

THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN ROBERT GRAVES

'The Haunted House', which has survived Graves's massive discarding of his earlier poems, employs the ballad form to express the conflicting choice between the kind of poetry, the entertaining sort, that his audience expects, and the kind of poetry which the terror-ridden poet can produce. He *cannot* just sing to them, but only bring 'clouded tales of wring and terror,' of a night torn with cries, and of 'lust frightful, past belief.' The terror is charged with the weird and the super natural. The cries that awaken 'honest men sleeping' (though it is ambiguous whether men are honest because they are sleeping or because they 'start awake with rabid eyes') combine with the groans and knockings of the spirits in the gloom, the mutterings of 'demons in the dry well' before finally fossilizing into 'unrestrainable endless grief in breasts long rotten.' The poem is included in *Georgian Poetry* (London, Penguin 1962, ed. James Reeves), but, ironically, one can hardly find in its murky tortured gloom the 'emotional warmth' and 'moral innocence' which James Reeves lists as the virtues of Georgian poetry. The invitation to sing a song of 'happy art and faith': 'Come, surly fellow, come: a song!' is rejected in the first stanza 'What, fools? Sing to you?' The concluding assertion of poetic integrity as being independent of public taste though aware of its limiting pressure is all the more wry because it is made through the amnesia of a benumbed contemporary consciousness:

A song?
What laughter or what song
Can this house remember?
Do flowers and butterflies belong
To blind December?

Despite the precise imagery of a haunting grief, the image of 'this house' is curiously vague, and assimilates a cluster of associations, personal, literary and historical. The description is probably based on Graves's stay after the War at a Tudor house near Harlech in which Nancy Nicholson's family was also staying; an experience which is also recounted in his essay 'Common Sense about Ghosts.'¹

It was the most haunted house that I have ever been in, though the ghosts were invisible except in the mirrors. They would open and shut doors, rap on the oak panels, knock the shades off lamps, and drink the wine from the glasses at our elbows when we were not looking. The house belonged to an officer in the Second Battalion whose ancestors

had most of them died of drink. There was only one visible ghost, a little Yellow fog that appeared on the lawn in the early morning to announce deaths. (GTAT, 340-41)

And the possibility that the haunting mode of poetic language may be analogous to the haunting of houses is stated in *On English Poetry*:

The most popular theory advanced to account for the haunting of houses is that emanations of fear, hate or grief somehow impregnate a locality, and these emotions are released when in contact with a suitable medium. So with a poem or novel, passion impregnates the words and can make them active even [sic] divorced from the locality of creation. (p. 129)

The image he uses to illustrate in 'How Poets See,' how his own 'imperfect visual sense' is compensated by 'a perfect memory sense by touch,' is indeed that of a house:

....if I were asked to reconstruct the dimensions of a house in which I have lived for some years, I should imagine myself walking through it in the half-dark, and know just how the rooms stood in relation to one another, their size, the position of their furniture, and so on. (CA, 295)

Graves's analogues of the mind are generally images of wild desolation, frighteningly timeless 'rocky acres' or 'lost acres' with 'pre-historic fern and reed / And monsters such as heroes find,' or the 'gardens of the mind [which] fall waste' and 'fountains of the heart [which] run dry.' Or inorganic objects such as the city, the castle, 'this vessel, dead from truck to keel' with a sense of vastness which is both desolate and confining ('The Furious Voyage'), and of course the house itself.²

However, to turn to 'The Haunted House....' In its accumulation of grotesque images of interior decay and desolation in an old house where the emblems of vast and unnamed terror are present, in its strong allusions to the subterranean world, in its focussing of the taint of ghostliness in physical corruption, and in its symbolism of the cold, blind house for the poet's neurasthenic condition, Graves's poem echoes Thomas Hood's 'The Haunted House' also written in the ballad style:

Graves

'the clouded tales of
wrong and terror

demons 'that cheep
mutter'; 'Clapping of
an unseen bell'

'flesh-creeping'

'the web-hung room up above
the stable'

'Unrestrainable endless
grief'

'Do flowers and butterflies
belong to a blind December?'

More contemporaneous, though less conscious perhaps, are the Eliotic parallels. In Eliot's 'Gerontion' both the old man and the decayed house symbolize contemporary consciousness which has been benumbed into inertia (cf. 'The Unmoving present' of Graves' 'Virgil the Sorcerer'). The poem is a series of 'small deliberations' on this theme: 'Tenants of the house/Thought of a dry brain in a dry season.'

The Haunted House

'Dry Well'

'Honest men'

'Madmen'(in the *Country
Sentiment* version) and
'Bone-chilled', 'rabid eyes'

'Blood choking the gutter'

'Spirits in the web- hung room'

'of lust frightful ('filthy' in the
Country Sentiment version), past
belief'

Hood

'over all there hung a
cloud of fear'

and 'the spirit daunted' said
'as plain as whisper in
the ear./The place is
haunted!'

'The centipede along
the threshold crept'

'the cobweb hung across
in mazy tangle'

The emmets marched
'in undisturbed procession'

'If but a rat had lingered
in the house./To lure the
thought into a social channel!'

Gerontion

'Dry mouth', Thoughts of a
dry brain in a dry season.'

'I would meet you upon this
honestly'

'Chilled delirium', 'wilder-
ness of mirrors'

'The woman...poking the
peevish gutter'

'I have no ghosts', 'What will
the spider do./Suspend
its operations'

'Think/Neither fear nor courage saves
us. Unnatural vices/Are fathered by
our heroism.'

There is an unnamed terror, a disturbing ominousness in both the poems, though the Eliot poem has a wider range of ironic meditation achieved through a poetic form which stylistically enacts the break in historical continuity experienced by the contemporary persona. Graves, on the other hand, uses the *genre* of the traditional ballad or 'song' to achieve an ironic effect by truculently asserting his independence of, rather than a confidence in, his immediate audience to whom his poem is 'sung.' He cannot write the song to entertain in the happy manner of Walter de la Mare, for example, though the latter can also be sinister. No doubt, the haunted house recurs in de la Mare: 'an old unfriendly house,' 'A phantom house of misty walls,' 'the house of Stare.' But de la Mare's *forte* lies in his ability to create a world of moral innocence whose magic (as poems such as 'Hospital' or 'Fear' show) can dissolve in its final impact the menace of the outer world. Graves, on the other hand, is concerned with a pattern of experience in which fear, nightmare, dreams actually portray the condition of a death-burdened psyche. In 'The Haunted House', the persona knows that he cannot use any other form but that of the traditional ballad to articulate his ambivalence. In this, Graves may be said to have anticipated the revival, in the 1950's and 1960's, of the ballad form often ironically used in the protest poetry of the "beat generation."

'The Haunted House' first appeared in 1919 as 'Ghost Raddled,'³ but Graves changed the title circa 1938, the year in which both he and Laura Riding published their respective volumes of *Collected Poems*. Riding's 'On a New Generation' deals with the theme of lovers who 'speak to each other in a peculiar way and forget nature/then to fall quiet like a house no more haunted.'⁴ It is possible that Riding's poem was consciously or subconsciously in Graves's mind when he made the change especially because both the title-poem and the title of his volume of poems *No More Ghosts*, which followed in 1940, echo Riding's poem. Further, the opening line 'My love for you, though true, wears the extravagance of centuries' ('Compact', CP, 398) echoes the idea of 'On a New Generation' that the deep quiet of the house no longer haunted contains 'enough centuries' and the noise of 'all the loud births.' However, a more probable and more convincing source of the change of the title 'Ghost Raddled' to 'The Haunted House' is the fact that 'Mock Beggar Hall: A Progression' (1924), as the manuscript drafts of the poem show,⁵ was first titled 'Landlord and Tenants,' 'Registry Office,' 'The Haunted House,' 'The Haunted House: A Problem in Ethics,' 'The Haunted House: An Ethical Duologue.' Besides its opening line, in which the poet reports to the philosopher his dream about the haunted house, it develops the view, as part of the therapeutic strategy, that

the ghosts represent the anti-social impulses in the individual. The new element which the dream

added is an observation that as social systems evolve, new modes of behaviour are expected from the individual and the old modes are discounted. But certain individuals cling to tradition, then as each mode claims complete liberty of action at the expense of other interests there follows continual friction.

In 'Mock-Beggar-Hall,' the image of the haunted house incorporates in its allegorical framework the more impersonal political conflicts. The poet explains that the reason why he had made the haunted house a registry-office was not only because he had subconsciously remembered that during the war Mock-Beggar-Hall at Oxford had been used as a Government office-building but because, more than that, it 'symbolises European civilization' as well as 'official attempting to control the individual from the cradle to the coffin. The allegory was broadened from the conflicts within the individual to the conflicts between groups of individuals....' In part III, there are new strands and a lawyer and a landlord start 'an ethical dialogue'. The persona is surprised to 'hear a lawyer recognizing ghosts / Possessed of individual right and feelings.' They speak like individuals; and a processional delineation of the paraphernalia of administration and political machinery builds up a hysterical sense of responsibility, and 'a satire on British imperialism' soon develops into a satire on imperialism in general. The original dream about Mock Beggar Hall which had precipitated the poem provides, of course, the scaffolding for this image of political hysteria and exigency. 'Efforts to exploit one mode of behaviour in the individual at the expense of all others is a form of imperialism comparable with a political imperialism, and though at first it is the ready solution of former difficulties, all imperialism as such is bound in its later stages to run a certain unhappy course....' It can be readily seen that the imagery of political suspicion, of the conflict between the white, the black and the brown, of famine exploited towards the perpetuation of the Raj—which may be related to the *quete* motif in the folk-songs—all portray the private world of the poet's conflicting selves. In its haunted state, the mind seems to operate like any political imperialism, full of the machinery of drought, secret lies, and exploitation.

In Part IV the poet finds that 'you cannot talk about the Voice of India or the Voice of England or the Voice of Civilization or the Voice of the Individual, even where these are not any longer entities but storm-centres, rough houses of acute conflict':

...when these two thousand years
Expire, and the whole property reverts
Either to me or to my heirs-at-blood,
Then *on the day that we resume the house,*
In a most real sense we become the house,
A house that's continuity of the tenants

Through whom by slow accretion it evolved,
Taking an individual stamp of each,
Often at odds, room against room divided,
Waiting the landlord-absentee's return,
Long while despaired of such reintegration,
We being the house then, *a house whole and free,*
Become the continuity of these ghosts,
And there can be no question of annoyance
Or hauntings in the former vicious mode. (p.72)

(My italics).

The lawyer who speaks for self-control and order mocks this idea (expressed by the landlord, who is become 'the other,' the second self of the persona) of leaving conflicts to be solved by fate as 'Deterministic sloth' and advises the absentee landlord: 'Settle the house, *now*: show them who is landlord.' This is Graves's perception of the contemporary theme of the paralysis of will and of the consequent need 'for individual obligation as distinct from any abstract notion or isolated notion of collective obligation'. This is also at the centre of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, in which the recognition of personal responsibility: 'Shall I at least set my lands in order?' seems logically to arise from the larger perspective of a decaying civilization. 'Mock Beggar Hall' was published in May 1924, eighteen months after *The Waste Land* appeared. Graves's appreciation and analysis of Eliot's famous poem three years later⁶ confirms the probability that Graves was perhaps aware of the similarity between the moods which produced these two poems. Unlike 'The Haunted House,' 'Mock Beggar Hall' is a dialogue in prose and reads more like a clinical report with a deducible philosophical conclusion. Both poems, however, lack the Christian symbolism that dominated Tennyson's 'The Deserted House' with its 'dark deserted house' of the body contrasted with 'a mansion incorruptible' of soul in heaven. Graves's haunted house may also be contrasted with 'a mansion incorruptible' of soul in heaven. Graves's haunted house may also be contrasted with Frost's abandoned house or ghost house, which is an image of heroism, of self-protection against odds, but evokes neither a sense of historical continuity, ironic or otherwise, nor that of historical change or nemesis that threatens to devour human pride.

In 'Vanity', which first appeared in *Welchman's Hose* (1925) in a slightly different version as 'Essay on Knowledge,' the two lovers who live in one house *agree* that the house stays intact despite the forces of destruction within and without. But a sense of the security of the house, the assurance that 'The roof is tight, the walls unshaken./As now, so must it always be,' is not inviolable for it, also inevitable, awakens

Such prophecies of Joy awaken
The toad who dreams away the past
Under your hearth-stone, light forsaken,

Who knows that certitude at last
Must melt away in vanity—
No gate is fast, no door is fast—

That thunder bursts from the blue sky,
That gardens of the mind fall waste,
That fountains of the heart run dry. (CP, 47-48)

Both the thunder that attends the moment of certitude and the thunder that destroys it heighten the centrality of the image of the house. The image of 'one house' that contains two agreeing lovers stands for the inspired oneness in love which, like lightning, is unpredictable and comes as a natural and not supernatural event. Love's security is rooted in the very heart of its insecurity and transience; its exquisiteness is contained 'in the pulse of tainted blood.' Although the house seems unshakeable, despite the lightning outside, this very sudden experience arouses the dreaming toad in the darkness under the hearth-stone. The toad lurking in the apparently unshaken house, symbolizes the fears and memories of terror and destruction lurking in the haunted mind. The Dragon who can 'rear his fabulous green head' any time from 'the pools of peace' and destroy 'The flowers of innocence' and the image of the dreaming toad capable of being aroused evoke parallels with the toad of the fairy-tale who has once been a prince and has been transformed by witchcraft, with Milton's archangel fallen through pride and self-transformed into a serpent bringing disruption and disorder, and also with "another creature exiled from the realms of light, Grendel (described frequently in *Beowulf* as 'lightforsaken')." It also recalls an earlier poem, 'Outlaws' with its 'almost dead, malign' but proud Gods who lurk in the unconscious. The suggestion that the house is not merely the private house of the ghosts of the various sub-personalities in the poet, but also a symbol of accumulated tradition and history is, however, less veiled in the earlier version of the last stanza in *Welchman's Hose* (p.49) in which, instead of 'That fountains of the heart run dry' we have the repetitive: 'That age-established brooks run dry/That age-established brooks run dry.' In 'Around the Mountain,' (CP, p.197) the lover's night-walk through summer rain keeps him out of the house. He can cross the shadowy milestones of 'the sub-human, block tree- silhouettes,' 'unseen, gungling water'; 'the bulk and menace of entranced houses; to wraith wandering by'; and return to the house only if he 'makes the desired turning-point, and walks back another fifteen miles.'

The image of the house as an analogue of the mind is also used in 'The Presence,' 'The Smoky House,' 'A Measure of Casualness,' 'Between Hyssop and Axe,' 'The Young Cordwainer,' 'The Secret Land,' 'The Death Room,' 'The Visitation,' 'Frightened Man,' 'Theseus and Ariadne,' 'The Winged Heart,' 'Not at Home,' 'Rhea,' and

'The Window Sill.' In 'The Presence,' the Muse 'fills the house and garden terribly / With her bewilderment.' Her 'profuse reproaches' deafen and blind the lover in the same way as the real pangs of death 'that lately choked her breath.' In other words, the Muse's presence maddens the lover's mind in the same way as her absence would: and the emotional effect of both is likened to the suddenness and fierceness with which the 'horror of the grave' can grip the dying person. 'A Measure of Casualness' (CP, p.277) focuses the way in which a heightening of the senses of sound and smell and sight in the poetic trance can also heighten the poet's sense of touch and thereby facilitate his sense of movement in the mind-house:

Too fierce the candlelight; your gentle voice
Roars as in dream; my shoulder-nooks flower;
A scent of honeysuckle invades the house,
And my fingertips are so love-enhanced
That sailcloth feels like satin to them.
Teach me a measure of casualness
Though you stalk into my room like Venus naked.

One of the blessings of 'the poetic trance,' or 'love-trance,' or 'the necessary trance of attention,' or still again, the 'paranoiac trance' is that it breaks the pattern of routine and monotony of time that is normally broken only in dreams. While its spell is unpredictable, it is not completely outside time. The haunted house, whether it is filled with the ghostly tenants, the lurking and interfering sub-personalities, or whether entranced by the freedom of certitude, whether threatened by the forces of unreason or invaded by the thunder of certitude, maintains an air of general orderliness. The forces of reason and unreason, the constant presence of the ghostly tenants and the strategy of re-orientation are inherent in the very resilience of the owner of the house: they are part of the natural process of decay and preservation and renewal of which the White Goddess is for Graves the most authentic symbol. It is a pagan acceptance of the paradox of death in life or death in love and life in death or love in death which explains the inclusiveness of the love-trance in which the poet can move by himself or with the beloved in a way in which, though haunted by the moments of the excessive domination by these tenants, he can still stumble into a measure of casualness, a freedom of certitude:

To know our destiny is to know the horror
Of separation, dawn oppressed by night:
Is, between hyssop and axe, boldly to prove
That gifted, each, with singular need for freedom
And haunted, both, by spectres of reproach,
We may yet house together without succumbing
To the low fever of domesticity
Or to the lunatic spin of aimless flight (CP, 307)

It is important to realise here that the house-image which

brings the beloved and the poet or, symbolically, unreason and reason, the unconscious and the conscious selves together is envisaged as a normal experience in contrast to either of the abnormal extremes: 'the low fever of domesticity' and 'the lunatic spin of aimless flight'. The two extremes are also perhaps the extremes of the Romantic and the Classical sensibilities, the surrealist madness and disorientation on the one hand, and the dull monotony of classical control on the other. Between the two poles of ecstasy and pain, between dumbness and volubility lies the true 'frisson' of poetry, the inspired measures of casualness, the freedom to re-live the 'frisson' of history and the ugliness of war in the transformed idiom of experience. In the incandescence of love, as 'Freehold' makes it clear, the mind can perceive and live the cadences of ease and

certitude in the immediate present even when mindful of the past:

Though love expels the ugly past
 Restoring you this house at last
 This generous-hearted mind and soul
 Reserved from alien control
 How can you count on living free
 From sudden jolts of history,
 From interceptive sigh or stare
 That heaves you back to how-things-were
 And makes you answerable for
 The casualties of bygone war?
 Yet smile your vaguest: make it clear
 That then was then, but now is here. (CP, 347)

Notes

1. *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1942, p.754.
2. *Vision and Rhetoric*, G.S. Fraser, London, 1974.
3. *The Owl*, 1:8 May, 1919. Also see *Country Sentiment*, London, 1920.
4. *Collected Poems*, London, 1938, p.316.
5. Available at the Lockwood Memorial Library, SUNY at Buffalo.
6. *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (with Laura Riding), London, 1927. Reprinted in *The Common Asphodel*, London, 1947.
7. Kirkhan, *The Poetry of Robert Graves*, London, 1969, p.97.
8. Perhaps the fifteen miles of the return journey, like the half a hundred live-bites in 'Dethronement' are part of Graves' lunar symbolism. The 'desired turning-point' is the turn of the moon when she brings '...the rain/In swarthy goatskin bags from a far sea' thus 'repairing/Damages of long drought and sunstroke.' ('Turn of the Moon', CP, pp.210-11).

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