

Profound Frivolity in Robert Graves' Poems: 1938-45

Critical studies, reviews and commentaries on *Poems: 1938-45* tend to focus on those poems which can be pigeon-holed as a part of Graves' exploration of the man-woman relationships or as kernels from the cob of ideas generated by *The White Goddess*. While book-length studies, such as Michael Kirkham's and Martin Seymour-Smith's, do make mention of a variety of poems from this collection, their principle concern is for the poems to be read as an aspect of works which fit into the phases of Graves' emotional and intellectual development as he defined them. In other words Graves' *Goodbye to All That* and the "prophetically" titled collection of poetry *No More Ghosts* were declarations that his neurasthenic traumas had been resolved and these "declarations" were accepted as absolute watermarks for Gravesian researchers. This acceptance has left huge gaps in the study of many significant works from this, and other, collections—gaps which are beginning to be filled by more recent studies such as Adrian Caesar's exploration of homosexual imagery in poems written after Graves had stated that "...[his] affections [were] running in the more normal channels" (200).

"The Shot" is a poem which defies easy classification since, thematically, it remains outside of a readily identifiable 'body' of the collection. In other words, it stands on its own without obviously developing any of the individual themes which critics and reviewers were quick to pick up on in their studies. Yet, the poem persisted through Graves' frequent editorial cuts to his many volumes of collected works and should be considered for this, if for no other, reason.

The opening line of the poem, "The curious heart plays with its fears", acts as both premise and thesis for the essayistic verse which follows. Through it, the reader learns that the poem is about the "play" of a "curious heart". The notion of a "playful" caper with death is both intriguing and telling. While Graves acknowledges that the collection has, in its whole, a part dedicated to "satires and grotesques for wits", "The Shot" is listed with his "poems for poets" (foreword). Though the work has a frivolous premise, one can assume that through it Graves means to provide a profound insight.

A pregnant expectation of another Robert Graves war poem is induced by the title. This expectation is relieved, at least partially, in the second line where the reader learns that "the shot" is not a reference to Graves' Great War experiences, but rather, is a fictional shot which is being hurled through a "ship's planks". The destructive nature of the shot is shocking when the syntax and structure of the line reveal that it is the owner of the "curious heart", a passenger on the ship, who is hurling the shot. It is important to note that Graves wrote, "To hurl a shot through *the* ship's planks" and not, "*a* ship's planks". The definite article's stress on the ship as an immediate object, rather than as a hypothetical one, implies that the narrator is on board. Furthermore, the colon

which punctuates the first line sets-up the second line as an example of how the curious heart plays with its fears. The suicidal overtone of such a "playful" decision bears heavily on the developing psychological make-up of the narrator and the notion that such an action could be considered draws close attention to it.

Though the suicidal proposition is recounted in the third-person, thereby giving a fictional context to the narrative, there is an implied first-person presence in the statement. The effect on the reader of the implication is that the poem's fiction seems as if it were personally experienced by the narrator. This overtone gives the poem a moral slant which Graves subsequently explores.

The reader learns, in the third and fourth lines, that the shot is hurled because the "curious heart" is "... assured that the green angry flood / Is charmed and dares not dance into the hold." It is through this assurance that Graves expands the apparent purpose of the composition. Before hurling the imaginative shot, the "curious heart" does not first "... sweep a lingering glance around / For land or shoal or cask adrift." The implication of this passivity is that the heart's "fear" is as charmed as the hull of the ship: neither is in real danger from "the shot"; hence, the flippancy with which the shot is hurled. It seems, from the poem's commentary, that Graves considered this attitude morally reprehensible.

The concluding line of the first stanza, "So miracles are done; but madmen drown", is a segue to the haunting rejoinder of the first line of the second stanza: "O weary luxury of hypothesis". The "luxury" is that the shot is an imaginative one. The weariness is caused because:

...human nature, honest human nature
(Which the fear-pampered heart denies)
Knows its own miracle: not to go mad.

The miracle is two-fold. First, it is not-mad human nature who invents the shot and imagines that the "green angry flood" will remain, magically, outside the hull after it is hurled. Secondly, it seems the narrator is puzzled by the ability of the human mind to remain sane while producing such wild fantasies; yet, the mind does, and this security is what provides the weary luxury to the hypothesis.

This second postulate raises questions of Graves' psychological state. Graves' short story, "The Shout", which I believe provides vital evidence for this reading, is described by Martin Seymour-Smith in the following way:

[Graves] has said that the victim-figure of the tale, Richard, was a 'surrogate for myself'. ... The fundamental thesis of the story, though it does not mention poetry, is that the practice of poetry (magic)

turns a man into a monster, and his hitherto 'ordinary' beloved into a tyrannous, capricious, cruel and sinister being. (117)

There is a powerful thematic parallel between Charles who, near the beginning of the story, contemplates giving a "... shout [which] would have either killed them outright or sent them mad" (17), and the "curious heart" from the "The Shot", whose "hypothesis" is as threatening as the "almost" delivered shout. Both of these intimidations are products of minds which are bent on destruction.

The works are diametrically opposed in their conclusions though. "The Shout" ends negatively with Richard and Rachel in an ignorant bliss that leaves the reader wondering, through the narrator's amazement, how such a parable could have been misunderstood by the principal characters. "The Shot", on the other hand, has a much more positive conclusion. Graves seems to believe in one's ability to maintain sanity and before "...pitch[ing] the shot in fancy, hint the fact, / Will bore perhaps a meagre auger hole". The ability to preserve one's wits, or so Graves seems to be saying, promises that you "... will not drown, nor even ride the cask."

The difference between the two conclusions shows the progress of Graves' reconciliation with his neurasthenic traumas. Michael Kirkham suggests that, "'The Shot' ... while displaying ... moral assurance allows the affirmation to be an emotional as well as a mental one" (186). Meanwhile, Seymour-Smith, writing about "The Shout", claims: "... in its

original (8000 word) form, [it is] the fullest representation of his haunted state that he achieved in those years" (117).

It appears that Graves, in the ten or fifteen years (Seymour-Smith (117) and Richard Perceval Graves (25) disagree on when "The Shout" was written) which passed between the writing of "The Shout" and of "The Shot" became, in a sense, empowered. Ultimately, "The Shout" is a passive story in which Richard, the fictionalised Graves, is recounting events to which he was nothing more than a horrified observer. "The Shot", on the other hand, presents us with a dynamic attack on Graves' self-experienced traumas. An attack through which he conquers his fears, and, by the poem's end, is able to simply "stanch [the fears] ... with a tarred rag"—a satisfying conclusion by which it becomes apparent that Graves was convinced that he would neither "drown", nor be forced to "ride the cask". This is an affirmation that is completely absent from the poem's thematic predecessor, "The Shout".

I do not believe that "The Shot", as a poem of the style I have labelled "profound frivolity", is unique. I have tried to show through this paper, that it has thematic links to earlier works such as "The Shout"—links which have been overlooked for too long. It will make for an engaging project when someone undertakes to reexamine Graves' neglected poems and discovers whether or not further traces can be found between these texts and those which have thus far been regarded as too disparate for serious consideration.

Works Cited

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