

# Return of the Roman

by Allan Massie

*Knowledge of Latin may be in decline, but novels, films and documentaries about the Romans have never been more popular. We are still dimly, unconsciously, aware that our culture grew out of classical civilisation*

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In his short book "The Future of the Classical," Salvatore Settis, director of the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa, writes that "the marginalisation of classical studies in our education systems and our culture at large is a profound cultural shift that would be hard to ignore." At the same time, he asks: "What place is there for the ancients in a world... characterised by the blending of peoples and cultures, the condemnation of imperialism, the end of ideologies, and the bold assertion of local traditions, and ethnic and national identities in the face of all forms of cultural hegemony? Why seek out common roots, if everyone is intent on distinguishing their own from those of their neighbour?"

The points are well made, the questions pertinent, though the implication is not always as cogent as Settis supposes. After all, one characteristic of the Roman world was a very similar "blending of peoples and cultures," as eastern gods and goddesses were introduced to Rome and worshipped there, and as the emperors came more often from the provinces than from Italy, let alone Rome.

Yet if classical studies are in decline, as they unquestionably are, there is still much interest in the ancient world. Settis is not, admittedly, impressed by this: "The spread of superficial and persistent 'classical' references (particularly apparent in advertising and the cinema) is not preventing the expulsion of classical culture from our shared cultural horizon." It depends, of course, on what you judge to be "superficial." Novels set in ancient Rome or Greece, for instance? A matter of opinion, certainly. As Jason Cowley wrote in last month's Prospect: "Robert Harris may be one of Britain's most popular novelists, but he remains a victim of literary snobbery, or so he thinks. Interviewed recently in the Observer, he complained that the kind of novels shortlisted for the Booker prize were as much works of genre as any other. Harris is considered to be a genre writer: a writer of the airport thriller and historical saga. As such he is never in contention for the main prizes, and his latest novel, *Imperium*, was predictably not among the 19 titles on this year's Man Booker longlist."

Of course, Harris's publishers may not have entered it for the prize. But if they did, the novel had two things against it. First, the proof copy came with the boast that it had a publicity budget of £400,000, information guaranteed to offend high-minded judges. Second, it is indeed genre fiction, being about the political career of Marcus Tullius Cicero. It is also written with

close attention to the historical sources and is a highly intelligent political novel.

It is popular, too--number three in the bestseller list as I write. No doubt some buy it because they have enjoyed Harris's other novels. But others must do so because of their interest in the subject. Is that interest to be judged "superficial"? If so, it is likely to be deepened by a reading of the novel. At the very least the reader will close the book having learned a good deal about life and politics in the late republic.

Why are so many novelists in the modern age drawn to write about the ancient world, especially Rome but also, to a lesser extent, Greece? The line of those who have done so goes back at least to Edward Bulwer-Lytton and *The Last Days of Pompeii*, written at a time--the 1830s--when classical studies were central to education throughout western Europe. Some such genre novels are actually very "literary"--Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*, for example. But most, whatever their literary quality, aim to be popular, which is to say that they have a strong narrative, striking characters and richly dramatic scenes. If not bestsellers, Roman novels are certainly intended to please the "common reader." Two which did are Henryk Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* and Lew Wallace's *Ben Hur*, both of which had a Christian theme, not a characteristic of the modern Roman novel.

The father of the genre, in English anyway, was Robert Graves, himself a classical scholar, if an eccentric one. His two novels about the emperor Claudius have scarcely been out of print since first being published in the 1930s. They were also successfully adapted for television in the 1970s (the series was recently repeated on BBC4). Jack Lindsay, a Marxist whose *Rome for Sale*, about the Catiline conspiracy, would make a nice companion to Harris, actually published his first Roman novels before Graves wrote *I, Claudius*, but they never enjoyed the same success and his books are now mostly out of print.

Graves's success encouraged others. It was as if he had opened a door, through which novelists such as Rex Warner, Thornton Wilder, Alfred Duggan, Peter Green, Gore Vidal, Howard Fast, Colin Thubron, Ross Leckie and Conn Iggulden crowded. I myself have written six Roman novels, offering a fictionalised history of Rome from Julius Caesar to the Flavian emperors. There have also been Roman novels in other European languages, notably *The Death of Virgil* by Hermann Broch and Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian* (perhaps the finest of all). Most of these books deal with the elite--politicians, generals, emperors. More recently, however, there have been crime novels by Lindsey Davis, David Wishart and Steven Saylor, in which low-life characters mingle with the great.

Novels set in ancient Greece have been fewer, reflecting, perhaps, a lower level of interest in and knowledge of Greek history as distinct from myth and legend. Mary Renault had a big success in the 1960s with her fine novel about the Peloponnesian war, *The Last of the Wine*, and then with her trilogy about Alexander. Homer and the Greek tragedians have been plundered less often than one might expect. Two exceptions are Hilary Bailey's *Cassandra* and Barry Unsworth's *The Sons of the Kings*, which masterfully evokes the ethos of the Achaeans.

The list could be lengthened, but what's clear is that the classical world still holds attraction for both authors and readers. Some of this interest may be "superficial," but by no means all of it is. In any case, it is natural that there should be such interest. There is still an appreciation in our culture of the fact that our civilisation has its roots in Greece and Rome--as well,

of course, as in biblical Israel--and that Greek and Roman history, legend and myth are part of our inherited culture. This is reflected, for example, in the comparative popularity in sixth forms of classical studies, offering pupils the chance to read Greek and Roman literature in translation.

Some awareness of the ancient world has been transmitted even to those ignorant of the languages, often, indeed, by men who were not themselves classical scholars. Shakespeare, famously, had "small Latin and less Greek," but his Roman plays, drawing on North's translation of Plutarch's *Lives*, provide evidence of his appreciation of the importance of the ancient world--and also, of course, of his recognition that it offered splendid dramatic material. The golden age of French theatre was influenced by the classics, not only in the dramatists' obedience to Aristotle's theories of drama, but in their choice of subjects. Both Corneille and Racine set plays in Rome and Greece.

Hollywood followed suit, for the obvious reason that toga-movies offered the chance to make high-grossing spectacles. Kirk Douglas has been crucified as the rebel slave Spartacus (by a sneering Laurence Olivier). Peter Ustinov as Nero fiddled while Rome burned, and Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor prefigured their own stormy marriage as Antony and Cleopatra. More recently, Brad Pitt has played Achilles and Colin Farrell Alexander.

It is not surprising, therefore, that almost everybody knows at least a little about Roman history and Greek legend--more, probably, than about medieval Christendom or Norse mythology. Julius Caesar and Odysseus, Cleopatra and Helen of Troy are figures as familiar as any in British history. That lions devoured Christians in the Colosseum is a fact firmly lodged in people's minds, even though a recent history of the Colosseum questions whether such scenes ever took place there. Even if politicians no longer quote the classics in the House of Commons, Rome, in some form or another, remains part of popular culture.

People read historical novels, it may be assumed, for information, enlightenment and amusement. They represent an agreeable way of learning a little history. There's no reason why authors should bridle at this. Nabokov wrote that novelists are three things: storytellers, teachers and enchanters. We may not all be able to enchant--Nabokov thought only the masters could do that--but we can all aspire to tell a story and even to teach. I am happy when a teacher of classics tells me he or she recommended my Roman novels to pupils, and that some admitted to enjoying them. I recall with pleasure how often my own interest in particular periods of history was first stimulated by a novel.

Unlike the historian, the novelist usually writes from the point of view of one character or group of characters, thus offering a limited picture. On the other hand, the novelist does something that academic historians rarely succeed in doing. He reminds us, as Carlyle said of Walter Scott, that people now long dead were not abstractions, but living beings made of flesh and blood. The novelist may perform another service to historical understanding. By its nature the historical novel teaches, or reminds, the reader that events now in the past were once in the future. You won't find a novelist writing, as lazy historians sometimes do, that such an event "changed the course of history." When he describes, for instance, Caesar crossing the Rubicon, the novelist shows that this is the course history took and, because he must imagine Caesar's state of mind before he takes that decision and calls out "let the dice fly high!" he dramatically reveals its significance.

All this applies to any historical novel. So why Rome? Why Greece? Clearly the author's pre-standing interest in subject and period is the first reason for the choice. I embarked on my Roman novels (originally intending to write just one, about Augustus) only after I had published a book of biographical essays on the first 12 Caesars, intended as a companion volume to Suetonius. Others followed that first novel, partly because my publisher asked for them, partly because Augustus sold better than the contemporary novels I had written, and partly because, unlike with these other books, it proved possible to sell translation rights. Nevertheless, I would not have continued but for the intrinsic interest of the subject; and the more I wrote about the Rome of the late republic and early empire, the more deeply interested I became.

There were also a couple of what you might call technical considerations. The first applies to historical novels set in any period. Anyone who has read biographies of Dickens--or indeed his letters--will know how agitated he became when in need of a plot. Well, the historical novel presents the author with at least the outlines of a plot, ready-made. You still have to invent much: incidents, dialogue, encounters and so on. But your journey is mapped out. You know that somehow you have to get Caesar to the theatre of Pompey on the Ides of March, 44BC.

The second of these "technical" considerations is more important, or at least has been for me. The great problem of the historical novel is how to make your characters speak, and this problem becomes more acute the closer you get to our own time. Harry Mount made this point in a review in the Daily Telegraph of Peter Ackroyd's new novel, *The Fall of Troy*, which is set in the 19th century and tells the story of a thinly disguised Schliemann's discovery of Troy. The conversations, Mount said, "fall into the double-trap of being in both olden days language and translationese... The rules [of both] are oddly similar. They demand you speak as formally as possible, that you don't use colloquial expressions where a pompous romanticised one will do... 'Ride like the wind, Rashid. I expect you to return before nightfall.' ... What's wrong with 'it's dark'?"

Well, by assuming that your characters are speaking Latin and that you are translating an autobiography or memoir, you can avoid at least one of the pitfalls of the historical novel and make your characters speak in fairly neutral contemporary English--something impossible to do without ringing false in, say, a novel set in 17th-century England.

None of this explains the popularity of Roman novels with readers. Part of the answer is clear: readers like to be entertained by strong narratives, larger-than-life characters and dramatic confrontations. But why are more novels written about Rome than about Tsarist Russia--where you also find those things? Why Julius Caesar and Augustus rather than Louis XIV or even Napoleon--subject of innumerable biographies but few novels?

I would hazard this explanation. However dimly or unconsciously, there persists the idea that Greece and Rome matter, that they are part of our inheritance. Salvatore Settis quotes John Stuart Mill writing in 1859: "The battle of Marathon, even as an event in English history, is more important than the battle of Hastings. If the issue of that day had been different... the Britons and Saxons might still be wandering in the woods." "This image," Settis writes, "of Greek history as universal history requires the Romans not just as cultural intermediaries but as the institutional, military and administrative structure by which the Roman empire created the right context for 'classical' culture to put down roots." Though Settis casts some doubt on the validity of this view, and draws attention to the "superficial" nature of much contemporary interest in the classical past, there nevertheless remains, even in our global cultural economy, something of the sense that we grew out of Greece and Rome. People may have only a vague notion as to the exact nature of our debt to antiquity. They may be--indeed, must be--further from understanding classical culture than those belonging to earlier generations, whose education was dominated by Greek

and Roman texts. Nevertheless, Greece and Rome continue in some way to matter as other periods of history, and other cultures, do not. Those of us who write and read novels set in the ancient world are striving to absorb something of its significance. Our novels may offer only a shadowy representation of the reality of Greece and Rome, but even that shadowy version is preferable to classical culture being submerged in the dark.

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