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Robert Graves, the Victorian Education System, and the British Identity

Abstract I: Questo saggio esplora il profondo legame di Robert Graves con la letteratura classica, plasmato dalla sua educazione e formazione vittoriana. Si intende analizzare come i suoi romanzi, saggi critici e poesie riflettano una continua rilettura dei Classici, radicata nei valori di disciplina e rigore intellettuale appresi negli anni formativi. Contestualizzando Graves all'interno del più ampio panorama culturale ed educativo vittoriano, e confrontando il suo approccio con quello dei suoi contemporanei, questo studio mostra come questo background abbia creato la sua voce letteraria unica. In ultima analisi, viene messa in luce l'attualità dei testi classici nell'opera di Graves e la loro rilevanza culturale nella Gran Bretagna del primo Novecento.

Abstract II: This paper explores Robert Graves's deep engagement with Classical literature, shaped by his Victorian upbringing and education. It examines how his novels, criticism, and poetry reflect a lifelong reinterpretation of the Classics, rooted in the values of discipline and intellectual rigour from his formative years. By contextualising Graves within the broader Victorian cultural and educational framework, and comparing his approach to that of his contemporaries, this study reveals how this background informed his unique literary voice. Ultimately, it highlights the enduring relevance of Classical texts in Graves's work and their cultural significance in early 20th-century Britain.

Keywords: The Classics, Victorian education system, Ancient Greece and Rome.

In Victorian Britain, education relied heavily on the study of the Classics. Ancient Greek and Roman languages, history, literature and philosophy were the core of school and university curricula as they were regarded not only as the foundation of intellectual and moral development but also as the mirror of the values and aspirations that the Victorians advocated.

The Classics were a pillar of élite education in preserving the social structure and were also important in shaping the British cultural identity. Ancient Rome in particular, was seen as a metaphor for nineteenth-century Britain in terms of imperial ideology, the European view and 'civilising mission' that made the British the modern people who received the legacy of classical wisdom and moral excellency. As Norman Vance demonstrated extensively in his groundbreaking *The Victorians and Ancient Rome* the Victorians "were able to respond to the vestiges of the Roman world and of Latin literature which reached them through the

classics of English literature and in contemporary fiction and poetry, painting and theatre, accessible to men and women on more or less equal terms", more than they responded to ancient Greeks as few of them "understood or bothered about the precise nature of Rome's debt to Greece" (Vance 1997: 16). Therefore, studying the Classics (and, particularly, Latin) was an inevitable aspect of the Victorians' education, in order to feel part of a social and cultural milieu and be ready for leadership in the modern technologically developing world.

Throughout the nineteenth century, public schools as well as middle-class schools offered curricula based on the Classics. However, Greek language and literature were was always only central to the gentleman's education in the great public schools, whereas Latin was taught everywhere. Between 1858 and 1864, three Royal Commissions were appointed to examine the state of the education system in England and Wales. The results of Clarendon's Report (1864), which dealt with the great public schools, and the results of Taunton's Report (1868), which dealt with middle-class schools, showed that teaching Ancient Greek and Latin was still recommended for male education:

> In accounting for the position which the classics now hold in that course, the first place should perhaps be assigned to their intrinsic excellence as an instrument of education, on which we shall remark hereafter[1].

University curricula were also discussed in extensive debates on disciplines, subject matters and topics, involving academics, intellectuals and public officials. From the 1830s, innovations in the university structure and academic staff were taken into consideration in Oxford, Cambridge, London, Dublin and Edinburgh. Such innovations went in the direction of an idea of a modern university that implied a more and more professional curriculum. Adam Sedgwick, the author of *A Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge* (1833), which was to become a sort of "handbook for prospective students" (Gibbins 2005: 247), maintained that the studies at university had to be divided into three branches:

> 1st. The study of the laws of nature, comprehending all parts of inductive philosophy.
> 2ndly. The study of ancient literature – or in other words, of those authentic records which convey to us an account of the feelings, the sentiments, and the actions, of men prominent in the history of the most famous empires of the ancient world. In these works we seek for examples and maxims of prudence and models of taste.
> 3dly. The study of ourselves, considered as individuals and as social beings. Under this head are included ethics, and metaphysics, moral and political philosophy, and some other kindred subjects of great complexity, hardly touched on in our academic system, and to be followed out in the more mature labours of afterlife. Our duty here is to lectin a good foundation on which to build; and to this end we must inquire what ought to be the conduct of the mind in entering on any of these great provinces of human learning (Sedgwick 1834:10).

[1] Clarendon's report: https://www.education-uk.org/documents/clarendon1864/index.html (consulted on 24/05/2025).

Sedgwick's idea was, as can be observed, still basically theocentric: the study of science was "driven by knowing the mind of God", whilst the study of ancient literatures and languages was "driven by human concerns, gaining knowledge, wisdom and judgment" (Gibbins 2005: 247). No wonder that only two years later, John Stuart Mill counterattacked Sedgwick in his *Professor Sedgwick's Discourse on the Studies of the University of Cambridge* (Mill 1905: 77-129): by questioning in detail the university don's argumentation, Mill argued that universities were still sanctuaries of academic immobility for the education of the British élite. However harsh the utilitarian philosopher's critique may have been, it was clear evidence of the ongoing debate on reforming education in the light of the social and economic revolution that Britain had been experiencing for some decades. Starting from the mid-century, William Whewell and later Mark Pattison and John Grote established and revised the university systems, curricula and statutes for a substantial change not only in tutoring, teaching and lecturing but also in offering a wider reflection on the role of education in the modern context in order to shape a liberal tolerant society. They each provided their own position and suggestions, yet they all agreed that modern sciences, physics, chemistry, natural history, geology and mathematics had to be included in any university curriculum. Likewise, they regarded the study of modern languages and philology as necessary in order to prepare British young generations to the ideal of liberal education. As to philology, Whewell and Grote in particular maintained that comparing (modern) languages to classical languages had become a more and more important activity, but philology – "a fresh and rising science" as Grote aptly called it (Grote 1856: 95) – could not replace the study of the Classics as it could not "provide the lessons, the learning and the guidance provided by [them]" (Gibbins 2005: 252). For Whewell,

> Greek and Latin are peculiar and indispensable elements of a liberal education; and it is my business to shew, that the study of the modern authors just enumerated, and of others, however admirable their works may be, does not produce that kind of culture of the mind, which is the true object of a liberal education (Whewell 1838: 33).

Grote also championed the idea that Greek and Latin were no way replaceable, as they were the roots of the English language and culture and the means to make other (European) cultures accessible:

> It is evident that classical study lends itself very well, in the general, to the idea of preparatory education of this kind. The subjects which it is concerned with have enough of literary charm, when pursued far enough, to make them come in, when recurred to in after life, as a mental recreation, and enough of business character to make them preserve the regard of practical and intelligent men, and to keep them in relation with the habitual manner of thought of such. They help to enlarge and liberalize the conception of our own work on earth, by bringing into comparison with it other people similarly employed under different circumstances, whose views on the subjects which interest us we may compare with our own, and so at once correct our views and relieve our attention (Grote 1856: 87).

Later, in the years between the turn of the century and the First World War, when public school curricula were enlarged with the study of other, more modern subject matters, the place of the Classics was still undisputable, as they were, for many public-school students, "part of the furniture of the mind" (Jenkins 1997: 519). However, it was ancient Rome that influenced the way the Victorians perceived their own past and present, their roots and language, their laws and sense of administration. By the second half of the nineteenth century, Rome was beginning to be a model for the Victorian empire in terms of administrative efficiency and the construction of national identity (see Edwards 1999). It was also the source and the inspiration of modern life, "the city of visible history" as Dorothea Brooke, the female protagonist of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, calls Rome during her tour in Italy (G. Eliot 1965 [1874]: 224). In other words, the Eternal City and the culture it represented shaped the life of the western world, its languages, laws, ideologies, art and architecture. As T. S. Eliot later would recognise, "We are all, so far as we inherit the civilization of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire" (T. S. Eliot 1957: 130).

This sense of belonging to a great civilization permeated the many discussions about education, and yet the attempts to reform or re-design curriculum for educational institutions (Oxbridge and the new London University, in particular) never questioned the role of the Classics in the transmission of culture and the reproduction of social élites. Even the most fervent supporters of scientific knowledge such as Thomas Huxley, who strove to establish new areas of study – e.g. law, psychology, anthropology, philology, economics – in university curriculum, admitted that for "a very good scientific education [...] putting [students] through the Latin and Greek mill will be indispensable" (Huxley 1903: 242). That is to say, the prestige of the Classics permeated the whole century as they "provided avenues for advancement in secondary schools, the universities, the church, the military, the professions, and the Civil Service" (Huxley 1903: 242). A classical education constituted the basis for gentlemen and the social élite; however, it was also regarded as an instrument of social mobility and a means of securing gender division. In fact, it was not until the creation of women's colleges, later in the century, that women were allowed to study the Classics (Huxley 1903: 163).

In such a context, the role of Roman studies and Latin was as relevant as ever in the last decades of the nineteenth century, in connection with the expansion of the British Empire, and in the twentieth century when Rome came to represent a potent symbol of both cosmopolitanism, embraced by England as a colonial nation, and the transcendence of time. Like Rome, the Eternal City, London also aspired to be a model in its architecture, its power and its temperament. Like the Romans, the British also celebrated, for example, the *pax romana* (the Roman Peace) in India, drawing parallels between the Roman and British empires. Such comparisons were useful in discussions on race, citizenship, nation, and the British perception of the 'other' in terms of national identity and process of assimilation to that identity (see Majeed 1999: 88-109).

Apart from the unsurprising idea of associating the two empires within the Western tradition, it was the Victorian view on *latinitas* that corroborated the belief in the inevitability of the study of the Classics. In delivering his address titled "On the Place of Greek and Latin in Human Life" at the meeting of the *Classical Association of England and Wales* in

1904, J. W. MacKail stated that "The Latin achievement in the conquest of life is definite and assured. It represents all the constructive and conservative forces which make life into an organic structure" (*Classical Association of England and Wales Proceedings* 1904: 14). Therefore, in an age of profound changes, technological progress and rapid innovations in almost any area of human life, Rome, as Norman Vance puts it, "presented challenging paradigms and reference points, ways of making sense of a chaotic and volatile present" (Vance 1997: 25).

* * *

The Victorian age was a complex arena of debates and experimentations from the point of view of educational theories and practices. Robert Graves was born and grew up in this cultural environment. His father, Alfred Perceval Graves, who married twice and had ten children altogether from two marriages, was an intellectual, a poet himself and an inspector of schools. He introduced his son Robert to poetry and the imaginative power of versification from when he was a child. Already in 1908 Robert Graves started to write poetry: as he himself recognizes in the first chapter to *The White Goddess* "poetry has been my ruling passion" (Graves 1948: 17).

I have no intention of going into Graves's reasons for taking up poetry and the history of his relationship with prose or of the perception of his success as a novelist and critic. On the other hand, what I will deal with is his approach to the Classics and the use of Rome and of *romanitas* as the paradigm for the organisation of his artistic world. The Graves family moved to Wimbledon in the 1890s and young Robert attended various prep schools: King's College Junior School and Rokeby School in Wimbledon, then Hillbrow School in Rugby and in the end Copthorne Prep School in Sussex. When he was eleven, he went to one of the most famous public schools in England, Charterhouse on a scholarship in Classics. His education included Latin, Greek, English, Mathematics, French, History, Geography, Divinity, Arts and Music and physical education. He was not good at sports and did not enjoy boarding school, which as he remembered later on, encouraged 'pseudo-homosexual behaviour' that caused him to feel extremely uneasy (Graves 2018: 36-68). At Charterhouse studying the classical civilisations made him familiar with and fascinated by antiquity, which led him to his historical novels *I, Claudius, Claudius the God*, *Count Belisarius* and *The Greek Myths*. In addition, during his last years in Charterhouse, his editorial experience with *The Carthusian* and the publication of his first poems were fundamental for Graves in that he became aware of his talent and his aspirations and at the same time, critical of the educational system[2]. After the First World War, he went up to Oxford to continue his studies but in his opinion, the English syllabus was "tedious" (Wilson 2018: 253). He preferred Anglo-Saxon poetry and again, reading the Classics, since he was surrounded by translators and Greek and Latin scholars like Robert Bridges, Gilbert Murray and Edmund Blunden.

The point is that Graves, unlike the Victorian poets and, even more so, the modernist poets for whom myth (and classicism), in T. S. Eliot's words, is "simply a way of controlling,

[2] Graves writes: "My last year at Charterhouse I did everything possible to show how little respect I had for school tradition" (Graves 2018: 55).

of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history" (T. S. Eliot 1923: 483), used the Classical world to give shape to his imaginary world. In fact, he never considered himself a Classicist or a scholar but a poet who moulded Classical material for his own work, to his creative "making" (in the etymological sense of ποιέω). For him, poetry had to be the combination of emotion and craftsmanship, as he explained in his 1922 essay *On English Poetry*:

> "first, the Poetry, the unforeseen fusion in his mind of apparently contradictory emotional ideas; and second, Poetry, the more-or-less deliberate attempt, with the help of a rhythmic mesmerism, to impose an illusion of actual experience on the minds of others. [...] I would suggest that every poem worthy of the name has its central ideas, its nucleus, formed by this spontaneous process; later it becomes the duty of the poet as craftsman to present this nucleus in the most effective way possible, by practicing poetry more consciously as an art" (Graves 1922: 1).

This "fusion" of the poet's spontaneous emotions and ability to stimulate the reader's imagination is the basis of his poetic creation. It was the Classics that taught him to become aware of this process and how to render the poetry correctly.

In the 1964 Arion questionnaire on the relationship between the Classics and the literary community, when Graves was asked about the use of the Classics, he gave some interesting, though very short answers: "the point about the Classics is that they make one realize problems of meaning and syntax in writing one's own language" (Graves 1964: 57). He added a *post scriptum* saying that "I am not a 'literary man' but try to write clear English for which, as Mr. Charles Chaplin told me with passion recently on getting his hon. degree at Oxford, Latin is absolutely necessary" (Graves 1964: 57). Eddie Marsh, one of the editors of the anthology *Georgian Poets* to which Graves contributed early in his career, criticised Graves's style for being outdated. The poet replied that his style had been formed by his "reading, the immense preponderance of the 'classical' over the modern" and the Victorian literary tradition embodied by his father (Graves 1982: 30). However, that tradition used to regard the Classics as models to imitate, an idea that Graves never shared. He disliked imitation since it meant "virtuosity as opposed to inspiration" (Seymour 1995: 23)[3]. In other words, the point about the Classics is that they allowed Graves to find his own style.

Let us take, for example, the poem "The Legion" written in 1917 and published in *Fairies and Fusiliers* that same year. As can be seen, it is clearly a war poem and the use of classical references appear conventional: Rome and the Roman army are symbolic equivalents for the modern war, and the legionaries may be associated with the German invaders in France and Belgium:

> 'Is that the Three-and-Twentieth, Strabo mine,
> Marching below, and we still gulping wine?'

[3] Isobel Hurst adds that "as a critic [Graves] is dismissive about the kind of poems that were inspired by the 'gradus ad parnassum spirit', the odes and pastoral poems of eighteenth-century Augustanism" (Hurst 2015: 204).

From the sad magic of his fragrant cup
The red-faced old centurion started up,
Cursed, battered on the table. 'No', he said,
'Not that! The Three-and-Twentieth Legion's dead,
Dead in the first year of this damned campaign –
The Legion's dead, dead, and won't rise again.
Pity? Rome pities her brave lads that die,
  But we need pity also, you and I,
Whom Gallic spear and Belgian arrow miss,
Who live to see the Legion come to this:
Unsoldierlike, slovenly, bent on loot,
Grumblers, diseased, unskilled to thrust or shoot.
O brown cheek, muscled shoulder, sturdy thigh!
Where are they now? God! watch it straggle by,
The sullen pack of ragged, ugly swine!
Is that the Legion, Gracchus? Quick, the wine!'
'Strabo,' said Gracchus, 'you are strange to-night.
  The Legion is the Legion, it's all right.
If these new men are slovenly, in your thinking,
Hell take it! You'll not better them by drinking.
They all try, Strabo; trust their hearts and hands.
The Legion is the Legion while Rome stands,
And these same men before the autumn's fall
Shall bang old Vercingetorix out of Gaul' (Graves 2003: 30).

It is important to notice here that Graves does not offer a positive or negative opinion of the Roman identity, in that for him it conveys a wide meaning. He is referring to the experience of war in general and to the figure of the 'soldier', regardless of whether he is English, German or French. War brings together everyone who fights it, irrespective of their allegiances and ideologies, both in ancient and in modern times. In Graves's poetry, the aim of the dialogue between Strabo and Gracchus is to illustrate two points of view of the same reality, war, which is always a synonym of death, loss and pain[4]. Like other war poets, Graves is not unaffected by Germany's invasion of France and Belgium, but here the association between the Roman invaders and Germany is not exclusive, since the English seem to have a lot in common with the Romans[5]. Starting from the context of the First World War, the poem "The Legion", composed in a disciplined and rigorous metric-rhythmic form that shows a considerable *labor limae*, then adopts a universal dimension by depicting war as a collective experience carried out in loyalty to one's country. This feeling invalidates any rhetorical consideration of the futility of war; being a soldier does not mean enforcing one or another policy; it means being part of a collective body ("O brown cheek, muscled shoulder,

[4] According to Adrian Cesar, "Gracchus clearly articulates Graves's own position in the closing lines of the poem" (Cesar 1993: 202-203).

[5] In fact, Elizabeth Vandiver suggests ambivalence and ambiguity in Graves's choice of his reference points and aptly speaks of "different readings of the relationship" (Vandiver 2010: 71-75).

sturdy thigh!"(l. 15) "their hearts and hands" (l.23) that is destined to die and yet will remain forever in people's memory. This is, moreover, the idea of life that the Roman identity expresses: it does not attribute a positive or negative value to the single human experience, to the single individual, or single events, rather it intends to record the truth about men and women and draw inspiration from it. "Truth" is in fact the aspect of Graves's conception of poetry that is associated with the *truth* of the Classics. It is not simply a question of historical truth, of the objectivity of the facts that one can find for example in prose or history texts. Truth in poetry is associated "with the magical, with inspiration, with the a-rational and with quasireligious thinking" (Bennett 2015: 40)[6], so it interprets a dimension that transcends empirical data and even linguistic data which, according to Graves, has objective limitations in conveying the multiple meanings of reality. Poetry is "a miraculous, unpredictable and unassessable event in non-history" (quoted in Seymour-Smith 1995: 537)[7], but the process by which it is achieved is quite complex.

Rome also appears in another poem "The Cuirassiers of the Frontiers" (1938)[8]. Here, Graves inherits the Victorian sense of the analogy between the Roman people and the people of the end of the nineteenth century, all depicted during the decline of their empire:

> Goths, Vandals, Huns, Isaurian mountaineers,
> Made Roman by our Roman sacrament
> We can know little (as we care little)
> Of the Metropolis: her candled churches,
> Her white-gowned pederastic senators,
> The cut-throat factions of her Hippodrome,
> The eunuchs of her draped saloons.
>
> Here is the frontier, here our camp and place –
> Beans for the pot, fodder for horses,
> And Roman arms. Enough. He who among us
> At full gallop, the bowstring to his ear,
> Lets drive his heavy arrows, to sink
> Stinging through Persian corslets damascened,
> Then follows with the lance – he has our love.
>
> The Christ bade Holy Peter sheathe his sword,
> Being outnumbered by the Temple guard.
> And this was prudence, the cause not yet lost
> While Peter might persuade the crowd to rescue.
> Peter renegued, breaking his sacrament.
> With us the penalty is death by stoning,

[6] The opposition of poetry and prose is made clear by Graves in *On English Poetry* (1922), but it also appears in the *Claudius* novels.

[7] Unpublished letter to Martin Seymour-Smith from July 1965.

[8] In 1938 Graves also published the historical novel *Count Belisarius*.

Not to be made a bishop.

In Peter's Church there is no faith nor truth,
Nor justice anywhere in palace or court.
That we continue watchful on the rampart
Concerns no priest. A gaping silken dragon,
Puffed by the wind, suffices us for God.
We, not the City, are the Empire's soul:
A rotten tree lives only in its rind (Graves 2003: 348-349).

The language used by Graves takes one back to the Latin meaning of "sacramentum"[9] (lines 2 and 19), "senators" (l.6), "eunuchs" (l.7), "Metropolis" (l.4), "City" (l.27), but it is obvious that these words all refer to the British people. This way, an analogy is established between Roman and British greatness, but there is also an analogy between the fall of Rome and the decline of the British Empire. Graves acknowledges the sense of continuity linking Caesar with Queen Victoria that characterises European history, whose values and disvalues the British personify. There is an interesting use of the word "cuirassiers", of French origin, instead of a Latin synonym like *catafracti* as Jon Coulston suggests (Coulston 2015: 116), which indicates heavily armoured cavalry. The choice of a modern word, which also appears in the novel *Count Belisarius*, of the same period, highlights the sense of continuity that the Victorians proudly emphasised, starting with that "Civic Romanus sum", spoken by Palmerstone in Parliament on the occasion of the Don Pacifico diplomatic case. None the less, unlike the Victorians, Graves was aware that the analogy with the greatness of Rome also applied to the decline of Rome. He interpreted the analogy from a modern point of view, as a complex and ambivalent model of cosmopolitism and nationalism, as an endless source of ideas, of stories and emotions, of values on which to build one's own identity as a European citizen of the twentieth century.

I would like to conclude by mentioning Graves's lecture entitled "Legitimate Criticism of Poetry" held at Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts in 1957. He began by saying that poetry "is more than words musically arranged. It is sense; good sense; penetrating, often heart-rending sense … it often has layer after layer of meaning concealed in it!" (Graves 1958: 34), implying a complexity in poetry that derives from the Latin concept of "veritas", in other words of the Greek concept of "aletheia" (ἀλήθεια), that is, the unveiling of truth. Only poetry, since it is therapeutic art, can unveil the multiple aspects of life. This is taught by the Classics as the "matrix" of modernity[10].

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[9] Vance suggests that "sacramentum [...] could denote both a military oath of allegiance and a Christian rite", (Vance 1997: 223).

[10] I use the word "matrix" in the sense used by Graves himself in an interview for *The Paris Review* in 1969 à propos of his method of revising poetry: "You feel there are a certain number of poems that have got to be written. You don't know what they are, but you feel: this is one, and that is one. It is the relation between jewels and the matrix – the jewels come from the matrix, then there's the matrix to prove it. A lot of poems are matrix rather than jewels" (Graves 1969: 119-145, 137).

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