings of Greek culture from modern suppositions.” Humphries’ main concern is “the problem of inapplicability of modern categories and presuppositions to ancient Greece,” especially with respect to religion (p. 3).

¹⁰ Cartledge 1993. The present book was already in the press (January 2011) when I noticed the publication of Eric Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton 2011) about which Christopher Jones writes: “This is an excellent and timely book on an important topic. Gruen persuasively argues that the model of the Other does not work for antiquity.” Hence, I do not expect that the term ‘desperately alien’ will be prevalent in this book.

¹¹ He has traced back the origin of the expression to J. W. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* [London 1962]). At p. 16, on the notion that it is literally impossible to get inside the skin or mind of any other—let alone an ‘Other’—society Cartledge writes: “The Greeks, it is argued, were irreducibly alien or desperately foreign to us in culture. In something like the same way that contemporary ‘primitive’ peoples are alleged to be.” It is followed by a passage with warnings against all too rigid exclusivist oppositions, for which see below.

¹² Both in the beginning (p. 17) and at the end of the book (p. 175).

society” as E. Kearns called it¹³—acquire the precarious status of a dogma if not an axiom. ‘Precarious’ since the effects tend to become counter-productive. Axioms and dogmas by definition exempt their adherents from the obligation to explain exactly what they mean by them or from reflecting on their advantages and limitations. Innovative, more especially revisionary, theories may be necessary but require just the same critical assessment as did the ancient and worn-out schemes that they claim to replace.¹⁴ Indeed, in the famed words of the astronomer Carl E. Sagan: “It pays to keep an open mind, but not so open that your brains fall out.” Or, perhaps more to the point, the mind that adopts a new idea without question, thus turning it into a dogma, may be typified—with a variant of the dreaded notice at Italian churches or museums: ‘chiuso per restauro’—as ‘closed for innovation’. After all, if a culture is characterized as exotic, desperately alien, absolutely inimitable, separated from us by an unbridgeable divide, the question prompts itself whether it is at all possible to understand or even to describe it on the basis of its literary and material legacy when we have no other interpretive tools besides our own (desperately different) concepts and terminology.¹⁵ How can we reach the unreachable, how find access to the inaccessible?

It is therefore crucial to call to mind an alternative approach. For instance in the other extreme stance of those who consider Greek culture as the earliest form of Western civilization. Which, of course, is exactly the target of the ‘desperately aliens’. One might even consider the most generalizing suggestion of Marguérite Yourcenar: “Modern man is a great deal less different than he thinks from man of the 19th, of the 15th century, or of the first century BC or even as compared to man from the stone age.”¹⁶ This posture, however sweeping, at least

¹³ In her review of Gould’s contribution to Easterling-Muir 1985, in: *CR* 36 (1986) 259.

¹⁴ “The revisionist biography is becoming as clichéd as the hagiography that originally inspired it,” thus the beginning of a review article on biographical work by M. Eliot, *TLS* Sept. 2 (1994) 20.

¹⁵ Oudemans & Lardinois 1987 phrase the difference between Greeks and us in terms of an unbridgeable gap between the modern Western ‘separative cosmology’, which has no room for ambiguities, and the ancient Greek ‘interconnected cosmology’.

¹⁶ “L’homme moderne est bien moins différent qu’il ne le croit de l’homme du XIX^e siècle, de l’homme du XV^e siècle, de l’homme du I^{er} siècle avant Jésus-Christ, ou même de l’homme de l’âge de pierre. Nos besoins et nos instincts sont les mêmes”. In an interview with: P. de Rosbo, *Entretiens radiophoniques avec Marguérite Yourcenar* (Paris 1972) 57.

takes into account the absolute minimum precondition for historical and anthropological research, *viz.* “that the most distant cultures, both in space and time, show behaviour that is, to a certain point, meaningful, and understandable as human.”¹⁷

As at several points in this book the positions of Vernant and Burkert will be opposed and compared it may be fitting to present the plea for a basically universal and ongoing identity of the human race as worded by Walter Burkert. Never renouncing his interest in ethology and sociobiology in his search for relics of primordial ritual behaviour in historical Greek cult, Burkert contends: “The conglomerate of tradition which constitutes religion perhaps owes its particular form less to the cunning of reason than to the cunning of biology.”¹⁸ In line with this, his book *Creation of the Sacred*¹⁹ opens with a discussion of precisely this distinction between culture and nature in which he takes exception to the monolithical focus on culture, including religion, as the one and only definer of humanity—referring to Cl. Geertz’s expression:²⁰ “there is no nature apart from culture”—and the concomitant dominant interest in differentiation instead of unity in human expression. While acknowledging Vernant’s important contributions from the viewpoint of religion as a cultural marker of the polis, Burkert claims that we should not ignore the phenomena common to all human civilizations, the universalia of anthropology. Among them are language, art and religion, which accordingly may be viewed as a “long-lived hybrid between the cultural and the biological traditions.”²¹ Instead of the notion of Greeks as *cultural others* we are here confronted with the concept of Greeks as *natural humans*, like us. Instead of a professed strategy to ‘defamiliarize’ Greek culture, we discern a quest for human universals. Instead of ‘desperately alien’, Greeks and moderns are all recognizable links—hence commensurable components—in the great chain of human evolution.

Confronted with this never-ending dispute, in which one will recognize the vexed complications of the ‘anthropological doubt’, I confess

¹⁷ Oudemans and Lardinois 1987, 7.

¹⁸ Burkert 1985, 218.

¹⁹ Burkert 1996, 2–4.

²⁰ Cl. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York 1973), 35.

²¹ p. 20. This means that (p. 19): “religion, like language, can be hypothetized to have arisen at a certain stage in prehistory as a competitive act, as a way of gaining an advantage over those who did not take part in it.” Cf. 23–33 for the close connections between language and religion.

that I do not see a workable alternative to the no-nonsense conclusion as phrased by Dilthey:

Interpretation would be *impossible* if expressions of life were completely strange. It would be *unnecessary* if nothing strange were in them. It lies, therefore, between these two extremes.²²

And I am not alone in this.²³ Curiously, many a propagandist of ‘desperate otherness’, as if acknowledging the inevitability of the Diltheyan conclusion, grudgingly admits as much. So does for instance Cartledge: “On the other hand, there are or should be limits to the ‘othering’ of the Greeks” (p. 6); “although Classical Greek culture is both as a whole and in fundamental details deeply alien, it is nevertheless possible for us to gain a sympathetic understanding of Greek culture” (p. 17 and cf. p. 176). And so does, most surprisingly (and to my knowledge once only), Vernant:

The works ancient Greece created are different enough from that of our mental universe to give us a sense of disorientation from ourselves.

²² W. Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* 7 (Göttingen 1979) 225: “Die Auslegung wäre unmöglich, wenn die Lebensäußerungen gänzlich fremd wären. Sie wären unnötig, wenn ihnen nichts fremd wäre. Zwischen diesen beiden äußersten Gegensätzen liegt sie also.” As quoted by J.Z. Smith 1982, 135 n. 2, and brilliantly exploited there and in his other works. Cf. Geertz 1973, 41, “Once one abandons uniformitarianism (...) relativism is a genuine danger; but it can be warded off only by facing directly and fully the diversities of human culture (...) and embracing them within the body of one’s concept of man, not by gliding past them with vague tautologies and forceless banalities.” Oudemans & Lardinois 1987, 4–10 provide an excellent discussion of the problem. For fundamental views on the background and the implications of the ‘anthropological doubt’ see: R. Horton & R. Finnegan, *Modes of Thought. Essays on Thinking in Western and non-Western Societies* (London 1973); B.R. Wilson, *Rationality* (Oxford 1970, 1974²); H.G. Kippenberg, Einleitung: Zur Kontroverse über das Verstehen fremden Denkens, in: H.G. Kippenberg & B. Luchesi (edd.), *Die Sozialwissenschaftliche Kontroverse über das Verstehen fremden Denkens* (Frankfurt 1978) 9–51.

²³ To mention one out of many, F. Jameson, *Marxism and Historicism, The Ideologies of Theory*, 2 (1988) 148–77, argues that our understanding of history is always dialectic, oscillating between Identity and Difference: “If we choose to affirm the Identity of the alien object with ourselves—if we decide that it is more or less directly or intuitively accessible to us—then we have presupposed what was to have been demonstrated, and our apparent ‘comprehension’ of these alien texts must be haunted by the nagging suspicion that we have all the while remained locked in our own present. (...) Yet if we decide to reverse this initial stance, and to affirm the radical Difference of the alien object from ourselves, then at once the doors of comprehension begin to swing closed and we find ourselves separated by the whole density of our own culture from objects or cultures thus initially defined as Other from ourselves and thus as irremediably inaccessible.”

(...) At the same time, they are not as foreign to us as others are, since they are still living in our cultural tradition to which we continue to remain attached. Remote enough from us to study him as an object and as any other object to which our modern psychological categories do not entirely apply, Greek man is nevertheless close enough for us to be able, without too many obstacles, to enter into communication with him.²⁴

All this considerably differs from the isolated mantras that we have been discussing. And here we approach the rationale of this excursus: I hope it shows that axiomatic proclamations such as ‘desperately alien’ without further context or specification are desperately unscholarly, senseless, useless, and counterproductive testimonies of what Geertz (above n. 17) labelled “forceless banalities.” Banal too, but far less detrimental, is the alternative proposed by Dilthey (and implied in the pronouncements of Cartledge and Vernant just quoted) that Greeks are both different from and similar to the modern reader. The only way to make this banality interesting is by asking in what respects, to which degree, under which circumstances, and how distinctively Greeks, and above all *which* Greeks conceived their world in ways different from or similar to those of us moderns. This, then, is another major aim of this book, in which I will argue that it is good to defamiliarize the ancient Greeks, but not to the degree of dehumanizing them.

This implies, by way of example, that I both appreciate *and* have my doubts concerning the following statement by Cartledge 1983, 98: “few aspects of antiquity are harder to comprehend than the mental universe of paganism, a universe inhabited by and full of a multiplicity of gods rather than governed by one omnipotent deity.” In this book I hope to show that in some respects it no doubt is, but that there is reason to question the universality of this statement. Investigating problems inherent in such issues as polytheism/monotheism, theodicy and divine omnipotence (Chs. I/III, II, V respectively) we will discover that ancient Greeks applied interpretive strategies that did not substantially differ from the ones launched by modern Christians. As far as they do differ they do not differ *desperately*. The difference between Greeks and moderns is not to be sought in the *variety* of theological solutions (some of which Greeks and moderns share) but in their ability to accept (in our eyes) incompatible ideas as both/all true and simultaneously available. Consequently, the suggestion that

²⁴ Vernant 1971, 6, as translated by Zeitlin 1991, 7.

“the government of one omnipotent god” should be relatively more transparent than a regime of many gods is at least open to discussion. Even the most superficial acquaintance with the recent debate among Christian theologians on the notions of monotheism, theodicy, and omnipotence suffices to elucidate that things are just a bit more complicated than that.

Generally, it is hard to avoid the impression that we often exploit our classical texts as tools to show how clever *we* are in interpreting them, meanwhile imposing *our* interpretive paradigm on *their* expressions, and thus paving our road towards the professorate (if not the Sather professorate). It would not be a bad idea at all if for once we would read their texts in what currently seems to be felt as a wayward manner, for example in order to see how *they* coped with questions that our paradigm still does not allow us to solve. Indeed it is during the years of writing this book that I gradually learned to appreciate Nietzsche’s words: “Only late does it dawn on one what we can have from the Greeks, only after we have learnt much and pondered much.”²⁵

In Aesop’s 60th fable a satyr gives up his friendship with a man who first blew on his hands to make them warm and later blew on his bites of food in order to make them cool. A person who blows hot and cool with the same mouth, he admitted, was just a bridge too far for him. The prosaic message as usual added in the envoy to the fable says: “We conclude that we should shun friendship with those whose character is ambiguous.” Now these envoys are specialized in missing the point, as it most flagrantly does here. I can only hope the reader of this book won’t. In the forthcoming chapters I will never stop blowing hot and cool from the same mouth, but not on the same objects and not in the same circumstances. That is what the satyr missed by making his false generalization. That is what I often noticed as a modern pitfall particularly alluring to those who have some difficulty in appreciating ambiguous positions, ancient or modern.

²⁵ F. Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente* (Sämtliche Werke 8, Berlin/New York 1980) 25. I am not referring to the way in which ‘learning from the Classics’ is approached in: B. Goff (ed.), *Classics and Colonialism* (London 2005), however interesting its theme may be. Quite differently but equally challenging: P. Jones, *Vote for Caesar: How the Ancient Greeks and Romans Solved the Problems of Today* (2008). A. Chaniotis, A. Kuhn & Chr. Kuhn (edd.), *Applied classics: comparisons, constructs, controversies* (Stuttgart 2009) provides interesting critical discussions of related issues.

Finally, I am sure that many a specialist in any of the six topics treated in this book will find much to disagree with. I hope, however, that the great variety of topics will make it practically impossible for one scholar to disagree with all of them. But how about the author himself? Does he believe in the truth of everything he has written? My answer is that definitive truth being unattainable, in the end it may turn out to be a matter of trust rather than of truth or, to paraphrase a statement of an anthropologist, a matter of hoping to be “the one that has produced the more persuasive fiction.”²⁶ During the process of thinking, arguing and writing, however, the author is bound to ‘do as if’ he believes in (the results of) what he is doing. If this may sometimes make him phrase his insights in a rather unqualified way, please read the excursus on ‘Augensblicksglauben’ in Ch. VI before passing judgement. In the end, however, any author—particularly the one who does not have the opportunity to comply with George Orwell’s advice “Never mention religion if you can possibly avoid it”—may find his greatest comfort in a brilliant quote of T.S. Eliot.²⁷

About anything so great as ancient Greek religion it is probable that we can never be right; and if we can never be right, it is better that we should from time to time change our way of being wrong.

SOME APOLOGETIC TECHNICALITIES

On footnoting

The long period of the book’s genesis had its consequences for its format and girth, particularly with regard to the footnotes. As this will be my last book of such size I take the opportunity to spend a few words on the issue of footnotes. Few reviews of my earlier books failed to refer to their number, length, and exhaustiveness. Even if packed in the rose cellophane of respect a touch of reservation could not always escape their author. Although I am fully ready to offer my apologies for any irritation caused, I have no understanding of it.

In a review of a recent book of a compatriot of mine, whose craving for footnotes is one of the few things we share, the critic frontally

²⁶ M. Strathern, *Out of Context: The Persuasive Fictions of Anthropology*, CA 28 (1987) 251–81.

²⁷ *Selected Essays* p. 107, where he is speaking on Shakespeare. I have replaced the word “Shakespeare” with another to create relevance to our issue.

censures the “too-abundant notes as an unpleasant feature”, giving a few deterring examples. In his view “a footnote should lead the reader to a source worth exploring, or verify a point of contention.” And he explains the author’s aberrant preference for the footnote: “But the author writes in a European tradition that admires such behavior.” In the ‘Translator’s Introduction’ to Bruit-Schmitt 1992, p. XIV, Paul Cartledge (dis)qualifies Burkert’s great handbook of 1985 as being: “more a book of reference than an interpretative monograph. Not that it does not contain interpretation, throughout, but its many learned theses tend to be obscured by the overlay of erudition documented in the 130 pages of endnotes.”

Such critical assessments baffle me. How *can* notes, more particularly *end*notes, obscure the main text? And what about “a European tradition” as proposed by the first reviewer? Did he ever cast a glance into the early scriptures of the ‘Paris school’? I well remember that at least one of my incentives to give rather free rein to the footnote was the shocking observation of the dearth of them—and the near total lack of references to non-French literature—in these French works. For other conceivable motives, some of which I recognize, I refer the reader to the highly amusing studies of Steve Nimis and Antony Grafton.²⁸ “Giving an intellectual context for one’s argument, referring the reader to further or contrary discussions on the subject, giving credit to predecessors” strikes me as a suitable generic summary of the major functions of the footnote, especially since it leaves the author sufficient room for his own interpretation of these options. Relevancy moreover is a highly individual concept. However, imposing restrictive directives on what a footnote should/must/ought to offer is in my view a pedantic hobby.

I am quite aware that all this does not suffice as an apology in the eyes of scholars who do not like footnotes. For them, however, I have

²⁸ St. Nimis, *Fussnoten: Das Fundament der Wissenschaft, Arethusa* 17 (1984) 105–134 (in English despite its title); A. Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (London 1997). At the moment of writing the discovery was published that the number of references *to* a book is directly proportionate to the number of references *in* that book (Conference of the Society for the Psychology of Science and Technology, Berkeley August 7th 2010). Would have been a perfect motive had I known it. One perfectly legitimate motive is that notes are indispensable locations for accommodating quotations in any other than the Anglo-saxon language.

an, apparently so far unsuspected, way out of the problem: one need not read them (all)!²⁹

On quoting

“Versnel likes to quote” writes one reviewer and this was not intended as a compliment. But right he was. Not being a native speaker in any of the great world languages, I intensely hate every moment of being obliged to write in one of them instead of in my own (to get just an impression of my feelings, please, reader, try to tackle the motto above this Introduction). Hence, I am so relieved to find an author, belonging to whatever domain of scholarship, art, or literature, who formulates an idea that I am wrestling with more elegantly than I ever could, that I cannot withstand quoting it. It serves clarification. And once more I simply do not understand what can be wrong with that. Here, however, I feel backed up by Professor Sterling Dow in his charming little book *Fifty Years of Sathers* (Berkeley etc. 1965) 55. There he notices with satisfaction that some earlier lecturers were “well-read” authors, enriching their pages with quotations from the ‘great literature’ of the Western World. But since “scholars, alas, have very little time to read widely,” as he writes, the more recent volumes have no such “literary” flavor.³⁰

So, as this introduction makes sufficiently clear, I keep quoting, mostly from scholarly literature of course, also and especially so in foot-notes, where relevant passages in other works are often quoted in full, to spare the reader that reads footnotes the effort of looking them up themselves. And let us be frank: who, except those readers who knew it already, would not have regretted to miss the quotation from T.S. Eliot?

²⁹ But please do read the present one which proves that I am not blind to criticism. A reviewer of Versnel 1993, noted that at a passage on Greek-eating Cyclopes I had regaled “the stunned, occasionally surfeited” reader on “a bibliography on cannibalism”! I did so because I thought cannibals are *interesting*, especially since the question whether Polyphemus merits this predicate is a matter of discussion. In the journal *Nature* of August 2010, one can read that new findings *may* indicate that already the *Australopithecanthropus* used sharp stones to carve flesh from the bones of a beast of prey. I considered adding a footnote on this interesting news to illuminate a passage on the Homeric ‘lapse’ in using the verb ‘to cut’ for the Cyclops at his cannibalistic meal (below p. 386). By way of concession I have refrained from doing this and have thus withheld an extremely interesting piece of information from the interested reader. I regret this.

³⁰ Admittedly adding the afterthought: “There is also the danger, very real, that a favorite quotation is brought in self-consciously, for its own sake, or to parade knowledge.”

ON DESEXUALIZING LANGUAGE

I have never come across a satisfactory attempt to avoid ‘sexist’ language in the use of personal pronouns. *Consistently* applying plurals in order to avoid the problem, burdening the text with “he or she”’s, or following Dover (in the preface of his *Frogs*) in introducing gender-neutral forms like ‘hrs’ and ‘hrm,’ all these solutions are less than elegant. In this book I have occasionally resorted to alternating ‘she/her’ and ‘he/him’ in one passage. Although this may come in handy in some occasions (e.g. Ch. V, first paragraph) elsewhere it may breed feelings of uneasiness as I hope the first paragraph of this Introduction may have done. So, from time to time in this book the person indicated with ‘he’ should be taken as androgynous.

POSTSCRIPTUM

As said above this book is based on the Sather Lectures of 1999. Sather professors are invited to sign an agreement implying that the book shall be published in the series ‘Sather Classical Lectures’ of California University Press. Unfortunately (or fortunately), the contract was not reciprocal. Despite the strong recommendation of the referee and with great regret the publisher had to inform me that, due to recent regulations, *inter alia* under influence of the present crisis, the press can no longer afford to publish volumes of the size of the present book. This, now, turned out to be a blessing in disguise. However much I would have liked to see the book published in the distinguished Sather series, I cannot deny my long-time secret preference for accommodating it in another distinguished series. Therefore I am deeply grateful to Brill Academic Publishers and the editorial board of ‘Religions in the Graeco-Roman World’ (RGRW) for kindly accepting the book for their prestigious series.

It is this year fifty years ago that the first volume of Vermaseren’s ‘*Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’empire romain*’ (EPRO)—of which RGRW is the sequel—appeared. In the fact that this book will be presented on the day on which we will commemorate this anniversary, the day, too, of my farewell to our series, I see the hand of destiny. And as Herodotus taught us: τὴν πεπρωμένην μοῖραν ἄδύνατά ἐστι ἀποφυγεῖν καὶ θεῶ.