
Straddling the Fence: Robert Graves, Victorian and Modernist Modes of Writing about the Past

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Introduction

Change in human character takes time; it also takes plenty of grit and tenacity. However, situations beyond one's ken that necessitate such changes occur. The Great War occurred. It obliterated millions and left survivors dazed and disoriented. And even though the Victorian, the Belle Époque, the realistic-naturalistic and many other mindsets had already started to decay, this war seems to have lent the strongest impetus to the socio-intellectual changes that had been spreading in Western Europe in the early decades of the twentieth century.

From among these changes, the *sensu largo* object of interest of this text is the shift that took place in the field of historiography at the beginning of the twentieth century. The devaluation of the notions on which the late nineteenth-century paradigm of historiography was built resulted in this very paradigm losing its dominance. With room for new socio-intellectual vistas to open up, the modernist paradigm thrived.¹ The *sensu stricto* object of interest in this article is Robert Graves's Claudian dilogy (*I, Claudius* [1934], and *Claudius the God: and His Wife Messalina* [1935]), which I would like to examine, first, as a text that reflects the change in the historical mode of narrating past that occurred at the beginning of the century. The second purpose of my article is to show how Graves's mode of narrating the past – as it surfaces in the Claudius books – serves to position him within the historiographic landscape that formed after the Great War.²

In order to substantiate both propositions, I follow several coordinated lines of argument. The first part of this text opens with a précis of Peter Burke's theory of the key elements of Western historical thinking,³ in which the basic tenets of his theory are delineated and, to focus more clearly on Graves, the details of his so-called mode of writing about the past examined. In this case, I focus on the characteristics of the modes of writing about the past that dominated in the history writing of the late Victorian and modernist England. I conclude this section with a discussion of how Graves's Claudian dilogy draws on and/or distances itself from both these modes.

The second part of this work, informed by Kenneth J. Gergen's concept of the relational self, starts with a brief recapitulation of Gergen's idea that one's socio-intellectual functioning is shaped by the choices of narrative conventions one makes to handle social and private situations.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, I only focus on Gergen's conventions that seem most pertinent to Graves's texts, in particular, the so-called narrative negotiation of dependency. In the conclusion section, I summarise my findings and capitalise on them by addressing some of their implications.

Robert Graves's Drawing on the Victorian and Modernist Modes of Writing about the Past

In 'Western Historical Thinking in a Global Perspective – 10 Theses', Peter Burke puts forward a set of concepts that he deems to be constitutive of Western historical thinking. For him, each model of such thinking is a unique amalgamation of approaches to the following concepts: time, cultural distance, a/historicism, agency, historical knowledge, causality, objectivity, scriptocentrism, mode of writing about the real, and space.⁵ Although the author does not discuss even one such model that has fuelled Western European history writing, he does expand on the concepts he enumerates. Out of these, the one I would like to

concentrate on concerns the mode of writing about the real. When elaborating on it, Burke points to the fact that, within each model of historical thinking, one can notice idiosyncratic ways in which historians mould their narratives about the past. According to him, these ways – or mythemes, as he labels them most likely after Levi-Strauss – depend on the widely accepted perception of reality. To illustrate this observation, Burke adduces examples of historians who depict the past following the manner of *tragedy* (Polybius, Thucydides), *epic* (sixteenth- and seventeenth-century luminaries), and *progress* (Ernst Cassirer), arguing that these are the mythemes that constituted the generally accepted perception of the real at their respective times (Burke 2002a, pp. 26-27).

With this in mind, I would like to reconstruct the general ways in which late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English historiographers tended to mould their narratives, i.e. to delineate the mythemes organising their writings. According to Georg Iggers, the main difference between late nineteenth-century historians and their early twentieth-century counterparts hinges on their contrasting attitudes toward dominant narratives. Nineteenth century historians sought to create ‘a grand narrative of the history of man [..., a] story with a central plot in which individuals take their place’;⁶ but later historians tended to retreat from grand narratives, preferring to emphasise the complexity, orderliness and disorderliness of the past as well as the purposefulness and contingency of the heterogeneous forces shaping it.

The Victorian mytheme is quite reassuring when likened to the one that succeeded it. The grand narrative assured its proponents that they were at the peak of human progress with a bright future ahead of them; that their senses gave them the one and only unshakeable, coherent and unchangeable truth; that, with enough diligence, self-discipline and firmness, they could come up with detailed workings of the world and reproduce them in their own lives and texts. But, as it happens with many noble ideas, the progressive vision of reality could not stand up to a

reality check. The Great War and its aftermath, by and large, rendered it null and void.⁷

Eschewing all-embracing and allegedly stable socio-intellectual frames of reference, early twentieth-century historians embraced the chaos of shifting constructs, continuous sense of the inadequacy of their thoughts about the real and enervating deficiency of certainties. No new grand narrative emerged to replace the progress of humanity concept, leaving individuals free to come up with their own ideas about the real. Nevertheless, for historians, the conceptual polyphony that followed did not decline into frivolous subjectivity and chaos. For them, the real became more of a set of objects and features, contingencies and certainties, as well as states and processes driven and concatenated by both physical and mental forces in-between all of which they saw, and hence, showed historical figures as trying to make their lives meaningful.⁸



The chapters of the dilogy that cover Claudius's childhood give the impression that the real to which Graves introduces his hero is constructed as if it were logical, coherent, and well-organised, and that what precludes Claudius from understanding the workings of the world are deficiencies in his knowledge and/or interpretation of his milieu. The young protagonist has problems with learning, he is not really capable of making himself liked, he fails in carrying out simple duties. In contrast to his brother Germanicus's popularity, Lucius's cleverness and Antonia's and Julia's beauty, he seems to display no quality that would help him to find his place among the Roman elites. However, over the course of time, Graves makes his hero grasp both the alleged workings of his world and, more notably, 'their' – or rather what their interpreters envision as their – shortcomings. From a teacher pointing to every mistake, Cato grows in Claudius's eyes into a self-important brute; no longer the actual manager of the Roman empire, Livia

turns out to be a fearful woman consumed by her apprehension of a hellish penance for her atrocities.⁹ With these discoveries, Claudius proceeds to produce his own logical theories about his sound reality, until ‘a series of unfortunate events’ wrecks his schemes and lays bare the futility of formulating theories based on the ‘real is logical’ assumption. Only when he juxtaposes the revelations of Herod’s obsession with power, Messalina’s nymphomania, Agrippina’s thirst for influence, and Britannicus’s craze for the title of emperor, does Claudius conclude that the vision of reality which he has cherished for so long is simply naive.¹⁰ The ending of Claudius’s life is marked by his painful yet intellectually brave realisation that his reality is not as ordered or organisable as he has supposed, that it is formed of people’s rational but also irrational needs and/or impulses.

What might strike one at this point as a very peculiar authorial strategy is not only that Claudius’s realisation arrives so late in his life, but that the story gives no hint of the mature perspective of a man with forty-nine years of experience and with a thorough knowledge about the unsoundness of his reality writing his autobiography until its last chapters.¹¹ From the outset, Graves makes Claudius subject everything and everybody to an almost academic scrutiny. The results fail him at first, then, compel him to seek a more sophisticated explanation of the workings of his world. Following closely Claudius’s initial pursuits, readers may indeed end up with the impression that Claudius’s real is sound and his misapprehensions about given situations result from insufficient data and/or their inadequate processing.¹² Unless one is familiar with this type of narrative construction – or as long as one does not jump ahead to the last chapters of the diology in which the protagonist’s plans become conclusively wrecked – such an interpretation of Claudius’s logicalise-fail-repeat pattern might seem feasible. But the further one reads, the clearer it becomes that Graves has set out to demonstrate that Claudius’s problem lies in assuming he can understand the world, in the rationalistic sense. Claudius’s assumption of the world’s inherent

orderliness turns out to be his wishful thinking. And, if this is so, then Claudius's misinterpretations might serve as evidence of the unsoundness of his real.¹³

However, it would be incorrect to suggest that Graves is of one mind as regards this question. *I, Claudius* does not set out to depict an irrational world, or a mad historian. The real in it is never unsound to its extreme – to use the cliché, not thoroughly unsound. The proposed construct is, on the one hand, so unsound as to foreclose its comprehensive rational understanding, but, on the other, sound enough to comprise certain logical patterns – such as situation-related laws that even the lunatic emperor (without money Caligula would not afford his whims) and obedient soldiers (regardless of the situation, the Roman soldiers obey their commanders) need to observe.¹⁴

Interestingly, if Graves designates Claudius's real as predominantly unsound – most likely as a result of realising the unsoundness of his own world¹⁵ – but, nonetheless, makes the hero struggle to find his own place and make his dreams come true, perhaps, his retreat from the late nineteenth-century concept of the sound real does not amount to its categorical repudiation. It would seem that he follows one of the modernist trends that do not wholly reject the achievements of Victorian historiography but take a more moderate stance, allowing that the real functions on both the irrational (to a larger extent) and the rational (to a smaller extent).

The Claudian Dilogy as Graves's Means of Situating Himself against/within the Victorian and Modernist Modes of Writing about the Past

Graves's stance reflects his efforts to situate himself within the intellectual traditions that shaped the post-WWI world and broadly defined history-writing. To explore the details of this process, I would like to avail myself of the mentioned theory of

one's socio-intellectual functioning proposed by Gergen. According to Gergen, the way the self – or as he calls it, the relational self – plays out a given situation depends on its use of available and/or relevant narrative conventions.¹⁶ In most cases, there exists an imposed narrative which is considered primary for the given situation. The self may follow it – and hence, support it – or disagree with it – and hence, try to destroy, destabilise or substantially remould it. Graves's *dilogy* also presents a situation – fighting for the better future of Rome – in which the self – Claudius – affects the dependencies between dominating and competing narratives via, as I intend to show, negotiating these dependencies.¹⁷ In what follows, I wish to show that Claudius's change in orientation is a narrative device by which Graves critically negotiates his own retreat from the late nineteenth-century English historiographical idea of world order to justify aligning himself with the modernist embrace of disorder.

The sense of order and reasonableness is one of the key intellectual attributes with which Graves endows his protagonist. Young Claudius, as befits an aspiring historian, roots in time-worn manuscripts and contemporary social affairs to formulate a comprehensive vision of his reality. Researching and cataloguing the past and the present becomes his means of escaping the brutalities concocted by his relatives and soon melts into a passion morphing to an *idée fixe*.¹⁸ Thus, initially, world order is shown in the *dilogy* as an ideal whose comprehension is a worthy goal, and hence, as a value the text seems to assert. But, as one follows the story, this impression starts wearing off. Piecemeal, the knowledge Claudius and the reader are granted reveals the naiveté of many of his (and our) judgements, especially those related to the world order.¹⁹

Step by step, Graves reveals that the Roman world order cannot be grasped by reason alone (but, initially, refrains from a full conclusion). As if to prepare the ground for an irresistible critical attack, he has Claudius attempt yet another world order vision test – this time, his own vision of the better future of the Roman Empire, which fails because the protagonist is incapable of

eradicating the tyranny with his own hands. Only then does Graves move on to re-evaluating the underlying premise (rather than faulting the application). First, he has Claudius highlight the fact that order is maker-dependent, and hence, not an inherent property of the real.²⁰ Secondly, he puts into Claudius's mouth the comment that the emperors seem to come, scrabble with ordering their real according to their wishes and go crestfallen at their failures, at best. At worst, 'monarchy [also] turns [their] wits'.²¹ He saw, after all, Tiberius and Caligula – and could add himself to the set – enter the Julio-Claudian tradition of supervising the Empire. None of them, however, squeezes himself or herself into the predetermined role of the Empire caretaker. On the contrary, ignoring, by and large, their predecessors' achievements, each of them uses the obtained goods and privileges to impose a world order of their own design.²² In this way, Graves demonstrates how superficial, volatile, and non-persistent world orders are.

Thirdly and most importantly, blind adherence to the idea of world order, and making it the foundation of one's perception of the real, is shown as irrational because the world does not follow along a logical course toward rationally predicted outcomes. When, bearing the above in mind, broken Claudius starts re-evaluating the past, he makes the world orders of the Etruscans, Britons, or Germanic tribes, appear in a new light, this time, as examples of visions which keep crumpling and getting replaced by their allegedly upgraded, yet similarly unsuccessful versions.²³

If, in the last chapters of the dilogy, world order is revealed as an unstable and devalued concept uncritical allegiance to which entails certain catastrophe, one must wonder what alternative Graves would have in its place. Ostensibly, he seems to propose nothing. Between Claudius's collapse and his final words, there is just one paragraph, in which we find no solution, no redeeming value:

My eyes are weary, and my hand shakes so much that I can hardly form the letters. Strange portents have been seen of late. A great comet like that which foretold the death of

Julius Caesar has long been blazing in the midnight sky. From Egypt a phoenix has been reported. It flew there from Arabia, as its custom is, followed by a flock of admiring other birds. I can hardly think that it was a true phoenix, for that appears only once every 1,461 years, and only 250 years have elapsed since it was last genuinely reported from Heliopolis in the reign of the third Ptolemy; but certainly it was some sort of phoenix. And as if a phoenix and comet were not sufficient marvels, a centaur has been born in Thessaly and brought to me at Rome (by way of Egypt where the Alexandrian doctors first examined it), and I have handled it with my own hands. It only lived a single day, and came to me preserved in honey, but it was an unmistakable centaur, and of the sort which has a horse's body, not the inferior sort which has an ass's body. Phoenix, comet, and centaur, a swarm of bees among the standards at the Guards Camp, a pig farrowed with claws like a hawk, and my father's monument struck by lightning! Prodigies enough, soothsayers? (Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 418)

In these lines, the narrator merely inventories portents spotted recently in the Roman Empire: a comet, phoenix, centaur; and laments his tiredness. Taken at face value, it would seem that Graves excuses himself from proposing his own theory about the real.²⁴

However, in his silence, Graves would seem to be siding with the modernists who explicitly abstain from offering up alternatives to the progressive vision of the world, as an ideological principle. Clearing the field of macrotheories of that type, they attempt to show that microtheories applied to particular historical situations have greater explanatory value, or, to phrase it more grandly, the historical real does not tend toward some telos but operates as much on contingency as on individuals' purposeful actions.²⁵ Therefore, rather than a sign of negligence or anxiety, Graves's silence is simultaneously his declaration of retreat from the telic conception of historical reality and an advance upon a conception

that allows for the coincidence of opposites: certainty with contingency, truth with lies, and chaos with order.

Conclusions

A person born into a reality that appears, from the outset of one's life, to intimate and (on reflection) to turn out to be patently liquid, might develop a sense of longing for an idealised past that operates in line with some world order.²⁶ However, a person who is reared believing that his or her real is ordered, unambiguous and continuously progressing towards some better and brighter future, only to have this belief shattered by experience, would be more likely to struggle with the cognitive dissonance regarding the devastated ideal.²⁷

Robert Graves is an example of the latter type but also an example of an individual who skilfully manages such dissonance. On the one hand, he avails himself of selected achievements of Victorian historicism, and hence, shows himself to be thoughtful enough not to reject *in toto* the tradition in which he was born and educated. On the other hand, having demonstrated respect for the achievements of this tradition and benefited from its selective use, he distances himself from it. But, since Graves is not the only one handling such cognitive dissonance, one might wonder if, by any chance, his nimble balancing between intellectual stances might be typical of an early twentieth-century individual and, in particular, historiographer.

When it comes to the condition of early twentieth-century humanity, it might be rather obvious to conclude that Graves is yet another case confirming that to be human means to straddle the fence. But, less obviously, Graves's straddling is of a peculiar character. When disillusioned with a certain idea, intellectual tradition, etc., people tend to turn their backs on the source of their distress and think that discarding an idea means they have renounced their affinities with it. They have 'evolved'. But Graves makes thrifty use of the failed Victorian ideal. Not only do his

actions indicate a respect for this tradition but, when understood as an intellectual gesture, they seem to predate the developments of Harold Bloom or, to be more historical-context accurate, Ewa Domańska.²⁸ According to her, we may wish to think that ideas, worldviews, and social trends come and then fade into oblivion; and, as it might also be added, that we differ substantively from our eighteenth- or nineteenth-century predecessors. But we might notice instead that, even when we abandon a socio-intellectual milieu, we are left with mental baggage; and our culture cannot but develop on, following Domańska's concept, the humic foundations left by bygone generations.²⁹

When it comes to the implications of the fact that modernist writings about the past – as it might be surmised, Graves again participates in a wider trend – did not abandon the idea of order *in toto* but rather recalibrated its application to particular situations, one might of course feel goaded into concluding that just as the humic foundations of our predecessors shape the world so they shape history writing. Pertinent as this inference is, I would like to offer one more thought that this gesture seems to invite: if order is a construct that historians keep cherishing and which, in various iterations, seems to be an unalienable part of their practice,³⁰ the problem it generates might not be that it is a construct imposed on reality but that it should be kept made meaningful to be acceptable.

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 NOTES

¹ Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 284-285, 309.

² Robert Graves, *I, Claudius. From the Autobiography of Tiberius Claudius Emperor of the Romans: Born 10 B. C., Murdered and Deified A. D. 54* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984) and *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina: The Troublesome Reign of Tiberius Claudius Caesar, Emperor of the Romans (Born 10 B. C., Died A. D. 54), as Described by Himself; Also His Murder at the Hands of the Notorious Agrippina (Mother of the Emperor Nero) and His Subsequent Deification, as Described by Others* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

³ Peter Burke, 'Western Historical Thinking in a Global Perspective – 10 Theses', in *Western Historical Thinking. An Intercultural Debate*, ed. by Jörn Rüsen (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 15-30.

⁴ Kenneth J. Gergen, 'Psychological Science in a Postmodern Context', pre-publication draft for *The American Psychologist*, vol. 56, no. 10 (2001), p. [13]

<https://www.academia.edu/24541498/Psychological_Science_in_a_Postmodern_Context> [accessed 15 October 2015]

⁵ Burke's eighth thesis concerns the use of statistics in history (Burke 2002a, pp. 15-30). This thesis is of little relevance for this article because proper quantitative methods of historical research emerged in the second half of the twentieth century (although their incipient forms were present in the paradigms discussed in this work). In Peter Burke, 'Reply', in *Western Historical Thinking. An Intercultural Debate*, ed. by Jörn Rüsen (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 189-198, the author adds one more thesis, i.e. scriptocentrism. Because this thesis is of direct relevance for the history writing in the periods in question, I leave out the thesis of quantitative methods and replace it with scriptocentrism.

⁶ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), pp. 57. One should remember that the second half of the nineteenth century was the time of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and Marx's *Capital* (1867), which inspired historians to create works framed by either of these two progressive

grand narratives. According to Hayden White, Darwin argued for ‘the existence of real “affinities” genealogically construed. The establishment of these affinities [permitted] him to postulate the linkage of all living things to all others by the “laws” or “principles” of genealogical descent, variation, and natural selection’. Hayden White, ‘Fictions of Factual Representation’, in *Tropics of Discourse. Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 121-134 (p. 131).

⁷ Iggers, p. 57; Alison Byerly, *Realism, Representation, and the Arts in Nineteenth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 6.

⁸ José Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), pp. 165-166.

⁹ Graves, *I, Claudius*, passim.

¹⁰ Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

¹¹ Graves, *Claudius the God*, p. 9: ‘The reason I did not take the story any farther was that I wrote it less as ordinary story than as a piece of special pleading – an apology for having ever allowed myself to become the monarch of the Roman world.’

¹² Graves, *I, Claudius*, passim.

¹³ Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

¹⁴ Graves, *I, Claudius*, pp. 353-396, and *Claudius the God*, pp. 62-81.

¹⁵ James S. Mehoke, *Robert Graves: Peace-Weaver* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), passim.

¹⁶ Gergen, p. 12.

¹⁷ Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen, ‘Narrative and the Self as Relationship’, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 21 (1988), 17-56, (p. 39).

¹⁸ Alicja Bembien, ‘Solitude as a Means of Survival’, *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 2 (2014), 24-31. Should one treat this behaviour of the protagonist as a symptom of his *idée fixe*, one may see why – with all his astuteness and knowledge – Claudius needs more than fifty years to abandon the idea of world order.

¹⁹ Graves, *Claudius the God*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 112-116, 370-373, 415.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 404.

²² Graves, *I, Claudius*, passim, and *Claudius the God*, pp. 415-418.

²³ Graves, *Claudius the God*, passim.

²⁴ Graves's declaration that his novels were pot-boilers, intended only to pay the rent, transpires as a gesture of his downplaying the care and thought he put into these novels, perhaps because he felt he had to promote the importance of his poetry.

²⁵ Bruce E. Fleming, *Structure and Chaos in Modernist Works* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), passim.

²⁶ I refer to the concept proposed by Zygmunt Bauman in his *Liquid Modernity*. Behaviours of the sort seem to be emblematic, for example, of the contemporary golden-age yearners. See Woody Allen, dir. *Midnight in Paris* (Sony Pictures Classics, 2011).

²⁷ An individual shown that his or her worldview is untenable does not automatically have to abandon it. Psychological responses might take, in this case, various forms of negation, acceptance, etc.

²⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), and Ewa Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018).

²⁹ Ewa Domańska, *Nekros. Wprowadzenie do ontologii martwego ciała*, p. 48. A humic foundation is one whose contents have been buried so they may be dug up in the future.

³⁰ Stephen Arata, 'Some Versions of Form', in *A Companion to the English Novel*, ed. by Stephen Arata and others (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2015), pp. 192-208 (pp. 194-195).

Human beings are hard-wired to perceive pattern; the world would be unintelligible otherwise. Depending on your perspective, art is a tool either for uncovering the order inherent in human experience or for creating order where it does not exist. Or both: by means of its self-evidently artificial patterns, a work of art may heighten our awareness of the looser kinds of organization that structure the real world and our experiences in it.