

Sacred Egoist

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La Folie Baudelaire, by Roberto Calasso, translated from the Italian by Alastair McEwen, Allen Lane, 350 pp, £35, ISBN: 978-1846142901

Roberto Calasso, who was born in Florence in 1941 and comes from a distinguished line of philosophy professors, heads the highly profitable Adelphi publishing house located in Milan. He is also a writer of scholarly works of nonfiction, the best known being *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, an inquiry into Greek mythology and Western thought that improbably became an international bestseller about twenty years ago. Calasso is well read, fluent in several languages, and not one to hide the light of his learning under a bushel. Which is to say, his learning is impressive but not lightly worn. Furthermore, although his prose occasionally affects a playful tone, it is mostly sober and pedagogic, tending toward the ponderous.

Calasso's narrative style is idiosyncratic. He doesn't write books per se; instead he writes scores of individual essayettes of varying lengths on congruent topics, which he then juxtaposes as he deems fit. Reviewers of his books typically liken his compositional method to the art of mosaic. Calasso himself, as he recently informed *The Paris Review*, agrees: "It is always a mosaic, if you will, in which I write page 80, 30, 315 in any given order. And I never know where the final place of what I am writing in the book will be. It's the same with every book." A reader coming to Calasso for the first time, however, needs to be forewarned: he may be surprised to discover that the overall picture is less a finely tessellated portrait than a clumsily assembled jigsaw puzzle in which the completed image is oddly distorted, since more than a few irregular pieces were forcibly pounded into place.

The first-time reader should also be aware that he's about to dive into the deep end of the humanities pool – more like a jacuzzi – overflowing with Latin and Greek phrases, Vedic terminology and citations from a veritable Who's Who of major and minor European writers, historians, philosophers and poets. It's left up to the reader to sink or swim. To be sure, Calasso never fails to provide a wealth of footnotes that lend his work an appropriate scholarly veneer. But the footnotes primarily demonstrate what recondite sources our erudite author has consulted; they never throw a bone to the hapless reader who seeks clarity about an obscure literary reference or foreign phrase.

If it all sounds daunting, it is. And yet many of Calasso's books – not only *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* – have sold remarkably well. Furthermore, nearly all have been extravagantly praised by leading intellectuals and writers in his native Italy, throughout Europe and in the United States. Indeed, the two words that seem to pop up most often whenever Calasso or one of his books is discussed are "brilliant" and

“genius”.

Sometimes it seems as if there’s a competition to see who can praise him the most. No sooner has a critic for *The New York Review of Books* said that reading Calasso “makes for an exhilarating adventure,” than a critic for *The Boston Globe* goes him one better: “Calasso is much more than a good guide ... [he] brings us to the brink of revelation.” No sooner does the poet Charles Simic describe Calasso as “one of the most original thinkers and writers we have today” than John Banville asserts that Calasso’s unique way of synthesising fiction and philosophy – using myths to expose the mind of man – has done nothing less than “open a new road through the old landscape of literature”.

Over the years, I’ve picked up most if not all of Calasso’s books, sometimes reading the original edition of a work when it appeared in Italian, sometimes the English translation that followed. Sadly, however, and regardless of the language, reading Calasso has never proved an unalloyed pleasure. The “new road” Calasso laid out in retelling Greek myth in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* struck me as utterly flat and tedious when compared to the breathtaking scenery to be encountered while travelling the older pathway marked out by classical writers such as Ovid. I recall skipping large sections of the book. Then there was *Ka*, Calasso’s esoteric, bewildering and – to me at least – utterly unreadable summation of Indian myth, which I abandoned less than a tenth of the way in. But these two works were the exceptions; I’ve read a good half-dozen of Calasso’s books cover to cover – including his most recent work to make it into English, *La Folie Baudelaire*.

My assessment? Calasso is an interesting writer who can occasionally toss off a fascinating observation. But having invested so much time reading him, I feel more than qualified to say that he is seriously overrated both as writer and thinker. I also believe the ideas he has been putting into circulation are far from salutary and merit closer examination than they have yet received. The English-language publication of *La Folie Baudelaire* provides the perfect occasion to provide such scrutiny.

It’s difficult to fully comprehend what Calasso is doing in *La Folie Baudelaire* unless you’re aware that for quite some time now he has been working on Something Big and Important. Unfortunately, the “something” doesn’t have a precise name – at least not yet.

Surely it is no mere *lapsus calami* (as Calasso himself, with his penchant for Latin phrases, might put it) that his current US publisher, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, introduces him and the most recent fragment of his Something Big to enter the English-language market this way: “Roberto Calasso, publisher of Adelphi in Milan, is the author of many books, among them *The Ruin of Kasch*, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, *Ka*, *K.*, and *Tiepolo Pink*, all parts of a work in progress (emphasis added) of which *La Folie Baudelaire* is the sixth panel.” Six books – I’ll keep calling them that in lieu of the more pretentious “panels” – all part of a much grander “work in progress”. But what?

We can begin by noting that Calasso's *Something Big* began to take shape in 1983 with the publication in Italy of *The Ruin of Kasch*, the foundational text, as it were, from which nearly all of his later ideas flow. It has become *de rigueur* when discussing this book to quote what Italo Calvino wrote about it when he reviewed it, so let me not fail to do so here. "*The Ruin of Kasch*," he wrote, "takes up two subjects: the first is Talleyrand; the second is everything else."

The Calvino quote is usually cited as a testament to Calasso's encyclopaedic learning and his ability to tell a story by means of manifold digressions – somewhat in the manner of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. As Calvino proceeded to elaborate, the book is a "curiosity" made up of "fragments, citations, digressions, anecdotes, and aphorisms". So much for the trademark writing style. As for the book's substance, Calvino noted how Calasso drew a straight line from the dawn of modernity to the killing fields of Cambodia. Which is to say that for all its digressions the book has a core of ideas. Among these are the notion that the Ages of Enlightenment, Revolution, and Modernity were catastrophic for mankind's psyche – because they put an end to an order of things in which societies were regulated by a priestly caste presiding over rituals of sacrifice and unreason. A great and lamentable spiritual absence then ensued.

In his *Paris Review* interview, Calasso provides a further gloss on this when he says: "People talk a lot about religion, but they might as well be talking about huge political parties. The most delicate point to grasp is that society itself has become the major superstition of our times." Furthermore, "Sacrifice brings us into dealings with the unknown. In the act of sacrifice, you establish a relation with something that you recognize as enigmatic and powerful. Our collective psyche seems to have lost touch with it. ... Our world attempts to ignore [these actions], it considers all these things as very remote. In my books, I try to unearth them."

Kasch was followed by *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* in 1988 – in which Calasso rewrote Greek myths so that they challenge later monotheistic culture, which he dismissed as fossilised dogma. For Calasso myths represent man's deep spiritual longing, which, he again asserts, modernity has cruelly denied.

Ka followed *Cadmus*. Just as Calasso mourned the pagan world that Christianity had destroyed in the West, here his larger purpose, as I understand it from people who had the patience to persevere with the book, was to mourn the establishment of Buddhism in the East, which extinguished a more fundamental sacred consciousness, as revealed in Vedic texts.

Calasso followed *Ka* with a book about Kafka, entitled simply *K*. Many critics have interpreted Kafka's stories as religious allegories, but Calasso surpassed them all by treating them as esoteric commentaries that express some kind of primordial conception of the sacred. In other words, Calasso rewrote Kafka the better to continue flogging unmercifully some of his favourite hobbyhorses.

In the wake of *K.* one was suggested Calasso would move on to *Kar.*, as in Allan Kardec, the occult leader and founder of Spiritism, whose ornately mystical tomb in Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris attracts almost as many tourists as Jim Morrison's. But it was not to be. Instead Calasso sought to reinterpret the eighteenth century Venetian painter Giambattista Tiepolo.

Why Tiepolo? First, because he had a mania for creating graceful and radiant frescoes and paintings of the gods and goddesses of Olympus; that is, he inhabited a self-enclosed world pervaded by myth. Second, because – as the last major Western artist before the French Revolution – he marked the end of an epoch. Indeed he was so far from being an Enlightenment artist that he may have never read a book in his life. Third, because, as Calasso sees it, Tiepolo – no matter what great art historians such as Michael Levey have written – was not really a traditional Christian religious painter at all. Instead, in Calasso's view Tiepolo's etchings – his *Capricci* and *Scherzi* – reveal epiphanies of the world's hidden archaic sacredness. Yes, we're back to that again.

All of which brings us to *La Folie Baudelaire*, in which Calasso turns his attention to what Walter Benjamin called “the capital of the nineteenth century”, namely Paris, in which the spiritual shipwreck wrought by modernity is first made fully manifest.

The central figure of Calasso's book is the nineteenth century poet and critic Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867). Although Baudelaire the *poète maudit*, the author of *Les Fleurs du mal*, is no stranger, Baudelaire the art critic – on whom Calasso focuses – is less widely known.

Arguably the greatest figure in the history of art criticism, Baudelaire was fascinated by images. Just as the Alps led earlier Romantic poets to experience a certain *frisson* in the presence of the inexpressible, Baudelaire reacted similarly to the stimuli he encountered in Paris. The central tenet of his art criticism was the presence of heroic themes in contemporary life, which could suitably be evoked by the sensitive artist. The artist – be he poet or painter – must witness and depict the shocks he experiences in his own time, recording for posterity the eternal things latent within it.

The English art historian and novelist Anita Brookner devoted a wonderful essay to exploring Baudelaire's views of painting in her book *The Genius of the Future*. But that book appeared over forty years ago and Baudelaire's art criticism was due for an appreciative reevaluation. Calasso is exceptionally knowledgeable about French literature and painting and possesses the talent to do just that. His writing style and obsessions, however, make the task all but impossible.

For starters, the book fails to deliver a coherent, sustained argument of any kind. Rather it consists of seven discrete sections, these chapters serving as the darker “outlines” for the mosaic of essayettes they each contain. In the first section he randomly sets out some facts about Baudelaire's life. He mentions, higgledy-

piggledy, such things as his oedipal relationship with his mother and his hatred for his stepfather. Anyone who isn't already deeply familiar with the outlines of Baudelaire's life will have difficulty navigating this initial section.

Calasso then proceeds to give a misleading picture of Baudelaire's personality. He writes, for example, that Baudelaire never sought social advantage and had a "total indifference to all forms of social life". In fact Baudelaire oscillated between loathing the French bourgeoisie and seeking its approval. He flattered the leading Establishment critic Sainte-Beuve, canvassed votes to become a member of the Académie française, and himself admitted to courting popularity by lacing parts of his works with "vile flatteries". Both a major poet and a toady, he longed for fame and had moments of base careerism, which Calasso, who has elsewhere called Baudelaire "my hero", turns a blind eye to.

Whether as poet or art critic Baudelaire, with his feet planted firmly in the ground of French romanticism, reserved his highest praise for the creative artist, who imaginatively emulates the divine creator. He rejected Nature and rejected modernity. He struggled against the engulfing mediocrity of bourgeois culture and sought in his own writing to transfigure the banal world of everyday perception into a higher, more essential reality. He believed Imagination was the key to happiness and that through it one might be able to glimpse or regain paradise for a short while.

Unfortunately for Baudelaire, Calasso uses his concept of the imagination to bring his own ideas of spirituality to the fore. Which is to say that Calasso "inhabits" Baudelaire's writing in such an empathetical way that the French poet/critic ends up sounding like Roberto Calasso. In short order, Calasso is linking "Baudelaire's covert metaphysics to the Vedic theory of sacrifice, which he [Baudelaire] could not have known about". Baudelaire thus becomes transmogrified into "a magnetic storm" or "the most archaic of the moderns"; he becomes a soul who "sheds a magical and supernatural light on the natural obscurity of things" by channelling a prehistoric kind of "psychic climate". He becomes Roberto Calasso *avant la lettre*.

Calasso devotes the second and third chapters of his book to two important painters whom Baudelaire discussed: Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Again, however, Calasso misleads as much as he reveals. Yes, Baudelaire worshipped Delacroix and missed no opportunity to glorify him. But this was in large part because Delacroix lived up to Baudelaire's ideal of the dandy, a notion which Calasso fails to discuss. As for Ingres, Baudelaire reluctantly admired him and instinctively understood that Ingres – far from being a mere classicist – was deliberately "artificial" in a profoundly imaginative way. Quite true. But Calasso can't stop there. Rather he uses his discussion of Ingres to flog his own ideas about the sterility of mere reason, the same ideas he treated in his book on Tiepolo. According to Calasso: "Ingres has no use for logos, the word. He totally submits himself to the visible in his painting." Exhibiting his anti-rational bias yet again, Calasso celebrates Ingres for having "abolished thought" in his painting. "It is," Calasso exults, "the

Zen ‘no mind’ applied to the cult of form.”

In the fourth chapter Calasso turns psychoanalyst to see what meaning he can find in a dream that Baudelaire once described in a letter to a friend. In the dream Baudelaire visits a brothel, which displays curiosities sponsored by a daily newspaper. Among the exhibits is a monster with a snake-like tail. Calasso’s interpretation, faithful readers will be unsurprised to learn, is that modernity –that is the press – does harm by prostituting intelligence and virtually everything else it touches but, at the same time, its poisonous products can result in good when observed by those who possess gifted eyes – namely seers such as Baudelaire ... and, of course, Calasso himself.

Moving on, Calasso hurriedly discusses the Impressionists Edgar Degas, Édouard Manet, and Berthe Morisot, trying as best he can to position them in relation to Baudelaire. He strains to find connections: Degas and Manet lent each other Baudelaire’s books; Baudelaire moved in Paris more than thirty times and lived on or near the same streets as Manet and Degas. Calasso also discusses Constantin Guys, the unknown illustrator whom Baudelaire singled out as “the painter of modern life”.

In his sixth chapter he examines Baudelaire in the context of a plethora of other writers, including the younger rebellious poet Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé and the critics Félix Fénéon and Jules Laforgue. Marcel Proust also makes an appearance. These later decadents are further manifestations of what Calasso describes as “the Baudelaire wave” – that metaphysical line of revolt against modernity that reattaches itself to a prehistoric time of sacred ritual. His treatment of a period of extraordinary developments in French literature and art, which incorporated such movements as romanticism, realism, naturalism, aestheticism, symbolism, and modernism, is cursory and feeble. He ends, somewhat abruptly, with a brief and somewhat diffuse exploration of Baudelaire’s legacy, focusing on what he calls “absolute literature” – literature without social usefulness, in which writing seeks only to explore human consciousness.

The essayettes that Calasso strings together in *La Folie Baudelaire* are hit and miss. His hits generally involve *explication du texte*. For example, he nicely unpacks Baudelaire’s poem “Le Cygne”, explaining that absence is its underlying theme. Similarly, his reading of Ingres’s great painting “Jupiter and Thetis” is excellent, in that he successfully conveys how its striking use of colour and emphasis on pure form cleared a way for later modernist painters such as Picasso.

To sum up, all of Calasso’s tics are on display in *La Folie Baudelaire*: his penchant for unearthing “secret” things (for example, “a secret history of literature” and “a secret doctrine of Western painting”); his overuse of Latin, Greek, and Vedic phrases (among them *concupiscentia oculorum*, *delectatio morose*, *ágostos théos*, *ashvamedha*, and *bodhi*); his fondness for obscure terms like theurgical, hierodule, theologoumenon, and hesychastic.

At the beginning of an essay he wrote on Baudelaire, WH Auden remarked: “The important and complicated relation between an artist and the age in which he lives has been the downfall of many an excellent critic.” This book proves the wisdom of that observation. Calasso seems at times to want to deny the importance of Baudelaire’s life, as if he lived exclusively in the timeless and spaceless world of the spirit. At other times he suggests that his writing is a purely natural product, totally explicable in terms of a prehistoric metaphysical wave that Baudelaire is surfing. And so in lieu of keeping the tension between these two poles in perspective, Calasso swerves awkwardly between them. The real problem with *La Folie Baudelaire* though is that the reader is presented not with Baudelaire but with Calasso. The book tells us too little about the former’s thought, and too much about the latter’s.

In his book on Tiepolo, Calasso observes that “the ultimate peculiarity of Italian culture, the quality it could be proudest of ... is what is known as *sprezzatura*,” which Castiglione defined as “the opposite of affectation” and as “a certain nonchalance that may conceal art and demonstrate that what one does and says is done without effort and almost without thinking”. Calasso further notes that “the meaning of the word has become obscure and remote for the majority of Italians”. Affectation is a hallmark of Calasso’s writing, so it’s safe to say that he himself fits comfortably within this Italian majority.

Calasso is a strange essayist, as the Italian critic Alfonso Berardinelli, one of the few to dissent from the acclaim he has received in his native land, has lucidly explained. His aphoristic and oracular style owes much to Nietzsche and is in no way traditionally Italian. It must be said that Calasso has been well served by his English-language translators – the highly gifted Alastair McEwen in particular. But Calasso’s Italian is utterly unstylish.

Moreover, ever since Montaigne invented the genre, essays have aimed to investigate, to undertake an intellectual exploration. But Calasso merely rewrites and paraphrases, so that no intellectual exploration takes place. In Calasso’s writing the figures whom he ostensibly discusses ultimately become no more than mouthpieces for his own views. Instead of analysing or interpreting their ideas, he paraphrases them. Alternatively, he quotes them selectively, culling aphorisms that he removes from their context, ignoring the social and political problems that occupied them. In this way eminent artists become mere vehicles for Calasso to deploy as puppets.

And so to return to where we began: what is the Something Big that Calasso is grappling with in this, the sixth book of his unified opus? I can’t give any firm answer. I’m not sure anyone can, since Calasso rarely expresses his views clearly and directly. That said, he has dropped enough hints in *La Folie Baudelaire* and in his *oeuvre* as whole to allow one to venture some reasonable guesses about the tenets of his faith.

The first proposition of Calasso’s Something Big is that myths exist not as mere cultural phenomena – stories that primitive peoples invented to explain gaps in their understanding of the world – but rather as the direct

outgrowth of a mysterious and divine aspect of human consciousness. “A life to which the gods are not invited isn’t worth living,” Calasso writes in *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*. Which is to say that meditation on stories about the gods is a way of heightening our consciousness about the true nature of both the world and ourselves. Western philosophy took a wrong turn – and began to block off the pathway to a higher knowledge of Being – when it began to exalt rationality and science over ritual and sacrifice. A decline came to pass, as occult mysteries began to disappear.

But the true catastrophe (and here we come to the second proposition of Calasso’s Something Big) occurred in the eighteenth century. Calasso puts the blame squarely on the shoulders of Enlightenment philosophers who sought to banish the luminous world of the gods and replace it with science and technology. But any attempt to banish the gods – or, less poetically, to fail to recognise that the irrational side of human consciousness needs outlets – necessarily diminishes what it means to be human.

Fortunately, and here we come to the third and final proposition of Calasso’s Something Big, a group of modern writers (among them Nietzsche, Baudelaire, and Kafka) sacrificed their lives in order to create “absolute literature”. It is absolute for two reasons. First, it serves as a means to regain access to that zone of secret knowledge or consciousness – the absolute of pure Being – that has disappeared from the soulless wasteland of rational modernity. Second, this literature is self-contained, devoid of aspirations to societal usefulness or functionality.

In *La Folie Baudelaire* Calasso writes that “Sainte-Beuve hovered over the Parisian literary life like an authoritative and malevolent uncle”. Similarly, Calasso hovers over literary life in Italy – and to an extent around the world – like an authoritative and malevolent bluestocking. The Adelphi publishing house, which was set up in the early 1960s, was intended to offer an alternative to the politically committed books published by Einaudi. It publishes authors who present myth and mysticism as alternative forms of knowledge that transcend mere reason. Many of Adelphi’s writers are political right-wingers who reject rationalism and the Enlightenment – and the things that go with the Enlightenment, such as human rights and democracy.

On the one hand, his critique of modernity isn’t dissimilar from the traditional critique of secularism, liberalism, and revolution made by Catholic reactionaries such as Joseph de Maistre. But Calasso goes much further. He adds to the mix the rejection of reason offered by Nietzsche and the celebration of myth found in Jung and Eliade. Like these forebears, he exalts ritual rather than reflection, the mythic in contrast with the scientific, the authenticity of Being rather than the sterility of reason. It is in this spirit that he is fond of citing Maistre: “I have read millions of witticisms about the ignorance of the ancients who saw spirits everywhere; it seems to me that we who see them nowhere are much more foolish.”

But this type of thinking is pernicious and nihilistic, leading as it can and does to statements such as that of

Jean Baudrillard on 9/11, which the French philosopher hailed as an “Absolute Event” because it pointed to the desirable downfall of a Western world that embodies reason and commodity exchange.

For a deep thinker, Calasso enjoys simple oppositions. He smiles patronisingly at Enlightenment philosophers and their optimism, but in reality none of the *philosophes* was as blindly optimistic or addicted to reason as Calasso suggests. They were not unaware of the darker side of man’s nature. Although they thought man capable of improvement, they never believed such improvement would be easy.

Calasso seeks to replace the ideals of progress and rights with the sacredness of the past. He defends the importance of mystery and of irrationality as the means of attaining spiritual fulfilment. It is true – as the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski frequently observed – that a sense of the sacred is indispensable for understanding the limits to human power to change reality; in that sense, it is a useful corrective to an extreme confidence in human reason that can result in dangerous utopianism. But that is not what Calasso has in mind when he speaks of the sacred. Kolakowski’s understanding of the sacred was that it led us to embrace moderation. By contrast, Calasso rejects moderation in favour of rapture and ecstasy, priestly ceremonies and ritualised sacrifice and other such esoteric means to bring the divine to the forefront of human consciousness.

The standard reception of Calasso is that he has written a series of critical works that defy classification. But in fact they are all too easy to classify. The books are veiled antimodernist broadsides and Calasso is a modern-day Madame Blavatsky, memorably mocked as “Madame Sosostriis, famous clairvoyante ... the wisest woman in Europe” in TS Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*. She too saw herself as a missionary of Ancient Wisdom and spoke of the universe as a manifestation of an unknown Absolute Essence. She hoodwinked part of the literary elite in her day. Calasso similarly seems to have taken in the elite in our day. More’s the pity.

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