

Sacrifice or slaughter?

Roberto Calasso's moral ambiguity

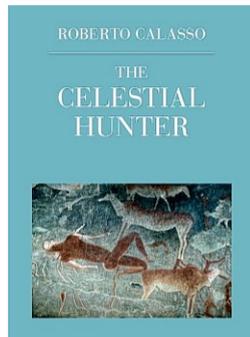
PATRICK CURRY

THE CELESTIAL HUNTER

Translated by Richard Dixon

ROBERTO CALASSO

464pp. Allen Lane. £25.



ROBERTO CALASSO IS THE ARCHETYPE of a polymathic Continental intellectual. Chairman of the respected publisher Adelphi Edizione, he is intimidatingly erudite and articulate. And prolific: *The Celestial Hunter* (which has been well translated by Richard Dixon) is the ninth in a magisterial series which started with the *The Ruin of Kasch* (1994), while book ten, *Il libro di tutti i libri*, has already been published and awaits translation into English.

Calasso's overall project is partly to explore, partly to create a philosophical genealogy of European modernity. To that end he delves deep into its prehistorical and premodern roots, and follows them into the present. It is hard to imagine any reader who would fail to learn something new from any of his books, although *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony* (1993), on classical Greek myth, is probably the most accessible and successful.

In *The Celestial Hunter* there are fascinating expositions, sparkling with insights, of Ovid, Plato, Plotinus, Athenian history, statues, ancient Egypt and the Eleusinian Mysteries. Its central preoccupation, however, is with hunters - celestial and earthly, human and divine - as well as shamans, sacrificial hierophants and early philosopher-mages. Here Calasso's strengths as a mythographer are again in evidence. Never merely antiquarian, he takes the reader to where myths are still happening in a timeless present. This skill is supported by his conviction that insofar as the divine itself (*tò theion*) exceeds and survives even the gods, its powers are still at work now, even if unrecognized. (Max Weber, drawing on Nietzsche, also said as much.)

Calasso's style is fluent and his many digressions are illuminating, but his facility sometimes brings with it vatic utterances that ring alarm bells. Thus, for example, "having become the animal that observes the animal, [the hunter] also had to kill it". (Why?) "Nothing is achieved without a sacrifice." (Nothing?) And my favourite: "Hyenas were the first philologists". It's true that I am taking these statements out of context, but even their contexts often don't help much.

Furthermore, a troubling ambiguity is at work. For example, when Calasso describes libation as an "action that makes the killing of an animal a sacrifice and not a slaughter" - which further implies approval of the former - it is characteristically unclear whether he speaks for his human subjects, or himself, or both. This matters, because running throughout the text is a fascination with death apparently sanctified by sacrifice. He explores the theme in many stories, of which an early one sets the tone. It concerns the fate of bear cubs captured by hunters. The cub is nursed and treated kindly, being addressed as a precious little divinity, until it grows up. "Then they would kill it."

What seems to be Calasso's admiration for hunting, killing and blood sacrifice comes uncomfortably close to a refined aestheticization and romanticization of violence and murder. He extols their "purity and hardness"; affirms that "Whoever strikes, knows"; praises the three "predatory gods" Apollo, Artemis and Dionysus for possessing "the highest erotic and aesthetic abstraction", and indulges in specious paradoxes such as "to keep death

away, it is necessary to cause death". (Death cannot finally be kept away, whether by causing more death or not.)

Meanwhile, the moral hole grows deeper, and in the story Calasso is telling it is not exactly remedied by the appearance of Christianity. As he rightly remarks, the centrality of sanguinary spectacle, both pagan and Jewish, inevitably positioned the Crucifixion as "the final, nonrepeatable sacrifice". Even if we banish animal sacrifice, then, the act itself remains affirmed. As does Calasso's valorization of it.

He is aware of the problem, of course. He even quotes Heraclitus' caustic comment on the absurdity, if not obscenity, of attempting to purify oneself of blood by shedding more blood, "as if a man covered in mud could wash himself with mud". But he tries to circumvent it by placing knowing (gnosis) before and above ethics. (I can see no other justification for the long and tediously arcane chapter on Plotinus, whose influence remained largely confined to other outliers.)

That move entangles his account in further problems, however. I don't just mean the phenomenon of self-serving esoteric elites jealously guarding knowledge that supposedly places them beyond the reach of mere morality. It is now no secret, if it ever was, that those claiming special epistemological

privileges, especially religious, are capable of committing the most heinous acts. And to this point I can find no answer in the pages of Calasso's book.

Every substantial body of work activates a figure or theme that calls it into question. In this case, there are two. One, exterior to European modernity but also his beloved India and its Vedas, is Chinese philosophy. The Neo-Confucian literati, in particular, gave pride of place to the ethical virtues befitting humanity, but they still revered and studied the workings of spirit (*chen*). The other critical exemplar, internal to the trajectory of European modernity, is Michel de Montaigne. His sceptical humanism placed the highest value on being humane and avoiding cruelty at all costs, whether to humans or animals. He was also suspicious of ecstasy and possession. Yet Montaigne loved and respected not only God but this world and its pleasures, not least Venus, "so sane and merry a goddess".

It is true that we need to eat and therefore, in some wise, to kill. But both these figures and their shared theme suggest, in contrast to Calasso's account, that it is possible and indeed admirable to cause minimal suffering in living, while still honouring ultimate mystery. After all, there is no necessary contradiction between the two. Humanity is the animal whose nature includes trying to live ethically in the face of the unknown.

Are these simply two agonistic forms of life, doomed to disagree about essentials? That wouldn't satisfy Calasso, who prefers to give the final word to deep paradox: killing to sanctify killing, and so on. Sometimes, however, incommensurability - messy, awkward and inelegant - may be all that is on offer. ■

“His facility sometimes brings with it vatic utterances that ring alarm bells”

Patrick Curry is the author of *Enchantment: Wonder in modern life*, 2019

Rodari never wrote entirely for children; rather, he wrote on their behalf and constantly undermined the perspective of adults through silly nonsense and fervent political beliefs.

—Jack Zipes, Professor Emeritus, University of Minnesota



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