
Visioning the Impossible

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Upon reading the possible variations offered upon the theme of this conference, ‘Robert Graves and Europe: Good-bye to All That / But It Still Goes On’, I have chosen to talk about ‘the relevance of his writing for our European present and future’, and in doing so I shall bring in a writer who is a European par excellence: the Italian writer Claudio Magris – of whom more anon.

How do the present and future appear to us? No less gloomy than they appeared to W. B. Yeats, who wrote in 1919, ‘Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; | Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world’.¹ Or, ten years later, to Thomas Hardy, at the close of his last volume of verse: ‘We are getting to the end of visioning | The impossible within this universe.’² Or ten years later still, to W. H. Auden, whose ‘September 1939’ provides a weather forecast for our own time:

Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives.

For ‘obsessed’ we are becoming, with each morning an anxious scanning for some further development down the road to catastrophe, our present fears beginning to coalesce with horrible imaginings into dread of a Minotaur that awaits not simply Europe, but the world. And its expression is by no means the prerogative of established literature: it is the stuff of popular song, as in Bob Dylan’s ‘License to Kill’, a song either directly influenced by Graves’s thought, or else startlingly coincidental with it:

Man thinks ‘cause he rules the earth he can do with it as he
 please
 And if things don’t change soon, he will
 Oh, man has invented his doom
 First step was touching the moon
 Now, there’s a woman on my block
 She just sit there as the night grows still
 She say who gonna take away his license to kill?³

It is also the stuff of cabaret poetry, such as Emile Sercombe’s
That adja goin dinnit – reminiscent of Graves’s ‘Lift-Boy’:

All those souls blasted to never never
 Because we trusted god
 No wonder ee gave isself the option
 Of having a load more ter be goin on with
 When our planet snuffs it.⁴

And then it is also the stuff of prose, of journalism, such as that of
 George Monbiot, writing, in 2017, of his recurring nightmare:

When I say this keeps me up at night, I mean it. I am
 plagued by visions of starving people seeking to escape
 from grey wastes, being beaten back by armed police. I see
 the last rich ecosystems snuffed out, the last of the global
 megafauna – lions, elephants, whales and tuna – vanishing.
 And when I wake, I cannot assure myself that it was just a
 nightmare.⁵

And when we ourselves turn to the news of the day there is
 enough in it to explain why he cannot.

For we all share this nightmare in some measure, dread of the
 hunger and violence that the Minotaur embodies. In this context,
 discussion of ‘the relevance of Graves’s writing for our European
 present and future’ expands to include the relevance of all art.

What do we expect of it? And should we expect of the artist answers to questions perhaps more properly addressed to the priest, politician, scientist, philosopher, journalist indeed? And the artist himself: how does he view his relevance to the common predicament? One of involvement or withdrawal? A Guernica, or an Ivory Tower? A Tennyson admonishing Gladstone: ‘Steersman, be not precipitate in thine act’, or a Yeats declining to write a war poem: ‘I think it better that in times like these | A poet's mouth be silent, for in truth | We have no gift to set a statesman right.’⁶ As Eliot said in another context: ‘these cogitations still amaze | The troubled midnight and the noon’s repose.’⁷

Where, then, is Graves in all this? In the first year of Graves’s life, Thomas Hardy wrote three poems under the same title, ‘In Tenebris’, in the second of which he identifies himself as one ‘Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst’. ‘Twere not too curious to consider this as a gift from a Fairy Godfather to help through life one who from school onwards felt himself, to use the words of the poem, ‘as one shaped awry’, who ‘disturbs the order here’, a gift seemingly acknowledged when Graves came to write, some forty years on:

To manifest poetic faith by a close and energetic study of the disgusting, the contemptible and the evil is not very far in the direction of poetic serenity, but it has been the behaviour most natural to a man of my physical and literary inheritances.⁸

Such ‘study’ concentrated primarily on individual problems of the sort he itemises in the Epilogue to *Good-bye to All That*: ‘arguing morals, literature, politics, suffering violent physical experiences, falling in and out of love, making and losing friends, enduring blindly in time’ – in short, the problems of one whose context reinforces his sense of being – again in Hardy’s words: ‘one born out of due time, who has no calling here’.⁹

Good-bye to All That was his farewell to that context in its personal, one might say local, application, but there remained a wider context that his energetic studies inevitably pointed towards, namely the fate of civilisation itself. It is to this he addressed himself in the trenchant utterances of the poem ‘Recalling War’:

War was return of earth to ugly earth,
 War was foundering of sublimities,
 Extinction of each happy art and faith
 By which the world had still kept head in air,
 Protesting logic or protesting love,
 Until the unendurable moment struck –
 The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

There is no gainsaying, to use a favourite word of Graves’s, the authority of these pentameters, any more than one can argue with Prospero’s valediction to the ‘great globe’, or with the self-evident inevitability of Yeats’s ‘Man is in love, and loves what vanishes, | What more is there to say?’ – except that the ‘more there is to say’ is the bitterness of the realisation that *it still goes on*, that the main problem of paganism, as Graves frames it in *The White Goddess*, namely ‘Must all things swing round again for ever?’,¹⁰ is also ours: ‘A sight to be recalled in elder days | When learnedly the future we devote | To yet more boastful visions of despair.’¹¹

But by the time he came to write that, Graves had already found a way to the better, as set forth in his Introduction to *The Common Asphodel*, 1949: ‘for the last twenty-two years [I] have abandoned the view that the poet is a public servant ministering to the caprices of a world in perpetual flux. I now regard him as independent of fashion and public service, a servant only of the true Muse.’¹²

He had expressed the same sentiment already in ‘The Fallen Tower of Siloam’:

It behoved us, indeed, as poets
 To be silent in Siloam, to foretell
 No visible calamity. Though kings
 Were crowned and gold coin minted still and horses
 Still munched at nose-bags in the public streets
 All such sad emblems were to be condoned:
 An old wives' tale, not ours.

Which leaves the majority of us among the nosebags (present company excepted, of course). Graves is famously unapologetic about this. *Good-bye* was not only to *all that* but 'to you and to you': Us and Them, the genuine few and the hoi polloi, Eliot's crowd of dead flowing over London Bridge, so many.

Nevertheless, as Lionel Trilling observed, Graves does indeed believe in civilisation as, to use his own words, 'the graceful relation of all varieties of experience to a central humane system of thought'.¹³ It is the present phase of civilisation he has no sympathy with, and little hope for its future. So, in his personal life he gets as far away as possible from its immediate effects:

Call me, if you like, the fox who has lost his brush; I am nobody's servant and have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle.¹⁴

And for the world at large, well, as Owen stated in midst of other woe than ours: 'All a poet can do today is warn.' And this Graves does, in his prose, where we find such passages as the following, from 1961 edition of *The White Goddess*:

No: there seems no escape from our difficulties until the industrial system breaks down for some reason or other [...] and nature reasserts herself with grass and trees among the ruins (*White Goddess*, 1961, p. 482).

Or this, in terms not unreminiscent of the conclusion of *Candide*, from a lecture delivered to MIT in 1963:

What I should like to see is cultural reserves, protected from an outside influence, even from anthropological study – the natives being left enough fertile land and animal life to give them a decent chance of survival. If our own highly artificial culture blows up, only such reserves can preserve humanity.¹⁵

I include the dates of these excerpts to applaud Graves for warning us then, but also to indicate how little likelihood there is now, given corporate greed and climate change, of either nature reasserting herself or cultural reserves being created.

And what of his own future, from which the commonalty are perforce debarred? Graves's construct of the White Goddess and her incarnation, the Muse Woman with whom the true poet falls wholly and fatally in love, would seem proof against the kinds of problem that beset, say, Christianity. But among Graves's last poems, the majority of which are celebrations of his muse of the time, there are occasional indications of the construct beginning to crack.

Tell me, love, are you sick too
And plagued like me with a great hole in the mind
Where all those towers we built, and not on sand,
Have been sucked in and lost; so that it seems
No dove, and no black cat, nor puff of smoke
Can cause a shift of scene and fetch us back
To where we lie as one, in the same bed?

So concludes 'A Shift of Scene', unique among the muse-poems Graves wrote in his later years in its despairing realisation (is this the first time poetry has made use of the black hole?) that the

whole magnificent structure of the White Goddess has, like the cloud-capp'd towers of Prospero's vision, which these lines recall, dissolved and left not a rack behind.

For the twentieth century, which opened in nightmare, for Graves ended so. When visited by a Spanish journalist in his extreme old age he was troubled by three things: he did not know where his passport was; he was afraid that mechanical diggers were coming to destroy his garden; he was tormented by remorse for the men he had killed in the war, regarding himself as a murderer. The facelessness, mechanization, and violence of our age could scarcely be more succinctly emblemized.



Hardy closed his final volume of verse, *Winter Words*, with the poem 'He Resolves to Say No More', and at this point there may be those amongst you hoping that I will emulate him. But if we are to speak of our European present and future we need to hear the voice of a European who can write acceptably of the present: 'Europe is above all a culture, ours, mine; a culture which permeates our innermost fibres, a style and an atmosphere, a Κοινή, an inhabited world to which we spontaneously feel we belong.'¹⁶

We need a writer who can write responsibly of the future, who 'can and must speak of the concrete problems confronting Europe today, of what favours or impedes the process of European unification, of the possibilities or difficulties of one day reaching, [...] a truly European State': someone who can also write realistically of a past that has to be faced, since it overshadows both present and future:

One thinks of the unmentionable, barbarous conditions of wretchedness and labour compelled for so long upon millions and millions of men degraded to subhuman conditions of life; one thinks of the crimes and the

genocides committed in the name of ideologies – a product uniquely and perversely European. One thinks in the first place, obviously, of the Shoah and of National-Socialism in general, a depth of barbarism quite unequalled; and it was we Europeans who created Auschwitz. ('Europe', no page number)

Now I would not for a moment suggest that Graves was unaware of all that, but it does not enter his writing in so patent a manner, which to that extent limits its relevance for our European present and future. What also limits its relevance – speaking as an Englishman – is our own insular acquaintance with Europe, which makes it so easy for us to forget why the European Union was formed in the first place. Not to be aware of the immediate and far-reaching effects of the Second World War upon the countries of Europe is a prerequisite for membership of the Brexit club, which is why I wish to introduce here the author of the passages I quoted above – Claudio Magris: one time Professor of Modern and Contemporary German Literature at the University of Trieste, novelist, essayist, public lecturer, erstwhile senator of the Italian Republic, Erasmus prize-winner, but above all inhabitant of the melting pot of Central Europe – Trieste. His life and work are inextricably involved in what might turn out to be Europe's fate, or destiny. If Graves has a private obsession with the Muse, then Magris might be said to have a public one with Europe. However, getting to know Magris through his writings it was inevitable that I should at the same time be recalling Graves, whose own work has become over the years part of the furniture of my mind. Even though the two men are as different as age, experience, nationality, language and personal experience could make them, they are profoundly alike in their dedication to writing, in their belief in civilisation and the values that make it possible, and in their determined grappling, as writers, with an age they see as inimical to that dedication and that belief.

Perhaps Magris's best known work is *Danube*, the story of the writer's journey from the source of the river to its estuary, a story which is no mere travelogue but an extraordinary vehicle for Magris's encyclopaedic knowledge of the history, geography, philosophy, literature, politics and language that pertain to the countries of Mitteleuropa – a kind of *White Goddess* in that it is a central expression of the writer's thought and belief. But the work that came afterwards also put me curiously in mind of Graves and his single-minded devotion to the Goddess. *The Voices* is a short dramatic monologue. The curtain rises on a room furnished only with a chair and a table, and upon it a telephone. This the protagonist makes continuous use of to call the ladies of his acquaintance, but only in order to listen to their voices as recorded on the answer phone. Should by ill chance the real woman answer the phone, he hangs up immediately. This put me comically in mind of Graves's distinction between the woman 'good as bread' and that impossible she 'as rare as myrrh'. But the comicality faded as I considered the comparison more attentively: the fate not only of the muse-woman should she fail to live up to her high calling, but also of the hopelessness of the poet's dependence on what, in 'Nightmare of Senility', he calls an 'archaic legend' – ultimately a construct which reality refuses. (I'm not sure whether it is fair to add that Magris's character turns out to be the inmate of a lunatic asylum.)

For common to both writers is the theme, born of experience, of the forlorn hope, and their admiration for those who, like Eliot's three Magi, persist in their quest despite the world's derision. So Magris repeatedly in his work adverts to the true story of the communists from Monfalcone, a town just outside Trieste, who at the end of the war crossed the border between Italy and neighbouring Yugoslavia to help rebuild the country in the name of Socialism, only to be thrown into brutal prison camps after they had protested against Tito's break with Stalin. Years later the survivors returned to Italy, only to find their homes occupied by others, the Italian Communist Party wanting little to do with them,

and the Italian police harassing them as probable Communist spies. Magris concludes his account:

They are men who always find themselves on the other side, in the wrong place at the wrong time, who have also fought for a mistaken cause and believed in a deception, namely Stalin. But their moral strength, their heroic capacity for sacrifice and dedication, their willingness to sacrifice themselves to fight for the freedom of humanity at large, such are the virtues that constitute their greatest legacy and that we ought to make our own [...] it is a great story, to which I remain obstinately faithful.¹⁷

When I first read this story, what came immediately to my mind was Graves's poem 'The Cuirassiers of the Frontier', and what may be seen as a prose gloss:

Ordinary civilised virtues had given place to heroic ones. We remained free because we were volunteers and bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament. Holding a trench to the last round of ammunition and the last man, taking a one-in-three chance of life when rescuing a badly wounded comrade from no-man's-land, keeping up a defiant pride in our soldierly appearance: these were poetic virtues. Our reward lay in their practice, with possible survival as a small bright light seen at the end of a long tunnel.¹⁸

Had the two groups of men been able to meet, one feels they would have understood one another well.

Which leads me to the genre the two writers have in common, namely the historical novel – understood not as romantic fiction set in costume times, but as a means of righting an historical wrong, setting the record straight. Look at Graves's treatment of Claudius, of Belisarius, of Milton's wife, of William Palmer. Likewise, Magris will defend the Monfalcone communists, the

deluded disciple of the philosopher Michelstaedter, the doomed Ataman of the White Cossacks, the manic collector of the war museum, Diego di Henriquez. Their driving concern is with the search for truth – which brings me to the chief reason for my introducing Magris into this essay. For while there is a great deal in Graves's work I can respond to, there is nevertheless something central to the experience of Europe that I do not find in Graves but have become keenly aware of by living in Trieste, the city where Mussolini proclaimed his racial laws, which hosted the Risiera, the only death camp in Italy, which underwent what England, with the exception of the Channel Islands, was blessedly spared – Occupation – and all its attendant evils. This reality is at the centre of Magris's most recent book, *Blameless*, wherein he exacts a full look at Europe's worst. The scope of the novel is wide-ranging, but its focal point is the creation of a fantastic war museum, filled with whatever weapon, document, poster, uniform its manic collector can lay hands on, in the hope that all this paraphernalia of destruction will cure men of the will to war. However, as Magris relates:

In the end my [...] character makes a mortal leap from the search for dead objects to the search for truth, a terrible truth. In the labyrinth of his and my Museum there is a Minotaur, strangely silent until a few years ago, the Risiera of San Sabba. For while eventually all was known about the Nazi occupation, the tortures in the Villa Triste, the hostages hanged and so on, about the Risiera – silence. A forgetting, a scraping away of the collective memory, an amputation of the hippocampus of the city, of the country. History as neurosurgery. This lethargic, dull silence is one of the reasons that have compelled me to write this book.¹⁹

To conclude; what these two writers have devoutly in common, I should hazard, is this regard for the truth of the past, without which the present and future are founded on lies and deceit, on

whitewash like the walls of the Risiera. This monitory function of memory informs ‘Recalling War’ and *Blameless* alike. But in its exercise memory has a more lasting effect. It is responsible, in Graves’s case, for that most poignant of elegies, ‘The Last Day of Leave’. In Magris’s case, for the inexpressibly sad account he gives in his book *Microcosms* of the forlorn hope of his aunt Esperia. Both poem and prose are, in the phrase of the former, a ‘blind-fate-aversive afterword’, the perennial plea, from Dido’s Lament to the woman about to enter the gas chamber: ‘Remember me’; like Graves’s trees in ‘Advocates’ (“‘Yes, yes?’” they plead). And if I were asked what I best remember of the works of both writers, it would be those passages where they themselves are remembering; and the bond thereby created, like Auden’s ‘affirming flame’, is what their work has to offer Europe, for without such bonding we are for the dark. The Inspector’s impassioned adjuration at the close of J.B. Priestley’s famous play is as germane to 2018 as it was to 1945 – if not more so:

We don’t live alone. We are members of one body. We are responsible for each other. And I tell you that the time will soon come when, if men will not learn that lesson, then they will be taught it in fire and blood and anguish.²⁰

Or as the 95-year-old Harry Leslie Smith puts it, in terms that echo both St. Paul and George Orwell: ‘Hope, decency and empathy are the building blocks for our civilisation’, and the greatest of these, I am tempted to say, is empathy, that ‘eternal reciprocity of tears’ that lies at the core of Wilfred Owen’s rage against insensibility, and at the core of all art. ‘*Sunt lacrimae rerum*’, Aeneas utters as he looks upon the paintings of the Trojan war, ‘*et mentem mortalia tangunt*’. The power of art to awaken us to that truth, to touch us as no other discipline can, is its relevance, and it is a power that both Graves and Magris possess.

Nick Carter is the author of *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement*.

NOTES

¹ W. B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming' (lines 3-4).

² Thomas Hardy, 'Tuesday Poem: We Are Getting to the End' (lines 1-2).

³ Bob Dylan, 'License to Kill' *Infidels* (New York: Columbia Records, 1983) side one, song four.

⁴ Emile Sercombe, *That adja goin dinnit* (London: Apples and Snakes Pluto Press, 1984), p. 17.

⁵ George Monbiot, 'We Can't Keep Eating Like This', *The Guardian*, 11 December 2017 <<https://www.monbiot.com/2017/12/13/we-cant-keep-eating-like-this/>> [Accessed 12 April 2020] (par. 14 of 17)

⁶ W. B. Yeats, 'On Being Asked for a War Poem' (lines 1-3).

⁷ T. S. Eliot, 'La Figllia Che Piange' (lines 23-24).

⁸ Robert Graves, *Collected Poems* (London: Cassell, 1938), p. xxiv.

⁹ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That, an Autobiography: Original Edn*, ed. and annotated by Fran Brearton (London: Penguin Books, 2014, [1929]), p. 447.

¹⁰ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, ed. by Grevel Lindop (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013), p. 195.

¹¹ Robert Graves, 'Recalling War', *Collected Poems 1914-1947* (London: Cassell, 1948), p.113.

¹² Robert Graves, *The Common Asphodel: Collected Essays on Poets and Poetry, 1922-1949* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. x.

¹³ *White Goddess* 2013, p. 302.

¹⁴ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 14.

¹⁵ Robert Graves, 'Nine Hundred Iron Chariots', in *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 46.

¹⁶ Claudio Magris, 'Europe,' unpublished essay in the possession of the author.

¹⁷ Claudio Magris, 'Between the Danube and the Sea: The Itinerary of a Writer', unpublished essay in the possession of the author.

¹⁸ D. N. G. Carter, *Robert Graves: The Lasting Poetic Achievement* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), p. 51.

¹⁹ Claudio Magris, 'No Case to Answer', unpublished essay in the possession of the author.

²⁰ J. B. Priestly, *An Inspector Calls* (New York: Pearson, 1993), p. 56.