

## The *Twilight* of Robert E. Sherwood or How I Learned to Start Worrying and Fear the Bomb

In the current international climate, the possibility of a nuclear war has once again entered the public consciousness, a subject never far from the narrower concerns of groups like the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation and The Union of Concerned Scientists. Cirincione (2022), among others, has recently argued that the presence of some 17,000 nuclear weapons in countries stable and unstable, should alert the public to what he considers the greatest threat to the existence of humanity currently facing the world. It is worthwhile in the general atmosphere of concern to look back to the initial responses to the nuclear era in works of fiction and drama. In this light, I propose to discuss Robert E. Sherwood's play *The Twilight* (1947). (Sherwood was an American dramatist, historian, and presidential speechwriter who is little remembered today.) *The Twilight* is the first play written in the immediate aftermath of World War II about the possibility of a future nuclear conflagration. I will show how—*mirabile dictu*—the gods of Greece and Rome were present at the beginning of the nuclear age and how they were intended by the playwright to alert the public to the new peril. The gods in Sherwood's play live on in a world that has forgotten them and turned its attention from its past, as represented by classical antiquity, to a “brave new world” of modern science.

The idea that the gods of Greece and Rome continue to exist in a world that has forgotten them goes back at least as far as Lucian. In *Zeus Rants*, Lucian depicts the gods' grave concern about how philosophy has replaced the old Olympian religion in the minds of humankind. The continued existence of the ancient gods in a modern context is a theme with an unbroken history since Lucian. Heinrich Heine imparted a new, serious spin to the idea that the gods of classical antiquity still survive. In *Die Götter im Exil* (1853) Heine inaugurated the theme of “the gods in

exile.” Heine imagined that the gods of the ancient world have been exiled from their traditional home on Olympus and live out their lives in hidden corners of the world, unrecognized by a humanity that has turned its allegiance to what Heine regarded as a malignant enemy: the pernicious force of a newer religion, Christianity. In *The Twilight*, Sherwood picks up Heine’s theme of the gods in exile but he replaces Christianity as their conquering enemy by the destructive forces of modern science that gave birth to the nuclear age.

The scene of *The Twilight* is an unnamed island in the Ionian Sea, which is conceived of as somehow separate from the rest of the earth. The earth is thought of here as a whole, lacking meaningful borders. Ares describes borders as “imaginary lines” dividing the various nations of the world (Sherwood: 1947, 2.5.31). On this island live Ares, Aphrodite, Ganymede, and, finally, Lyrith, Aphrodite’s half-mortal daughter by an Athenian shepherd who perished long ago during the Persian Wars. Other gods inhabit other islands (1.2.34), though Zeus still seems to maintain his place on Olympus. In Aphrodite’s words, the other gods have been “exiled from Olympus” (2.4.15):

Beyond the sea which happily surrounds us there is a place called the earth which is populated by something called “the human race.” It is composed of temporary creatures who pride themselves on being “thinking animals”—and that incidentally has been their downfall. They thought themselves right out of the paradise which we had created. They thought themselves into chaos. It was too much thinking that led them to the tragic error of curiosity... They ride to their inevitable doom on the wings of a question mark. Whereas, we gods are free from the curse of curiosity.

Ares decides to leave the island and check in more detail what has been going on with the human race. When he returns to the island, he reports on scenes of destruction that outdo anything he was able to contrive long ago as the Greek god of war.

Sherwood's *The Twilight* has never been produced. Nonetheless, it is an important, overlooked contribution to the Classical Tradition in twentieth-century America.

#### Bibliography

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