

ROBERTO CALASSO AND ALEX ANDRIESSE

A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERTO CALASSO

This conversation took place on the afternoon of June 7, 2018, in Roberto Calasso's office at Adelphi in Milan.

ALEX ANDRIESSE: I wanted to begin by asking how you see the different volumes of your Work in Progress in relation to each other. In particular, how do you see the books about historical European subjects (*The Ruin of Kasch*, *K.*, *Tiepolo Pink*, *La Folie Baudelaire*) in relation to the mythological books (*The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, *Ka*, *Ardor*)?

ROBERTO CALASSO: Let's start from the beginning. *The Ruin of Kasch* is apparently totally history, but the first lines are already a Vedic myth, after all, and myths are intertwined throughout the book. Moreover, the simple art of telling a story is at the center, because Far-li-mas is the protagonist of the legend of the Ruin of Kasch, which itself is a sort of primordial myth, although it is known only in that version that Frobenius wrote down. What changes in every book is the texture of style. As everyone can see, *The Ruin of Kasch* is a highly hybrid form, where you have all sorts of literary genres mixed: you have letters, you have fragments and aphorisms, theoretical digressions, you even have two poems and a theater scene. And that corresponds to the central matter of the book, which is what is called "modernity." Now modernity itself is defined by this mixture of elements. On the other hand, you read *Ka*, for example, and *Ka* goes straight from beginning to end through what is really a tangle of Indian stories, and of course the stories are always mixed with reflections, with thoughts, with elaborations of concepts; but that is the physiology of our mind, I think. It's not a special invention. And so each book



has a different kind of style and form. But the two elements you were asking about—myth and history—are present everywhere. That doesn't happen, of course, in the book on Kafka, because Kafka means a sort of self-sufficient world where one gets in and doesn't want to get out. Though everything is reflected in that world.

AA: And the narrator of the Work. Do you think of him as being the same throughout? One sees certain metaphors and certain motifs wonderfully reappearing from book to book.

RC: The ideal thing would be that the narrator may be totally invisible. That's what my highest aim would be, and I don't know if I've managed it. But I write as if he was invisible. The things should speak for themselves, in some way. Well, after all, myths used to speak for themselves since forever. I don't need a special voice, but a plurality of voices. I know that some of these books are in

a way terribly personal, like *La Folie Baudelaire* or *Tiepolo Pink*, but I think the same applies there, because after all they're definitely not history of art, they're definitely not history of literature. They're literature, simply, and literature is something which happens in front of one and doesn't need to be something else. I think it would be a big mistake if all this was connected too easily to what is supposed to be the psychology, or whatever else, of the author. That doesn't mean that the books are not terribly, even obsessively, linked one with the other. I think that must be totally clear now after so many years, with nine books. Sometimes I think that these connections are almost too evident. And they may be a surprise for me too. For instance, in that interview I sent you, done by Jaubert when *The Ruin of Kasch* was published in France: it was even a surprise to me to see that certain expressions which appear in *The Unnamable Present*, for instance "the superstition of society," are already there. It was already very clearly defined there. And that was '86. So a long time ago. Even "absolute literature," which is something I dealt with particularly in *Literature and the Gods*, is there throughout *The Ruin of Kasch*. So in a way I think I can be accused of all sorts of things, except that I'm not stubborn and I don't follow very constantly a certain line. Even more so because when I did that interview I was writing *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, but I had no idea, even in that moment, that after *The Marriage* there would be *Ka*.

AA: You've said before you had no plan to write a book about the Vedas. How did *Ka* come about?

RC: After *The Marriage of Cadmus* it was, in a way, like passing from a forest to a jungle. Only that Indian jungle is comparable to the forest of Greek myths. And I had to do with Indian things all the time, since before *The Ruin of Kasch*. They have always been essential to me. But I hadn't ever dealt with this huge proliferation of stories, which is Indian myth. So *Ka* was a surprise. And, when I was writing *Ka*, I was not thinking at all that the following book would be a book on Kafka, which was like going from the maximum

proliferation to the maximum reduction. That was because Kafka doesn't pardon you if you expand too much. It's a big misunderstanding if you do that. You must keep sort of playing with very spare elements, and that's what I tried to do. So it was the opposite. And at the same time the two books were closely linked for one reason, which is explicit in *Ka*, and you find it in two lines where I say that Prajapati, the progenitor of all the gods, has a relation to the gods similar to that of the K. of Kafka to the characters of Balzac and Dickens. *K.* in a way tries to show that—and at the same time it does something which was very disconcerting for the legion of interpreters of Kafka, which is that I established some connections to some Vedic categories, with which Kafka had no relation at all. But it doesn't matter. The relation is in the things. Then there were special cases like *La Folie Baudelaire* and *Tiepolo Pink*. *Tiepolo* was initially a part of *La Folie Baudelaire*. And then it was cut out of it like a branch from a tree. The trunk was *La Folie Baudelaire*. So I concentrated on *Tiepolo* and it appeared first, but in fact I see both *Tiepolo* and *Baudelaire* as two ways of looking at *le peintre de la vie moderne*, that's to say at modernity itself.

AA: In fact *The Unnamable Present* seems to have grown out of the last section of *Ardor* and, more particularly, out of *The Ruin of Kasch*.

RC: In a way, it's a similar case to what happened with *Ka* in relation to the two lines on Prajapati. "The unnamable present" are three words isolated in *The Ruin of Kasch*. And in fact in the beginning the idea for me was to write not nine or more books, or whatever—I don't know in fact how many—but to write three: two were *The Ruin of Kasch* and *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, and the third one would be a short book about what is around us. And so it happened, but many years later, with *The Unnamable Present*. I postponed the book for thirty years. I will tell you how it happened. A year and a half ago, I was planning to put together some essays or articles I had published, but never put together in a book. And then some of them, I realized, had to be part of something else, and that was a part which started as a speech

that I gave in Paris and then at Stanford, which is more or less at the beginning of *The Unnamable Present* now. And then it developed in this form. And the second part was something that I had written already in large part years ago and waited for something else where it would fit. So you see it was a surprise first of all to myself. It was not planned as it happened. If I plan something, it's sure that I won't do it exactly as I had planned. That I can say.

AA: In the English world at least, your books are often talked about as being written in a "new form." Is that fair to say?

RC: As to form, the most disconcerting and anomalous book in my ongoing work might be *The Celestial Hunter*. There you have fourteen parts and each has a totally different setting. One is an exploration of deep prehistory, focused on the passage of man from prey to predator, so its temporal range is huge. And another one is about a single night—the so called "night of the Hermocopids"—in Athens in the fifth century BC. Two other parts are straight narratives, mythical stories. Another one is set in Egypt. Another one is on the goddess Artemis. And there is a part on Plato's *Laws* and one on Plotinus. Still, a good reader may easily understand—I believe—how all these different sections converge on the same subject, which is what the Greeks called *to theïon*, "the divine." And on metamorphosis, with a range of material going from Inuit shamans to Turing. So I might say that in *The Celestial Hunter* I tried to do something which may appear outrageous to many. I was trying to show that Homo the Scavenger and Plotinus belonged to the same overall figure and should not be considered separately from each other, as paleoanthropologists and scholars of Plotinus usually do.

AA: In the other books, too, there's hardly anything formally comparable in recent English writing. Geoff Dyer may be the only Anglophone writer I can think of whose books consistently incorporate other books and remain literature, without becoming scholarship.

RC: His books have no genre, no clear genre—and that’s why there’s an affinity, in a way. He said to me once, you want to plunge immediately into the subject, and yes, that’s absolutely true. So all these books should, from the first line, be *inside* the subject, totally. No preliminaries. And that, of course, can be disconcerting—especially, you know, if you think that Vedic India is not exactly the India travelers come across today. But that’s why, I think, *Ka* and *Ardor* were received so warmly in India by so many who felt they were discovering, through these books, parts of their past they knew only vaguely about. I noticed that, even among cultivated people, if they knew the Upanishads, still they generally ignored the Brahmanas, to which the Upanishads belong. But this way of plunging into the subject applies even to *Tiepolo*. And even *Tiepolo* certainly doesn’t follow the rules of the historians of art.

AA: To have an introduction in one of these books—at least an introduction in the scholarly sense—would really take something away.

RC: Absolutely. They should appear abruptly. Which may be shocking, sometimes. Some people might prefer to go somewhere else, but others will plunge in, and they go on. For certain readers, it was obvious from the beginning. Brodsky was the reader who saw it most immediately. But I think this same thing in fact applies to all these nine books, whether they are mainly narrative or mainly something else.

AA: I’ve just typed up the Brodsky piece, which is remarkable, and then there’s the Calvino piece as well . . .

RC: Brodsky is the only one who seems to speak from the center of the book. But Calvino as well is excellent. *The Ruin of Kasch* was a book which struck him deeply. After the piece appeared, we talked about it a lot. In his last years, Calvino was circling around certain of these things and getting away from lots of things he had been involved in for a long time—and in a way going

against himself, as he knew he would. Dangerous ground. But his reaction was terribly lucid.

AA: I think you quote just one little line of that review in *The Unnamable Present*.

RC: Which one?

AA: About the abolition of the gods' dwelling-place ranging from . . .

RC: From the end of the Paleolithic to the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. Absolutely. But I didn't want to say, "in a review of one of my books..." He was very witty there. If one wants to find a sort of word around which everything turns, you can find it even before *The Ruin of Kasch*, because I realized myself a posteriori that *The Impure Fool*, my novel of 1974, was in fact a sort of prelude—a prelude in heaven or hell—but anyway a prelude to all the books of my work in progress. And that novel starts with the sort of breach in the order of the world which happens in the times of the ancestors of President Schreber, in Prussia. But in fact it's all about *rta*, that Vedic word which means at the same time "order of the world" and "truth." And that word appears in the beginning of *The Ruin of Kasch*. So the various metamorphoses of the order of the world are, I think, something which you find in all these books. And it's an endless task, in a way, because you never know where you get and from where you start. And then you get to today, when these words have a totally different meaning. In *The Unnamable Present*, I mention a book by Kissinger on "world order," thinking of the balance of powers, because simply the other meaning is totally forgotten. Today, if one says "world order," it's a question of what Russians can do versus the United States or China or vice versa. It's a proof in fact of what I call the superstition of society: nobody dares to go beyond that sort of horizon. It's strange. What is strange is that it is taken for granted. That it seems to be obvious if things are like that. But if

you think of, not only India, but even Greece, the cosmos was something else from the polis.

AA: Kafka would seem to be one of the modern writers you identify as being highly conscious that there *is* something beyond society.

RC: Kafka, for every possible reason, is something apart. You have to change your lexicon when you come to him, and if possible keep as near as you can to the letter, to what he says, without adding other things. But I have to say he is the writer to whom I refer in my mind most often, because for him it was absolutely natural to see things in this way, which went beyond whatever society could imagine—beyond whatever he had around him. And that applies, I would say, totally to him, but I couldn't think of many other examples. Though of course there are great writers, for instance Proust—who for me is most important—who are apparently totally immersed in a certain social world, but at the same time go so much beyond that even they belong to the same tribe.

AA: In *The Ruin of Kasch* especially, it's clear the narrative is steering clear of the usual sort of sociological approach to history. There's an attempt, it seems to me, to look at society both from within and without.

RC: In that interview with Jaubert, I have a formula which I think applies very well to the book. Not only to that book, but to other things, and that I have used only there, which is the following: an anamorphic vision of time, so applying anamorphosis, a distortion, in time rather than in space. That is essential for *The Ruin of Kasch*. This fact of things being at the same time very far apart and simultaneous. So, if you change the angle, you have Pol Pot coming immediately after Talleyrand or the Vedas. And that is something useful to define the way in which the book is made, because it is the opposite of the usual linear view of history, going either always toward what is better or what is worse. It's the same, after all. And that is totally alien to me.

AA: On the subject of sacrifice, you say in the Jaubert interview: “The error, the danger, is the solution. It’s thinking that everything can have a solution.” You’ve now examined the subject of sacrifice in the Vedas and the Greek myths, as well as in the French Revolution and in twenty-first century terrorist attacks. Is it such a potent subject in part because it is a problem without a solution?

RC: Solution is a very important word. But not for me. Especially in the Anglo-American or Scandinavian world, lots of people think they are very practical and they want whatever you say to have a solution. And, unfortunately, I have very bad news on that point, because I think it’s the main social democratic mistake to think that everything has a solution. “Just give us enough time”: that is the social democratic way of thinking. Well, being in Holland you have an experience of that. The secular, enlightened people are open to whatever you can think or whatever you can imagine, they are full of generosity and open to all sort of things, and they say, “Well, just wait a little, we have science, we have technology, we’ll go step by step toward the end of the way and find the solution,” except that it doesn’t work, or at least, it works for many things—terribly impressive—but fundamentally minor. The essential things are things that—well, you started with the word *sacrifice*. Imagine someone telling you “I have the solution for what sacrifice is.” It would be ridiculous. It’s something really almost offensive. Or death. Well, some people are convinced of that, particularly today. “Just wait a moment, we are implementing a few things.” And death might be a prejudice, in a way. No, I’m afraid not. In that same interview, I mention Flaubert on *la rage de vouloir conclure* being the worst thing. And that’s why I’m writing the tenth volume—because I don’t even imagine getting to any type of conclusion. Because there is no conclusion. The best you can do is to go from one point to another and then back, and then you start again, and then go in another direction; all the rest seems to me a naïve—and maybe a noble—illusion. With the best honed arguments they want to find solutions, and when this way of thinking applies itself to

society it's even more disastrous, because all the twentieth century was more or less guided by people who were offering solutions. One should remember that. In Germany and in Russia as well. And it applies, too, to the most enlightened democratic societies. They follow more or less a line where, in the end, one by one, you may put things in order. But there is a final disorder of everything, which you cannot heal so easily. And so that is a point. And that applies to all my books. And that's why sacrifice reappears in all these books. Because I realized after a while it is in fact one of the most difficult things you can think of. And it's really inexhaustible. The idea of having come to fully understand certain phenomena is highly doubtful. After all you deal, in sacrifice, with a very strange form, which is rather absurd, because why should people, for instance, kill animals in order to appease or to make something appreciated by an invisible entity? And this gesture starts off very early and appears practically everywhere, so one should be very careful when one tries to understand it. One should change angles many times.

AA: Because your work is literature and not literary criticism or history or something well defined, solutions in the usual sense would be out of the question. But you don't have a sort of master plan?

RC: Not at all. It happens that at certain moments I feel that I have to tackle certain things. As to Kafka, for instance, I had in mind since I was more or less twenty that some day I should write something on him but it took a long time and even the book I'm writing now I have postponed for many, many years. But at a certain moment how does everything begin? It begins just by writing. And that's something I did since I was a young man and without any special sort of aim. At a certain moment certain things took a certain shape, and so it happened with *The Ruin of Kasch* as for *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. And there's a case which was a sort of a paradigm for all of this, *The Impure Fool*. I wanted to publish the memoirs of Schreber with Adelphi and the memoirs needed a sort of introduction just to explain what was this

strange book of which I had revised the translation. The time came when I should write the introduction and then I realized that I couldn't. That it was a delirium to which I could respond only with another delirium. And I wrote in a very short time—I think a few weeks—that novel, after which I wrote—I finally wrote—an essay, not on Schreber but on the readers of Schreber. It is published in *The Forty-Nine Steps*. So you see how things start and every time it is a surprise, in a way. That was a very typical moment.

AA: You find the form just by continuing to write.

RC: Yes, that's it. Absolutely. I always keep a notebook in my pocket and in a way I cannot say I write only in the morning or afternoon or night, as some people do. It can happen at any moment. And so it was with *The Ruin of Kasch*. Except that for certain things from the beginning you have a sort of feeling of the dimension of the whole. You know, Karl Kraus made once a beautiful observation; he said that the first sentence of something implies the whole. So the first sentence of a book of five hundred pages implies the five hundred pages. Or if it is a sonnet, it implies a sonnet. And so I felt in certain moments that I was starting something which would be rather long or not long or whatever, and for instance for *The Unnamable Present* I felt the opposite—that it should be short. And I don't know why. I don't know exactly why. But that it should be sort of compact and dense.

AA: That book ends with that very eerie passage by Baudelaire, about the tower.

RC: I was of course tempted to put that passage in *La Folie Baudelaire*, but it didn't belong there, it was waiting for another moment. It's strange. I didn't know why myself. But it happened. I think it's right as it is.