

**Review of Roberto Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*. Trans. Richard
Dixon (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019)¹
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If Roberto Calasso, in his latest book, *The Unnamable Present*, engages with physics and information technology, it is through a hermeneutical lens. It is not the actual debates occurring within such disciplines that matter to this esteemed Italian writer and publisher, but their anthropological and cultural significance. What does it say about us if we regard reality as built up from discrete atomic particles, or if we regard it as one continuous wave? In the case of the latter, where does consciousness stand in the relentless torrent of Being? Furthermore, Calasso asks the question of how such views are the product of a particular history: the genocidal twentieth century.

The Unnamable Present is the latest volume within a great project which commenced in 1983 with *The Ruin of Kasch*, wherein Calasso lays out his critique of culture. Even if it is unclear whether this volume, the eighth in the series, signifies that this project is now at its end, the book reads as a culmination: while earlier works tend to focus on a particular subject (*The Ruin of Kasch* being an exception), here Calasso synthesises his main preoccupations into one encompassing vision of the West in the twenty-first century.

The book's structure is as follows: In the first part, Calasso presents the difficulties that beset any attempt to understand our contemporary moment: the exemplars of our time have themselves given up any constitutive relationship to the idea, and to mythology. Tourists and terrorists are both not only cynical in their actions, but their entire experience of the world is informed by cynicism. Not being guided by ideas, the human being of today experiences the domain of intelligence as a ubiquitous pool or indeed a *web* into which we are thrown, in much the same way as the existentialists of the last century were thrown into the *world*. Independently, it pre-exists us. To be sure, it is a commonplace observation to state that, today, man in relation to the computer rarely occupies the active role of *programmer*, and is instead assigned the passive role of *consumer*. This leads Calasso to the hermeneutics or experience of physics and intelligence technology in the twenty-first century, and the way in which it gives up on the notion of the atom as a 'discrete particle' in favour of a continuous flow of reality.

The second part of the book presents a narrative of the holocaust, composed entirely of glosses on the correspondence of more or less well-known European writers and their acquaintances. In a way, this is the empirical part of Calasso's study, and, lightly but surely, he grounds his analysis upon this material.

¹ This essay was expanded from a shorter review first published in *World Literature Today*.

Finally, there is a very brief piece on Baudelaire, and his clairvoyance with regard to our century.

The Unnamable Present, like *The Ruin of Kasch* and the rest of the series, is obsessed with the ways in which the modern mind attempts to distract itself from death. Mythology and the logic of sacrifice, marihuana, the *soma* of the ancient Vedics, and other substances; these different inebriations dilute and distort, but ultimately mediate the mind's relation to death – and for Calasso, they reveal something essential about the human being. This goes for the ancient Vedics described in *Ardor*; for Baudelaire and his generation, for the assassins ('*hashshāshīn*') of *The Unnamable Present*, and it is also the meaning of the French diplomat and statesman Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord – the protagonist of *The Ruin of Kasch*.

Indeed, in this struggle, Talleyrand becomes emblematic – not in the way of political theory, but through Calasso's aesthetical appreciation of Talleyrand's every gesture. Like *La Folie Baudelaire*, *The Ruin of Kasch* follows its protagonist through a great many *salons*, where they – Talleyrand and Baudelaire, exemplars of their time – stand out. Talleyrand represents a crucial effort on the part of the modern mind to channel its constitutive link to mythology – as it is slowly but surely depleted through history. The unnamable present, then, means the historical moment – a certain radical post-modernity – when such effort has become impossible, meaningless. Rather than exploiting or preying on the myths that have informed our historical momentum and narrative, we have turned for sustenance to the very separation between myth and our time.

Roberto Calasso is an erudite scholar of nineteenth century proportions. There is no end to his references. First among them in the present volume is W. H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, and, given Calasso's breadth, selecting one reference as decisive gives nothing away. Near the end of the first part of this book, Calasso cites a lengthy passage from an introduction written by Robert Frost for Edwin Arlington Robinson's 1935 collection of poems, *King Jasper*. Frost speaks obliquely here of the difference between griefs and grievances. While grief is a patient pain, grievance is a pain that is articulated only through a need for vengeance. It appears that Frost finds himself before a dilemma. On the one hand, there is the call to make good on our grievances, in a mad and final 'rush on the citadel of evil'.² This is the call of revolutionary utopian politics. On the other hand, there is the demand, this time written in law, to give up on grief altogether, surrender any remaining religious feeling and respect before the unknowable contingencies that condition our lives, and embrace science and progress. This is the call from 'Wall Street, the League

² Roberto Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*. Trans. Richard Dixon (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2019), p. 88. Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays* (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 743.

of Nations, and the Vatican'.³ Indeed, when progress is assured, grief appears irrational. Yet Frost warns us that progress is not certain, and we may find ourselves disarming unilaterally before an enemy who is not interested in winning a merely symbolic victory.

Placed before these two demands, Frost displays a kind of messianic indecision, and rather chooses to remain with the analogy, the comparison or correlation. Also resolved to defend the culture of analogy, Calasso sides with this warning against pacifism. Indeed, *The Unnamable Present* dwells on, specifically, Islamic terrorism, and its determination not to attack any idea in particular – as it knows the West is not committed to any one idea in particular – but to end the lives of those they imagine to represent the West.

The concern with analogy expressed here in *The Unnamable Present* can also be found in Calasso's earlier *La Folie Baudelaire*. In the present volume, the analogists are explicitly named, and are presented as the enlightened elite of secular culture. Leibniz, atomic metaphysician, is part of this tradition, as is the author René Daumal, known for his *Mount Analogue*. However, not much about the analogists is explained here, except that the disinterested but keen attention that they pay to the world sets them apart from the tourists who roam the planet in the twenty-first century. *La Folie Baudelaire* has more to say about analogy; it means a crucial discovery for the poet of *Les fleurs du mal* as it captures the very spirit of modernity that has moved the West since the scenes of Oedipus: 'to *interpret infinitely*, without a *primum* and without an end, in unceasing, suddenly shattered, and recursive motion'.⁴ Instead of putting analogy in the place of the medium, as had been the case in other cultures (ancient China is named), Calasso sees it absolutised in Western culture. The analogists are those who are in touch with the very substance of mythology, the symbolic, where items and concepts can appear in one another's place, and refer back to one another.

It is interesting to note that Calasso's compatriot and contemporary, the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his critique of Western culture, returns to the same root. However, in Agamben's analysis, from his early work, *Stanzas*, Oedipus, the hero of modernity means also a betrayal of the foundational experience of language: the decisive unlocking or decoding of the Sphinx's mysteries belies the human being's existence in a language that does not exhaust itself in meaningful statements and communications, but envelops us whole.⁵ This is the language of mythology, and both writers are detailing the human mind's taking leave of that language. This reference to a Golden Age of meaningfulness puts Calasso and Agamben together in a relatively small category. It is the theological element in

³ Calasso, *The Unnamable Present*, p. 88.

⁴ Roberto Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*. Trans. Alastair McEwen (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012), p. 13.

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 137 –9

both of them. Yet simultaneously, they are miles apart: if Calasso is wholly committed to exploring the undercurrents of ancient mythology and the ripples they continue to cause, Agamben is prepared to shed light where none has shone before, and to debunk the political ideologies facilitated by such old stories, and the mirage of a bottomless pit that they create. I have already pointed out that Calasso finds meaning in the fictions and myths we tell ourselves, in the hallucinogenics we take. This intoxicating element, in Agamben's work, meets a resolute, Marxist air of suspicion. The debate between Calasso and Agamben, then, focuses on this question: is the human, together with its essential capacity for fiction, redeemable? Indeed, in a brief juxtaposition with Adorno, Agamben's position is presented like this: 'rather than rescuing the subject by way of remembering its loss, as Adorno would have it, Agamben would prefer to lose the subject in order to allow for its redemption'.⁶

For these reasons, Calasso is less critical of the Oedipal trope within our culture, but like Agamben he sees the contradiction between an infinite helix of analogies on the one hand, and a 'natural obscurity of things' on the other. Baudelaire's genius was able to locate the point of their reconciliation. Here, it is worth mentioning that Cadmus, the protagonist of Calasso's most famous book, is the ancestor of Oedipus. The archaeological gesture in Calasso always points further *back*, while in Agamben it is aimed at opening up a particular *nameable* experience of the present. In this respect, it is fascinating how for Calasso the paradigm of the sacredness of the human being is found in the ancient civilisation of the Vedics – absolutely removed from us today – whilst for Agamben it exists in the Nazi concentration camps, the still insurmountable problem of the evil of man. Both are examples of human activity that made an attempt to escape history without leaving a trace.

Robert Frost's warning against unilateral disarmament does not merely apply to debates around pacifism. It connects to the concepts of science, philosophy, political theology, and the messianic. For a high culture wherein analogy is the principal value, the messianic becomes its most terrifying possibility. Frost's position is one which resolutely faces up to this problem. As pointed out, he first warns against seizing the messianic moment in 'one last rush on the citadel of evil'. Yet, his warning more urgently applies to embracing the opposite tenet, to give up grief itself, in a move to eclipse all religious experience of the unknown in favour of rationality and science and belief in historical progress. In a way, Frost hears the calls from revolutionary politics to install utopia now, as he hears speakers imploring him to give up altogether any stake in the absolute. For this is what Frost takes 'Wall Street, the League of Nations, and the Vatican' to ask of him: that he surrender his claim on, or his part of, a reunion with the absolute materiality of

⁶ Yoni Molad in Alex Murray and Jessica Whyte (eds.), *The Agamben Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 20.

human society. Ignoring both these options, Frost is resolved to dwell indefinitely in analogy.

In my reading, the reference to Frost is crucial because, in the context of this volume, Calasso is doing the same thing. On the cultural level, he is with the analogists; however, on the level of political theology there is no justification for the analogy. Instead, we have to look for those literary writers who have the ability to unite the analogy with the absolute – as Baudelaire did. For this is what *The Unnamable Present* proposes: an extended and extending analogy of the absolute.

For the humanist Calasso, for this eminent historian and philologist, Frost's dilemma is an *aporia*, a dead-end, and it is adjudged that Frost is right not to give up his position before it. Indeed, there are no, and nor can there ever be, humanist, historical, or philological resources to justify any attempt at overcoming this issue, and Calasso mocks the transhumanists. For this reason, however, it is interesting to wonder what could have happened had Calasso seriously engaged with Agamben. For Agamben does not join the transhumanists, obsessed with death, either. In his analysis, on the contrary, subjectivity in the West is not an original metaphysical concept, but the effect of a politico-legal apparatus that keeps putting human life in an irreducible proximity to legal imputability. The urgency of Agamben's project throws an entirely different light on Robert Frost's messianic indecision.

Indeed, it remains to be seen whether the culture of analogy can be defended on the very ground-zero of analogy. Recently, a revival of the theological mode of philosophy has inspired a number of philosophers to explore the messianic potentialities within our tradition. Agamben's work is enormously important here. Yet even more explicitly relevant, given the stakes that Calasso is raising, is the speculative thought of the French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, who in his essay *After Finitude* precisely addresses the theoretical debate that underlies terrorism and fanaticism:

The modern man is he who, even as he stripped Christianity of the ideological (metaphysical) pretension that its belief system was superior to all others, has delivered himself body and soul to the idea that all belief systems are equally legitimate in matters of veracity [...]. We are trying to grasp the sense of the following paradox: the more thought arms itself against dogmatism, the more defenceless it becomes before fanaticism.⁷

The patient and dignified grief that speaks through Robert Frost and Roberto Calasso, the thinking of the analogy, is proudly free of dogmatism, but, as Calasso himself concedes, '[y]ou can simply ignore it. And this act of omission has a boundless power, like a blow delivered by a murderer'.⁸

⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 48.

⁸ Calasso, *La Folie Baudelaire*, p. 16.

In *The Unnamable Present*, Calasso faces up to a world that has done away with his *milieu*, his element – the culture of analogy, the physics of the discrete particle – as it has irrevocably committed itself to a digital, virtual reality. This book could very well contain the record of an analogist’s final guidance and implorations to that world.