Robert Graves's *Pier Glass*: War Revisited and Love Lost

By the end of 1920, Robert Graves's dissatisfaction with his marriage, together with the financial burden of a growing family and the pressures of reading for a degree at Oxford, must have pushed his already strained nerves to the breaking point. The poet, though, with what Seymour-Smith calls "his characteristic behavior of making the best of a bad situation" (84) turned away from his marital problems and delved deeply into the causes of his war neuroses and nightmares to produce the impetus for his next volume of poetry, *The Pier Glass*.

Except for the six poems that had appeared earlier in *The Treasure Box*, almost all poems in *The Pier Glass* were written in 1920 when Graves's mental condition was unstable. On 7 October 1920, the usually silently suffering Graves wrote the following lines to Eddie Marsh just after Secker had accepted the poems for publication:

> I never seem to see anybody these days and when I do they excite my shell-shock so that I am useless for days after. I am worn-out from much work, chiefly in the last few weeks, helping Nancy with her shop that she sportingly started up here. (O'Prey *Images* 119- 120)

The volume was published in late February of 1921 and, in a letter to Edmund Blunden thanking him for a favorable review in the *National* and *Athenaeum*, Graves explained carefully how the poems should be interpreted.

> You can see it [*Pier Glass*] better if you think of it as half a reaction against shell shock by indulging in a sort of dementia praecox...of fantastic daydreams, "Troll's Nosegay", "Hills of May", etc., half as an attempt to stand up to the damned disease and write an account of it (hence, "Incubus", "Gnat", "Down", "Pier Glass," "Reproach" and so on), the obscurity of which is not so obscure as the original. (O'Prey *Images* 123-124)

In fact, Graves's division of poems is very helpful when one attempts to analyze the contents of the volume. The majority of poems, forming the first half of the collection, deal with his efforts to understand and diagnose his neurasthenia through the medium of poetry, but the second section continues to examine Graves's pre-occupation with love. Kirkham, who agrees that the

poems fall into two distinct categories, comments in his criticism that "neither of the themes, war neurosis and love, is explored; the former is regarded merely as an appalling and apparently causeless fact, the latter is hailed simply as a panacea for all ills" (47). Kirkham, however, overlooks Graves's extended attempts to confront and overcome his nervous disorder through poetry and downplays the concern Graves had of losing his inspiration in the process of seeking out a cure. Indeed, Kirkham's judgement that Graves passively accepted his illness is as questionable as his suggestion that the love poetry in this volume is simply escapist. On the contrary, of all the love poetry written for this volume, only "The Patchwork Bonnet" has any cloying elements of sentimental escape in evidence.

The opening poem of *The Pier Glass* attempts to put the problem of Graves's guilt-laden unconscious to rest. "The Stake" is, on the surface, an argument between two towns over the guilt or innocence of a person buried under a cross-roads with "a stake through his heart." During the spring, the stake begins to throw out shoots, ostensibly gaining life from the decomposition of the body below. An argument then commences over the nature of its shoots.

> Naseboro' says "A Upas Tree";
> "A Rose," says Crowther;
> But April's here to declare it
> Neither one nor the other.

Both townsmen are wrong in their speculations; the new life springing from the stake is neither the sweet smelling romantic rose nor the saplings from the poisonous Upas tree, but rather, as should be expected, the shoots from an honest English oak.

> A green-tufted oak-tree
> On the green wold,
> Careless as the dead heart,
> That the roots enfold.

"Careless" is the key word here, for the tree is depicted as continuing to grow without effort and completely oblivious to the dead body below.

The poem, then, is Graves's positive attempt to atone for the deaths that he caused in the war by an intellectual affirmation that his current suffering and feelings of remorse have no relevance to those now dead. To try to justify the deaths of the soldiers with romantic allusions (the rose) or staunch military rhetoric (the Upas tree) is both false and insincere; rather, Graves must learn simply to accept the reality of life and death as part of the natural course of existence and to remember that in nature, nothing truly dies—new life continu-

ally springs forth from the old. His argument is convincing from a logical point of view, but his discounting of the emotional response makes the poem incomplete.

"Reproach," Graves's attempt at atonement for having played his part in the slaughter on the battlefields of France, demonstrates quite convincingly that the poet is still haunted by his actions. A figure with a "grieving moonlight face" stares down and reproaches the speaker, who tries to dispel the image with his own rational verbal formula:

> I am not guilty in my mind
> Of aught would make you weep.

The image charges Graves with being untrue and unkind. Such blatantly understated terms scald the poet's "heart with shame" as he recognized his complicity in the death of fellow soldiers during the war. And through the use of pathetic fallacy in the final stanza, the shame of and bewilderment at this heinous crime bear witness to Graves's own recognition of his "ancestral sin."

> The black trees shudder, dropping snow,
> The stars tumble and spin.
> Speak, speak, or how may a child know
> His ancestral sin.

The ancestral sin here is not "original sin," as Day postulates (32); it is the sin against humanity that is apparent in all war—the sin of pride which sets men to fighting together against other men. The nagging spirit of the night will not let Graves extricate himself from the responsibility for his role in the bloodshed; a payment must be extracted for his complicity, and that payment is the guilt-ridden neurasthenia that haunts his vision.

In "Down," a poem very carefully analyzed by Graves's critics, the poet allows the reader to journey with him figuratively to the "no man's land" of his neurasthenic mind. Lying in bed when the clock strikes two on a windy summer night, a sick man is disturbed by the crowing of a hen-roost "three hours from dawn." In order to distract himself from dwelling on his guilt, he tries in vain to concentrate on the answerless riddles of his childhood. Eventually, the guilt sinks deeply into his thoughts, and, as Kohli puts it, in a "claustrophobic dream structure" (95), the sick man begins to drown in his own conscience.

> Mouth open, he was lying, this sick man,
> And sinking all the while; how had he come
> To sink? On better nights his dream went flying,
> Dipping, sailing, the pasture of his sleep,

But now, since clock and cock, had sunk him down
Through mattress, bed, floor, floors beneath,
  stairs, cellars,
Through deep foundations of the manse; still sinking
Through unturned earth.

The sick man sinks into the ground where he feels he belongs: the place he has cheated before, and the place where the bones of his comrades rest. Suddenly the image of his comrades falling down during an attack is depicted in a funereal tableau: "weeping, down, drowned, lost!"—lost in the bowels of the earth forever. Graves's guilt, then, haunts him not only for having killed Germans; it haunts him for having survived. Later, in one of his *Crane Bag* essays entitled "What Was That War Like, Sir?" Graves points out that he is still haunted by the nightmare of visiting the trenches nearly fifty years after the war; he reflects here on the deaths of his comrades, which occurred with a macabre regularity.

> Death lurked around every traverse, killing our
> best friends with monotonous spite. We had
> been spared, but why? Certainly not because of
> our virtues. (59)

In the second half of "Down," the speaker tries to remember the simplicity of childhood when one could lose control of one's spirit and delve into an imaginative reverie, having the spirit return fuller and richer than when it left. This re-coupling of the spirit and the body in joyous harmony is now lost as the guilt-laden world of experience sunders any communication between the waking body and the seething unconsciousness. The poet's mind continues to fall further and further into madness—perhaps into death—in the final stanza.

Falling, falling! Light closed up behind him,
Now stunned by the violent subterrerrene flow
Of rivers, whirling down to hiss below
On the flame-axis of this terrible world;
Toppling upon their water fall, O spirit ...

The poem characterizes the nature of Graves's mental anguish and demonstrates clearly that the poet derived little positive inspiration from his nightmares; he sketches the utter hopelessness he feels with a mythical geography that maps the landscape of the poet's mind very accurately; in no way does he indicate that his mental suffering is likely to be curable.

"Incubus" is a less successful poem than "Down," but it attempts to display the helplessness that Graves felt when the long nights of semi-sleep turned into

brooding exploration of his unconscious. The evil spirit traps the body as it lies "Arms in supplication spread" and whispers its horrors into the ear of its victim. The second stanza describes in graphic detail his helplessness as nightmarish thoughts flash through his unconscious mind.

> Through the darkness here come I,
> Softly fold about the prey;
> Body moaning must obey,
> Must not question who or why,
> Must accept me, come what may,
> Dumbly must obey.

The final stanza is something of an aubade that forces the grim, dark powers of the night away and ushers in the welcome daylight. The "morning scent and treetop song,/ Slow-rising smoke and nothing wrong" help establish again a sense of normality, but the reader cannot forget that "half-Death's" dispersal is only temporary, and that the incubus will be back with a vengeance in the coming night.

The title poem of the volume, "*The Pier Glass*," which Donald Davie claims is "almost entirely parasitical on early Tennyson" (*Impersonal* 41), was originally inscribed to "T. E. Lawrence, who helped me with it." Indeed, in *Goodbye*, Graves mentions that T. E. Lawrence "made a number of suggestions for improving these poems [*Pier Glass*] and [Graves] adopted most of them" (371). This poem also enjoys the rare distinction of having been fully analyzed by both of Graves's biographers and has attracted countless interpretations from a host of Gravesian critics; most agree, however, that the poem is in some way a metaphor for Graves's neurasthenic state.

"The Pier Glass" is divided into four distinct stages, but these stages do not fall smoothly into four stanza divisions: The poem opens upon a servant woman roaming through a lost manor in an involuntary reverie that comes upon her at night and on "sultry afternoons." Her route is always the same, for she is "drawn by a thread of time-sunk memory." The second division accounts her thoughts as, entering the empty bedroom, she is confronted by the sight of the bed upon which her innocence was cruelly violated when her master summoned her from "attic glooms above"; here, too, she avenged herself by the murder of her master, who had practiced upon her both physically and literally his "*droit du seigneur*." She gazes into a cracked pier-glass and sees a ghost of her former self reflected. The act of killing another human being, no matter how justifiable, has sucked the life out of her. This very lifelessness is emphasized in the third stanza, where the empty room and the woman's life are synthesized to mirror the same reflection.

> Is there no life, nothing but the thin shadow

And blank foreboding, never a wainscote rat
Rasping a crust? Or at the window pane
No fly, no bluebottle, no starveling spider?
The windows frame a prospect of cold skies
Half merged with sea, as at the first creation,
Abstract, confusing welter. Face about,
Peer rather in the glass once more, take note
Of self, the grey lips and long hair dishevelled,
Sleep-staring eyes.

Overwhelmed by this unnatural reverie, the servant woman prays to Christ to show her that life still exists outside her paralyzing neurasthenic phantasma. Surprisingly, her reflections are answered by the appearance of a swarm of bees between the pier-glass and the outside wall, busy returning with honey for the survival of the hive. Their affirmative activity and sense of purpose leads the woman "home at last/ From labyrinthine wandering." The final section of the poem echoes her deliberations as she recollects her past violence in the room: with renewed effort, she decides to confront the cause of her disorder, contemplating whether she can find it in her heart to forgive the injustice done to her. Her judgement is evident from the last four lines:

Kill or forgive? Still does the bed ooze blood?
Let it drip down till every floor-plank rot!
Yet shall I answer, challenging the judgment:—
"Kill, strike the blow again, spite what shall
come."
"Kill, strike, again, again," the bees in chorus
hum.

Admittedly, the last stanza of the poem, which has been the subject of much criticism, is ambiguous. In fact, Graves himself omitted this stanza from all of his later collections. Seymour-Smith gives the following explanation for its weakness:

...Graves wrote the first part of the poem more or less
as we know it and showed it to [T. E.] Lawrence
for his approval. Lawrence could not understand it,
but was fascinated by it; he suggested to Graves that
he keep it cryptic, but added a few tantalizing clues.
So Graves 'manufactured' an ending giving such clues,
became interested in the section on its own account,
and therefore did no more than confusedly adumbrate
the White Goddess. (93)

While the connection between the White Goddess and the ghostly woman in "Pier Glass" is more credible than Seymour-Smith would have his readers believe, an explanation for Graves's choosing a female figure as evidence of his own mental instability is not particularly difficult to provide; the woman's wretched condition is brought about as a reaction to the violent deed enacted in revenge; she is a victim, as so many of Nancy's women were victims, of a man's lust and dominance. Graves, too, is a victim of his own conscience which recognizes the duality of his condition; he felt justified in performing his war service, but he became the victim of a nightmarish disorder for the gravity of his actions. The victimization of the woman who has been forcibly raped by her master acts as a simplified allegory of Graves's state of mind whenever he involuntarily returned to examine his war experience. The inability of the woman—or Graves for that matter—to forgive her enemy affirms the belief in the rightness of the initial deed.

The four poems analyzed here are indicative of Graves's concerns about his deteriorating mental condition and its effect on his poetic output. But the poem that is truly emblematic of his illness is "The Gnat," a strange tale about a poor shepherd who fears he will die when a gnat lodged in his skull begins to grow. As the shepherd imagines the gnat swelling inside his head, he kills his loyal dog because he is afraid that after his death no one will treat the dog as well as he. Ironically, after the dog is killed, the gnat flies harmlessly out of the shepherd's mouth, and the shepherd is left a despondent laborer without the companionship of his trusty animal. Graves explains the meaning of this bizarre poem in *The Meaning of Dreams* (159-165), the crux of which is synthesized by Canary:

> Graves said that he originally knew only that he felt an odd sympathy with the shepherd but that he now sees the gnat as an emblem of his own shell shock. The shepherd has hesitated about going to the minister with his problem, as Graves had hesitated about going to a psychologist, for to be rid of his madness might mean to kill that which he loved best, his sheep dog (poetry): 'The last line of the poem probably refers to psycho-analysis; meaning that all that will be left for me when I have ceased to be a poet will be scraping among the buried and unfruitful memories of the past.' (165)

If Graves was afraid that psychoanalysis would dry up his inspiration as it cured his neurasthenia, he certainly seemed willing to accept the therapeutic power of love both as a hope for inspiration and as remedy for his shell-shocked mind. In the preface to *Whipperginny*, he claims that he wrote a number of

verses for *The Pier Glass* with "the desire to escape from a painful war neurosis into an Arcadia of amatory fancy." Graves must have had in mind here such poems as "The Patchwork Bonnet" with its images of domestic bliss, and the lyrical ballad "Black Horse Lane" with its study of aged passion, both examples of wish-fulfillment for the ailing poet. In "The Finding of Love," the poet offers a hopeful scenario in which all his mental troubles are dissolved by the analeptic powers of new-found love. The poem is purely escapist in nature, unabashedly romantic and full of nursery sentiments and Georgian images. The opening lines present the lover's emotional and psychological state before the onset of new love:

> Before this generous time
> Of love in morning prime,
> He had long season stood
> Bound in nightmare mood
> Of dense murk, rarely lit
> By Jack-o'-Lanthorn's flit
> And straightaway smothered spark
> Of beasts' eyes in the dark,
> Mourning with sense adrift,
> Tears rolling swift.

Slowly the lover is freed from his distressing "clouded vision" by the onset of "An unknown gradual flame" which magically absorbs the confusion of his life and releases him from his affliction.

> No more, no more,
> Forget that went before!
> Not a wrack remains
> Of all his former pains.
> Here's Love a drench of light,
> A Sun dazzling the sight,
> Well started on his race
> Towards the Zenith space
> Where fixed and sure
> He shall endure,
> Holding peace secure.

The curious aspect of this poem is not so much "the amount of self-deception in the falsely triumphant conclusion, in which the poet assures himself that desire has become actuality..." as Kirkham states (46), but the culminating description of love as "steadfast" in the last line. Graves voices the hope here that

somehow his love for Nancy will suddenly dissolve his problems and transform them into joys. His plea is simply for Nancy to be consistent in her feelings for him, a request for her not to add to his insecurities but to give him a firm basis in their relationship so to assist him through the mental anguish of his neurasthenia. As Seymour-Smith points out, however, Graves was discovering some unpleasant facts about Nancy and his marriage at the time of writing *The Pier Glass*:

> There was a certain moral capriciousness, a lack of firmness, about Nancy which made her unsuitable as a Muse; he [Graves] was painfully and reluctantly realizing that he could never learn to love her. The young and war-stricken Graves of 1917 and 1918 had yearned for a loving, devoted wife and a long life of pastoralized bliss blessed by scores of children. But not even Nancy's feminism was convincing. His fate, as he now secretly admitted to himself and to Lawrence, was to be misunderstood—to be subjected to the whims of a scatterbrain. (94)

Several poems in *The Pier Glass* suggest that Graves's concept of love was becoming somewhat jaded at this time. In "Kit Logan and Lady Helen," he examines the consequences of love betrayed; and in a similarly negative vein, the "Hills of May" describes a lady so egotistical that she ignores man completely and moves on to another sphere of existence. But the poem that captures an accurate emotional flavor of Graves's early years of marriage is a capricious study of women, "The Troll's Nosegay."

> A simple nosegay! was that much to ask?
> (Winter still gloomed, with scarce a bud yet
> showing).
> He loved her ill, if he resigned the task.
> "Somewhere," she cried, "there must be
> blossom blowing."
> It seems my lady weeps and the troll swore
> By Heaven he hated tears: he'd cure her spleen;
> Where she had begged one flower, he'd shower
> fourscore,
> A haystack bunch to amaze a China Queen.
> Cold fog-drawn Lily, pale mist-magic Rose
> He conjured, and in a glassy cauldron set

With elvish unsubstantial Mignonette
And such vague bloom as wandering dreams
enclose.
But she?
Awed,
Charmed to tears,
Distracted,
Yet—
Even yet, perhaps, a trifle piqued—who knows?

R. P. Graves points out that Graves was working on this poem as early as February 1919 and that the poem passed through some thirty-five drafts before it was completed (207). Oddly, the poem is not criticized by Day or Kirkham, yet it seems to anticipate the whimsical demands of the White Goddess and the poet's dogged devotion to her unpredictable nature much more closely than their suggestions of her origins. Its content clearly derives from a need somehow to satisfy Nancy's unreasonable request for something as unobtainable as a bunch of fragrant flowers in the dead of winter. The devoted Graves is determined that he will do everything possible to fulfil her quirky request and "cure her spleen."

To satisfy his wife, Graves conjures up from his imagination an aromatic bouquet of lilies, roses, and fragrant grey-green Mignonettes and places his poetic offering before his lover, much in the same way that he will later pay homage to his White Goddess. The reaction to this offering is mixed at best; the woman merely accepts the prize without clearly indicating her gratitude. Somehow the gift of the poetic nosegay is not enough. The poet can only shrug his shoulders and wait for the next demand, a scenario that closely parallels Graves's attitude toward Nancy during the early years of their marriage.

In summary, *The Pier Glass* is primarily Graves's poetic investigation into the sources and manifestations of his neurasthenia with the hopeful aim of being able to understand and overcome the affliction through the therapeutic nature of poetry. In order to accomplish this task, Graves had to examine and bring to light the dark side of his unconscious and hope that once exposed, it could be rationally understood. Furthermore, *The Pier Glass* continues to expose Graves's ruminations on love and its manifestations, but the volume clearly demonstrates that the escapist elements of *Country Sentiment* were in the process of being replaced by a more pessimistic and negative view of the love relationship. And clearly, at this point, Graves seemed to have realized that he had reached a dead end as far as his poetry was concerned; he could not continue indefinitely to write about the psychological aberrations of his unconscious and his awareness of disintegrating love. In the preface to *Whipperginny*, he points out that while several poems of this volume continue the "aggressive and

disciplinary" mood of *The Pier Glass*, "in most of the later pieces will be found evidence of greater detachment in the poet and the appearance of a new series of problems in religion, psychology, and philosophy."

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Patrick Quinn
English Department
University of Toronto
Toronto, Canada