

PHILOSOPHICAL SPECULATIONS: MOCK BEGGAR HALL, WELCHMAN'S HOSE, AND POETIC UNREASON

In *Good-bye*, Graves admits that discussions between Mallik, Sam Haines (a young Balliol scholar and friend), and himself were so intense that "metaphysics soon made psychology of secondary interest for me: it threatened almost to displace poetry" (403). Rather surprisingly, the passage is omitted in the 1957 edition, and all allusions to Mallik are expunged. Nevertheless, the following passage from the original edition regarding Mallik's philosophy could, without much effort, be said to echo the essential concerns of Graves' next volume of poetry, *Mock Beggar Hall*:

Basanta's philosophy was a development of formal metaphysics, but with characteristically Indian insistence on ethics. He believed in no hierarchy of ultimate values or the possibility of any unifying religion or ideology. But at the same time he insisted on the necessity of strict self-discipline in the individual in meeting every possible demand made on him from whatever quarter, and he recommended constant self-watchfulness against either dominating or being dominated by any other individual. This view of strict personal morality consistent with scepticism of social morality agreed very well with my practice (*Good-bye* 403-4).

R.P. Graves points out that while Robert Graves was writing many of the poems in *Mock Beggar Hall* in 1923, he had once again "embark(ed) on a course of psychoanalysis . . . which raised a host of sleeping demons" in his poetry (R.P. Graves 278-79). Graves' nephew claims that the new poems, reflecting his psychological purging, have a "haunted air," and substantiates his claim by pointing out that *Mock-beggar Hall* is the name of a former leper house that Graves had dreamed was full of quarreling ghosts. However, upon close investigation of this collection, which was eventually published by Hogarth Press in March of 1924, this "haunted air" is not easily discernible. On the contrary, the poems bristle with too much light--too much deftness of intellectual argument. Almost all of the poems in the collection are philosophically slick and cerebrally poignant to the point of being didactic. In this volume, Graves fails to recollect his own warning from *On English Poetry* that a true poet who has solved his own emotional problems and transmuted them "into a calmer state of meditation on philosophical paradox" (36) has no inspiration left for poetry. The philosophical concerns are too grossly intellectual for the delicacy of the poetic plane. The "matter" of *Mock Beggar*

Hall is summed up deftly by George Stade in his doctoral dissertation when he states:

These poems are about "remembered conflicts of an earlier heat" (*Whipperginny* 43). He considers problems, questions, uncertainties, contentions, arguments, antinomies, imperfections; hesitatingly offers hypotheses, theses, syntheses, and counter-arguments; but ends up with incertitudes, irreconcilabilities, contrarities, "thought amazements," conundrums, equivocations, paradoxes, riddles, "verbal quags," and a new cause for dispute. He poses idealists against materialists, nuns against agnostics, priests against atheists, dialecticians against dullards, colonists against colonials. . . and decides that "wherever there is conflict, all sides are wrong" (Stade 139).

Under the influence of Mallik and his new philosophical direction, Graves became preoccupied with the contrariety manifested in human experience and with the need to find a synthesis. Sometimes these contradictions are resolved in familiar antimaterialist, antirationalist, and relativist attitudes echoed in the theories of Einstein (Pettet 217), but in many cases the posing of the problems acts simply as an intellectual puzzle which must have aided Graves to escape from his continuing psychological and marital difficulties. The most typical poem in the volume, "Antinomies," makes this point clear.

"Antinomies," a title that suggests a conflict between points of view, opens with the poet's muse in the guise of a grasshopper bidding him to sing. The lethargic poet, "lying in long grass one hot afternoon," hears the church bells ringing for evensong and thinks of the puritanical rector pouring forth from the pulpit "the text about the flesh warring with Spirit/Spirit with flesh." This evanescent thought is given form when the poet observes two eighteenth-century garden statues, *Furor Poeticus* and *Phryne Judged*, that stand one on either side of him. The poet, now inspired, imagines the psychosexual conflict between Praxiteles, the master sculptor, and his model. The woman, Phryne, sees in the admiration of the sculptor nothing that resembles the sensuous or physical. "He lets love-splendor pass / In thoughts of line and mass." For her, Praxiteles' failure to see beyond the surface contours of her body is foolish and tragic. Praxiteles, on the other hand, is disturbed by his mistress' sensuality. Initially, he had felt they were united on the spiritual quest for perfection in art ("She came as my true friend / this art our common end"), but Phryne's needs of fleshly satisfaction corrupt the artist's spiritual concentration:

Flesh was her all-in-all;
 O fell, and in this fall
 Here, woman, you shall view
 This marble ruined too,
 My mind in terms of you,
 On either part the same,
 Scorned beauty, passion, shame.

The poet's muse berates him for this kind of balanced argument in verse: "Cunningly balanced; rather too precise / A clear antinomy, purporting no more / Where does it lead us? Mutual ruination, / Dead-lock, but have you nothing to suggest?" But the poet answers his dissatisfied muse that "No conflict ends / Except in ruin of opposing views." The poet claims, then, that taking sides in any argument is ridiculous because right and wrong do not exist, because absolutism is ridiculous. Therefore, all the poet can do is present both sides of the argument and wait for truth (much as one must wait for Lucifer, the morning star, to appear) "to knock the swords aside." Until then, the poet's only constructive action is to find the counterbalance of every argument and present it, hoping that a solution of compromise will make itself evident from a study of both sides.

The poem closes with an example from Aesop's fables: that of the Man and the Satyr. In Graves' version the paradox of blowing on one's hands to warm the fingers and blowing on one's food to cool the porridge may never be clearly understood, but at the least the reason for doing it can be grasped by the Satyr--and that is something, after all.

This is the philosophical stance behind nearly all the poems in the volume. Every truth is relative to another truth; what one man sees as justification for an action, another sees as unjust. Even in a poem as seemingly uncomplicated as "Northward from Oxford: an Architectural Progress," Graves tackles the idea of nonjudgmental relativity. As the title suggests, the poem is a study of architectural styles in Oxford beginning with the delicate neoclassical curves of the houses on Beaumont Street to the red-brick neogothic spires along Banbury Road. Eventually, we reach the individualistic postwar villas of Summertown, but all are seen in relation to Graves' tumbledown cottage in Islip: "A house self-certain, not divided, with a good feng shwee / Beaumont Street, Banbury Road and Summertown cannot come to see / Whom I can no more understand than they can me." The point of the poem is clear: each housing style reflects a different type of individual with a different lifestyle, but Graves' philosophy makes no attempt to comment on this diversity--the agreement is to differ.

In the verse-play "Antigonus: An Eclogue," a literary historian and a poet come together to discuss the characters affected by the death of Antigonus, the slain Sicilian lord in Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*. The controversy of the poem originates from a discussion between historian and poet about the cowardly behavior displayed by Antigonus' companion Fernando Campi when he betrayed the island to the enemy Turkish fleet for revenge and for personal

power. After recounting the tale, the poet asks the literary historian which characters are responsible for the tragedy. The historian replies that he strongly condemns Fernando for his nefarious behavior. The poet refuses to do likewise and "abstains from taking sides" because favoring one side over the other suggests "a strong self-interest" in the result. It is better to allow Providence to provide a "virtuous resolution: / Then from the ruin of opposing views / Securer friendship might again be borne." Thus, Graves returns here again to the idea of the relativity of truth.

The argument of these seldom discussed poems also appears in the analyses of the more frequently criticized poetry. Canary points out in his interpretation of "The Rainbow and the Sceptic" that "the argument is that all knowledge is partial, all truths temporary" (64). In his long and informative discussion of "Mock Beggar Hall," the title poem of the collection, Kirkham notes perceptively that the significance of the poem resides in the landlord's restraint "from imposing his will on another and . . . (preferring) to wait passively for the conflicts to die out . . . 'Abstention and endurance' summarizes the trend of these poems" (Kirkham 80). Day examines "Knowledge of God" with the conclusion that

To assert with assurance that He (God) takes an active part in the endless round of existence, directing the seasons, sporting with the Danae, fighting with "rebel demons," and generally giving proof of his omnipotence, is wrong-headed: if God is God, then he must be invisible, unknowable, outside of Time and Space (Day 65).

Furthermore, the conclusion of another of Graves' long poetic verse-plays, "Interchange of Selves," appears to be that conflict in any form is evil and that stoical endurance is the only sensible solution to the vicissitudes of life.

These, then, are the basic concerns of the collection, except for the odd inclusion of "Full Moon." It is a drily intellectual volume, and one does miss the sense of assimilation of these Mallik-influenced tenets into some form of poetic image. As in the later poems in *Whipperginny*, the movement is away from poetic self-involvement and toward an objective appreciation of theoretical structures and broad generalities. Graves embraced the theory of relativity so firmly that in his *Poetic Unreason*, published in 1925, he goes so far as to affirm that judgments of "good" poetry and "bad" poetry are relative to the experiences of the critic. This inability to take sides, to feel emotional involvement, to take seriously the agnostic stance, is what is wrong with *Mock Beggar Hall*. The content of this pseudophilosophical poetry is not particularly original, and the realization that all the poems will have the same unresolved relativistic conclusion quickly dissipates a reader's enthusiasm for, or enjoyment of, the poems. In 1926, in his critical study of modern literature, *Transitions*, Edward Muir, a contemporary of Graves, compared "The Rock Below" from *Whipperginny*

with the "stifling compromise" of *Mock Beggar Hall*. Muir states,

On the one hand we have the consistent relativism of his later poetry, on the other, a determination to dig down until his mind produces "fruits of immortality." There is the mass of his busy, temporizing, hypothetical verse, verse which seems to say, "This may be true, or it may not"; there are a few poems which leave no room for the relative or for questions of this kind. . .

It is the difference between a state imagined and a state hypothecated and only dipped in the imagination to be given an intellectual convincingness. . . It lacks the truth which we feel in poetry when there is an organic correspondence between external image and the inner conflict or desire--that correspondence which clamps poetry to reality and gives it an absolute force (175, 173).

Fortunately, the poetic mood of *Mock Beggar Hall* did not last much beyond the return of Mallik to India, but the philosophical implications continued to affect Graves for the rest of the decade. The concept of relativism with which he always felt uncomfortable became a way of interpreting the world, and when one considers the difficulty that the opinionated and passionate Graves must have had in disciplining himself to the dispassionate, nonjudgmental stance advocated by Mallik, it becomes evident that the poet was grasping for some form of metaphysical standard by which he could live. Of course, in some areas of thought, Mallik's teachings were clearly in accordance with Graves' own conclusions and acted only as affirmations of what he already believed. They both agreed in the rejection of conventional societal values, the dismissal of an ascending order of moral values, and the disbelief in organized religion and its teachings. But if the intellectual maturing process of Graves' philosophical period assisted him in saying good-bye to the more conventional beliefs, it also made him aware of the hopelessness of clinging to a blighted love. This awareness is evidenced in his only love poem in *Mock Beggar Hall*--"Full Moon."

"Full Moon," written in 1923, first appeared in *Winter Owl*, a Graves-edited magazine financially supported by William Nicholson. The reason why Graves decided to include this love poem amid the many heady metaphysical speculations in *Mock Beggar Hall* has never been adequately explained. Kirkham's conclusion that the poem is "the symbolic counterpart, and the finest expression, of the morality presented exclusively in intellectual terms and laboriously argued in the majority of *Mock Beggar Hall* poems" (84) seems strangely out of keeping with the purport of the poem. Possibly, the emotional sentiments expressed in the poem were pressing enough for Graves to use despite their thematic inappropriateness.

The poem mirrors Graves' continuing unbalanced emotional situation through 1923 with Nancy and may signal his realization that their love was on the wane. In the poem, the warmth and passion of the two lovers have been chilled by the passing of the silver moon, "the tyrannous queen above." The final stanza brings down the curtain on the love affair:

And now cold earth was Arctic sea,
Each breath came dagger keen;
Two bergs of glinting ice were we,
The broad moon sailed between;
There swam the mermaids, tailed and finned,
And Love went by upon the wind
As though it had not been.

The coldly objective stance in the conclusion of the poem does not mean, as Kirkham seems to suggest, that the poet has stoically resigned himself to the loss of love. Rather, the irony of the sterile moon turning its chill gaze upon the ardent and hopeful lovers and transforming their frenzied passion into marmoreal bitterness reveals the purpose of the poem to be the "freezing" of the reader into contemplation of the fragile nature of love. The poet asks for emotional, not intellectual, sympathy here.

After *Mock Beggar Hall* was published, Graves immersed himself in a number of projects, including the revisions of his ballad opera "John Kemp's Wager" and the composition of several poems for J.C. Squire's *London Mercury*. Many, such as "Alice" and "Ovid in Defeat," appeared in the 1925 volume *Welchman's Hose*. As the summer of 1924 wore on, Graves was revising *Poetic Unreason* and writing the first draft of his thirty-thousand-word biblical romance *My Head! My Head!* During this summer, too, Graves edited a number of poems by John Crowe Ransom for Hogarth Press and first came across Laura Riding's "Quids" in a copy of *Fugitive*. Graves' fury of artistic activity seems all the more impressive when we learn that he was also doing much of the housework for a family of four children because of Nancy's ill health:

Nancy had now been subjected to the physical strain of bearing four children in under five years; she had also had to cope with the nervous strain of living on an uncertain income; while references to physical symptoms such as goitre, loss of hair, and periods of exhaustion suggest that her health was frequently undermined by a thyroid problem which was aggravated by any unusual strain (R.P. Graves 291).

Sassoon, for one, saw Graves as a victim of domestic drudgery and a domineering wife; but Graves had much pride in his choice of life-style and wife. He bristled terribly when anyone dared mention his difficulties to him, and in a reply to a letter from Sassoon written on 19 February 1924, Graves defended his domestic conditions as follows:

As for my drudging domestic difficulties I have none; My domestic duties . . . keep me happy and vigorous. As for money. We are absolutely broke at the moment and I am awfully grateful for your offer . . . to take money from you as a friend and to feel no obligation, *but* (Graves' italics) friendship at World's End implies friendship towards the whole damn lot of us and until you realize that I am completely satisfied with this life, debts and all, and am not so far as I know Nancy's drudge . . . or the Impoverished Genius with the Awful Wife and the Squalling Brats . . . you and I are at too cross purposes to be really friends again.

Much of this had to be a bluff on Graves' part. His poetry of this period showed a progressive disillusionment with the idea of love and marriage, and his "stiff upper lip" mentality was simply an extension of Mallik's teaching of the necessity of strict self-discipline in order to meet every demand placed on the individual. Graves was simply testing his own endurance during a very difficult time.

The realization that his two studies of poetic analysis (*Poetic Unreason* and *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry*) and recent volumes of poetry were not only overlooked critically but were also failures financially undermined Graves' confidence in himself. His insecurity was only heightened by the sudden deaths of many of his friends: Walter Raleigh, Graves' tutor; Sam Harries, his close friend; George Mallory, his tutor from Charterhouse; and even Rivers, his psychological mentor. Graves lamented at this time "that it seemed as though the death of my friends was following me in peace-time as relentlessly as in wars" (*Good-bye*, 404-5). Furthermore, Mallik had returned to India, T.E. Lawrence was abroad in the Royal Tank Corps, and Blunden had traveled to Tokyo as a professor of English. In a real sense, Graves was intellectually alone and probably found refuge from his dissatisfaction and from his worries in his work, both domestic and artistic. R.P. Graves concludes much the same when he writes that "the harder he [Graves] worked the happier he appeared to be, as there was less time for worrying overmuch about Nancy's health or about his own continuing lack of success" (302).

The poems in *Welchman's Hose* echo most of Graves' concerns during the mid-Twenties. The collection is in many ways a more sophisticated production than *Mock Beggar Hall*. Graves' belief in the relativity of all things is still in evidence, but he introduces the concept with a subtlety and smoothness that is lacking in the earlier volume. In addition, the collection is much lighter in tone than the previous volume and shows signs of ironic and even mocking awareness of the implications of the philosophic direction in which the poet was moving. This mocking tone was to be reintroduced later and with greater skill in *The Marmosite's Miscellany* in 1925, but here it makes a refreshing change from the gravity of *Whipperginny* and *Mock Beggar Hall*. The volume even contains Graves' Olympic silver medal entry for the 1924

games, "At the Games," which is a paean to pure sportsmanship. Also included is the touchingly humorous four-line "Love Without Hope," in which the birdcatcher doffs his tall hat to the squire's daughter as she rides by, while the escaped larks, unobserved (his poems?), sing about her head.

The most important poem in the volume is "Essay on Knowledge," later renamed "Vanity" and substantially rewritten for the *Collected Poems*. The poem is a symbolic presentation of Graves' struggle within himself to control the dark passionate emotions that seethe in him when he attempts to adopt a detached and philosophically neutral attitude toward the happenings in life. The dragon in the opening stanza symbolizes the awakening of passion and the death of innocence:

Be assured, the dragon is not dead,
Who once more from the pools of peace
Shall rear his fabulous green head.

The flowers of innocence shall cease
And like a harp the wind shall roar
And the clouds shake an angry fleece.

The awakening of the dragon throws the well-regulated aspects of daily living off course; the certitudes of rationality and reason are suddenly challenged by the whirlwinds of unbridged emotions. The intensity of this loosed passion frightens an innocent lover who cries out that love must be eternal, the "unshaken." But the cries awaken only an ancient toad, symbol of the philosophic awareness of the Apollonian and Dionysian duality in man's nature:

He knows that limits long endured
Must open out in vanity.
That gates by bolts of gold secured
Must open out in vanity.

That thunder bursts from the blue sky,
That gardens of the mind fall waste,
That age-established brooks run dry,
That age-established brooks run dry.

The repeated last line emphasizes that man cannot legislate his rational qualities forever; they can "run dry." Out of the calmness of a serene and ordered blue sky can burst the thunder of untamed violence or lust, and even the most cultivated minds can fall victim to passion's dictates. Love is seen here as the opponent of rational detachment and objective observation, but the implication of the poem touches a more profound level: if the rationalist places his trust in the certainty of a reasonable response to all matters of life, what happens when the foundation crumbles? What happens when lust or desire insinuates itself into the well-ordered mind? Graves' answer in this poem seems to suggest that all previously held values would dry up like the brooklets in a hot summer's heat.

Graves clearly realized that the most effective weapon in keeping an objective hold over "the dragon" in himself was the promotion of a relativistic philosophy in both his work and life. *Welchman's Hose*, as an example, might be said to deserve the subtitle "In Praise of Relativity," for most of the major poems in the volume are examinations of the various ways one can view productively the mundane dictates of existence. Relativity, for Graves, had become a liberating experience that stood in opposition to the banal social conventions of Victorian expectations, the established church, and Georgian poetry. In *The Long Weekend*, Graves defines what relativity meant to him:

The word "relativity" now came to be commonly used . . . to mean that a thing was only so if you cared to assume the hypothesis that made it so. Truth likewise was not absolute: "beautiful results" could be obtained by mathematicians from consistent systems based on the hypothesis, for example, that one could slide a left hand into a rigid right-hand glove--or simultaneously into a pair of rigid right-hand gloves (97).

In "Alice," Graves examines this same vision of relativity in poetic form. The poem opens the *Welchman's Hose* volume and seems to continue directly the philosophical speculations in *Mock Beggar Hall*. Alice, "prime heroine of our nation," is well prepared for the oddness of the looking-glass world because she is "of true philosophical bent." That is, she refuses to look upon the world from only the restrictive perspective of logic and reason, because they are inapplicable to her current situation:

"From hearthrug level, why must I assume
That what I'd see would need to correspond
With what I see now? And the rooms beyond,
Why should they pair with our rooms?"

Without the preconceived expectations based on logical conclusions and rational explanations, Alice thrives in the world beyond the mirror--the unconscious--and very easily discovers how "to learn the rules and move and perfect them." Alice's special talent, however, resides in her recognition that the rules and "realities" are different on both sides of the mirror.

For Alice though a child could understand
The neither did this chance-discovered land
Make nohow or contrariwise the clean
Dull round of mid-Victorian routine,
Nor did Victoria's golden rule extend
Beyond the glass: it came to the dead end
Where formal logic also comes;

There are two distinct worlds: the one beyond the glass and the dull world of mid-Victorian routine and expectation. The true heroine is at home in both places and

recognizes the relativity of truth in both places. For Graves, Alice's easy balancing of the unconscious and conscious worlds demonstrates a new awareness that his inspiration for his poetry need not always require a dredging of his unbalanced subconscious--his nightmare state--for material. Rather, the poem optimistically suggests that the poet can move freely from conscious to unconscious without mental trauma. Day makes a similar observation when he says: "While the domain of unreason may be the proper dwelling place of the poet, we can infer from 'Alice' that the poet need not fear it as a limitless realm which must encroach on the boundaries of everyday reality" (87).

"Ovid in Defeat," originally titled "Ovid's Breeches," is another study of relativity; but this time the subject is love. Graves examines here the role of the woman in a love relationship from the chauvinistic, pro-male perspective of Ovid and then looks at men through the jaundiced eyes of sectarian feminists, a reversal which is shown to be as simple as Ovid's vision. The result of such a jaded view of the man-woman relationship is eternal conflict between the sexes with nothing gained by either party. Graves' view is to recognize both sexes as uniquely individualistic in themselves. Neither sex is superior to or more talented than the other; their interpretations of thoughts, deeds, and art simply differ. His plea is for empathy between the two similar but slightly different views so that conflict and struggle for dominance can cease.

Thought, but not man's thought,
Deeds, but her own,
Art, by no comparisons
Shaken or thrown

Plough then salutes plough
And rose greets rose;
While Ovid in toothache goes
Stamping through old snows.

"The College Debate," which purports to be from a letter addressed to Edith Sitwell, one of the new friends Graves made during the Twenties (*Good-bye* 404), takes the reader into the heady atmosphere of the debate hall where the trend of modern poetry is being heatedly debated by learned dons. As might be expected, this work reflects the relative poetical tastes of the various speakers. First, the centenarian dean of Saul Hall declares that there have been no true poets since Wordsworth and Tennyson; the sycophantic librarian agrees, but feels that Watson's and Bridge's lyrics deserve mention. The more liberal junior don then pontificates on the merits of Hardy and Housman, but the young undergraduates who make up the audience bounce "from their seats" to defend the modern poetry of Edith Sitwell. In the central stanza, Graves stands back and addresses Sitwell with the relativistic attitude that he proposed in his *Poetic Unreason*. There he stated that "the possible appreciation of any poem depends . . . on whether the allusive images are common to the poet and to his

reader" (35), and that "no poetry can hope to appear to which an absolute permanent value may legitimately be accorded" (43). Graves humorously admits that in the heat of the moment he can sometimes sit "sceptered and orbed on the absolutist throne" and pass judgment on his friend's poetry, "but afterwards paid for each proud excess / With change of heart, fatigue, mere foolishness."

The proper spirit toward poetry, then, as toward life, is to realize that "poems alter by the clock and season / As men do, with the same caprice as they / Towards hate or concord." A poem may have its relevance for each generation, but it may mean very little to posterity. There is no absolute message that poets can give to future generations; the poet can be judged successful only if he touches the commonality of our personal experience.

"The Clipper Stater," the last of the "relativity poems" in the collection, is possibly the best known because of its purported allegorical references to T.E. Lawrence. This poem, which not unexpectedly contains several of Graves' concerns, relates how Alexander the Great, the Lawrence figure, suffers acutely from ennui when he discovers that there are no lands left to conquer; for this reason, he gives up his status, denying his godhead, to be carried off by a djinn to a frontier post in China far from any civilization. Here he becomes an enlisted man and quickly learns the rough lot of a frontier soldier's work. He stoically endures humiliation and physical hardships until one day he is paid with a coin that contains his own image, mutilated but recognizable. Alexander then contemplates his own divinity and concludes that a god is a god only for a certain group of people at a certain time. He impassively accepts the discovery of his lost divinity and "then all he knows / Is, he must keep the course he has resolved on." Spending his coin on a feast of almonds and fish, Alexander rushes back to the ramparts to stand his watch.

Clearly, Graves enjoys the use of irony at his friend Lawrence's expense, but the poem also applies Graves' vision of relativity and philosophy of strict self-discipline that he learned from Mallik. The poem indicated that Alexander's conquest of the known world did not encompass the wild frontier where he became a soldier and where his godliness was unknown. The conclusion to be inferred is that a god lives only in the minds of his adherents. When Alexander is whisked off to a place where he has no adherents, he becomes a mere common soldier:

He, Alexander, has been deified
By loud applause of the Macedonian phalanx,
By sullen groans of the wide worlds he had
vanquished.
Who but a God could have so hacked down their
pride?

But the argument in favor of the relative nature of God is not put to rest here. Alexander's acceptance without complaint of his new role as stoic man on the fringes of civilization is an affirmation of the soldierly virtues that

Graves valued during the war and that was necessary in order for him to survive his own hardships.

Two final poems, "From Our Ghostly Enemy" and "The Presence," deal with ghostly hauntings and remind the reader of the atmosphere of *The Pier Glass*; both poems clearly demonstrate, however, that Graves' poetic approach to his neurasthenic hauntings had changed considerably. He points out in *Good-bye* that his continuing attempts to write a novel or war memoirs brought back neurasthenic symptoms (408), but that the attacks became fewer and less intense after he met Mallik. "From Our Ghostly Enemy," first published in *The London Mercury* in December of 1924, demonstrates one method by which Graves learned to control his neurosis. The poem concerns a man constantly dogged by an unruly ghost---

Who, without voice or body,
Distresses me much,
Twists the ill to holy, holy to ill,
Confuses me, out of reach
Of speech or touch;

Who works by moon or by noon,
Threatening my life.

"Filled with despair," the man relates to his wife the nature of his haunting experiences; she, in return, dispenses some "simple advice" that brings him peace:

"Speak to the ghost and tell him,
Whoever you be,
Ghost, my anguish equals yours,
Let our cruelties therefore end.
Your friend let me be."

R.P. Graves sees this poem as evidence that Robert had grown completely dependent on Nancy during this period (292), but the critic has fallen into the trap here of taking Graves' poetry too literally. His interpretation forces one to ask why the man waited until he was in desperate straits before going to his wife. And what kind of wife would not recognize her husband's neurotic symptoms and come to his aid before being asked? More likely, the advice to confront one's fears and face the conflict calmly and without aggression sounds very much like Mallik's teachings.

The most damning evidence against Nancy's ability to dispense psychological balm to the troubled poet is in Graves' emphatic rejection of her in "The Presence." This poem, because of its similarity in tone to Graves' other neurasthenic poems, has been misread by most critics as simply another product of a diseased mind. Day, for example, describes the poem as "an inward haunting, the function of a tormented imagination, the real source of man's greatest fears." He adds, "Such poems as these prompt us to believe that there was more than a little justice in Graves' correlation between his neuroses and his best poetry" (Day 88). On the surface, the speaker is haunted by

his dead wife's spirit, which continually accuses him of forgetting her. The speaker's reasons for despair are vague and ambiguous; ultimately, this ambiguity is detrimental to the success of the poem. Day's suggestion that this is the "most moving poem of this point in his career" (88) seems far too much of an overstatement to be accepted without further critical evidence.

In "The Presence," Graves laments metaphorically the diminishing of physical desire in a love relationship; when desire disappears on one side, he implies, the love is moribund. However, the death of love in this way is neither clean nor abrupt, for its memory lingers on in physical presence throughout the house:

She fills the house and garden terribly
With her bewilderment, accusingly
Enforcing her too sharp identity,
Till every stone and flower, bottle and book,
Cries out her name, pierces us with her look.

That desire is no longer a part of the union and that the speaker is forced to be reminded of lost passion make the "horror" of her presence more painful than if she had left him alone. The failure of desire is torturing because one is reminded of past hopes and dreams that have been neither sustained nor, as in Graves' marriage with Nancy, fulfilled. "The Presence" is an admission of defeat; and by 1925, Graves must have known that his marriage was a failure; thus, not surprisingly, he was psychologically ripe for Laura Riding's entry into his life.

By 1925, Graves' financial situation was so bad that something had to be done to ensure a steady income. The care of his four children and Nancy's continued decline throughout the year compelled him to submit his B.Litt thesis to the English department at Oxford in order to obtain teaching credentials. His thesis had been published earlier in February by Cecil Palmer under the title *Poetic Unreason*, but, as R.P. Graves points out, it had prompted destructive criticism in the *Manchester Guardian* and misinterpretation in the *Times Literary Supplement* (R.P. Graves 307). Graves summarized his attitudes towards poetry at that time in *Good-bye*:

I then held the view that there was not such a thing as poetry of constant value; I regarded it as a project of its period only having relevance in a limited context. I regarded all poetry, in a philosophic sense, as of equal merit, though admitting that at any given time pragmatic distinctions could be drawn between such poems as embodied the conflicts and syntheses of the time and were literary hang-overs from a preceding period and were therefore inept. I was, in fact, finding only extrinsic values for poetry. I found psychological reasons why poems of a particular sort appealed to a particular class of reader, surviving even political, economic, and religious change (406-7).

In fact, Graves' summary of a book with which, by 1929, he could have little sympathy, is quite succinct. In many ways, *Poetic Unreason* was a "downright denial" of the views held in *On English Poetry* (1). Its main tenets, obviously influenced a great deal by Mallik's philosophy, suggest that the poem becomes a two-way mirror in which both the poet and the reader see themselves, and that the poem in its initial draft "has no communication intention at all" (26). The only communication between poet and reader occurs between their subpersonalities and shared environment; the more varied the poet's experience or the more mixed his heritage, the greater the opportunity for him to become a capable spokesman for his cultures because he can assimilate various discordant ideas and take on various subpersonalities with ease. In the interim, the reader may create any interpretation that fits his own vision.

Graves also reflects that a poet is separated not only from the reader, but also from his own creation, the poem. Because the poem is a product of unconscious activity, the author's conscious purpose is not of great critical value in understanding the poem:

From the poet's side, I wish to stress two important psychological phenomena: first, that no poet can ever rationally state beforehand what he is going to write about; second, that no poet can ever rationally state exactly what he has written and why; in effect, what the conflict is or what the factor is that solves the conflict, until after completely emerging from the mood that made him write the poem (*Poetic Unreason* 5).

The reader, too, is separated from the poem because of his limitations in experience or intelligence, which may deter him from grasping the implications of the poetry. Furthermore, Graves discusses how allusive images can be misinterpreted by various readers to produce divergent impressions of what the poet really means. Finally, Graves concludes that no poem ever remains static; it is a series of evolving events and meanings that change both temporally and subjectively. According to Graves, "no poem . . . has ever remained static but has always been steadily and waywardly developing both generally with the language and particularly with the mood of the individual reader" (188).

The meaning and effect of the poem, then, like everything in *Mock Beggar Hall*, is relative. Every person, every age, every mood, and every interpretation is relative to something. This leads Graves to the logical conclusion that value judgments as to what make a good or bad poem are invalid. Ultimately, the voice of Mallik can be heard when Graves, in defense of the term *bad*, states, "As in ethics, I do not see the possibility of an absolute right or wrong, God against the Devil, so in an aesthetic sense I hold that the term *Bad* is in effect only relative" (*Poetic Unreason* 22).

It might seem somewhat strange that despite this relativistic view of poetry, Graves was inspired in the spring of 1925 after a trip to the zoo with his family and

Sassoon to write a "long restless satire" (foreword, *Collected Poems* 1938) "ending with a description of many contemporary authors written by the marmoset as though he were the great satirist Samuel Butler come back to life" (R.P. Graves 312). The satire is leveled at writers from all schools of modern literature; Georgians, such as Bluder, Davies, Masfield, Marsh, and Squire, feel Graves' lashings as do the moderns such as Huxley, Eliot, Joyce, Strachey, and Yeats. Lawrence is seen "with dark robes of destiny hung," and Bennett deftly characterized as "eating ortolans from a paper bag." But the tragedy in Graves' mind is that his fellow poets have nothing to say to an audience of readers who are spiritually exhausted from the war and its aftermath. Graves recognizes that contemporary society and its cultural manifestations are as hollow as Eliot had depicted three years earlier in *The Waste Land*.

The Marmosite's Miscellany is more than just a poetic version of his *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry* (1925), in which Graves had placed the three contending schools of poetry into pseudoparliamentary factions and had critically scrutinized more than seventy poets' works. In the poem, Graves makes strong pleas for a pantheistic worship of God, for equality among men, for openness between individuals with different conceptions of life, and for what R.P. Graves calls the "exercise of 'associative' or 'analeptic' as against purely intellectual thought" (313). All of these concerns demonstrate that Graves was not as stoic as his tutor, Mallik, and his praise of associative thought would suggest that Graves was retreating from the strictly rational sort of poetry that he had been writing. In the dedication to *The Marmosite's Miscellany*, "To M. in India," Graves describes himself sitting beside the Thames, awaiting a sign which will explain the purpose of life to him, just as Mallik sits beside the Ganges beneath his peepul tree. But Graves does not have the patience of his mentor. He feels "exiled" in England:

Aghast at the long cruelty of tradition
At so much pain yet to be harvested
With the old instruments. In England I was
Bruised, battered, crushed, often in mind and
spirit...

Graves feels sure that his convictions about life are correct, but he is embittered and crushed by the loneliness of his vigil. His sole supporter is halfway across the world in India, and the only tie they have is their friendship, which "makes light / O broad dividing seas, broad continents" between them. However, with a family of four and disintegrating marriage, Graves could not afford "to sit cross-legged . . . by the Ganges" awaiting "the clear morning waters for a sign" forever; nor--by the middle of 1925--did he wish to.

Graves, now armed with his B.Litt, decided to apply for a university post and spent most of July 1925 collecting letters of recommendation for a teaching spot he would not be offered at Cornell (R.P. Graves 315). This rejection and the news of the unexpected death of Sam Harries in India

must have made his job of reviewing "dud poetry" for the *Nation and Athenaeum* even less inviting than before (*Good-bye* 408). Finally, when Nancy fell ill and her doctor advised that she needed to spend winter in a dry climate, Graves must have felt the noose tightening even further around his neck, but as he describes in the 1957 edition of *Good-bye*, good fortune was about to descend:

A week or two later. . . I was invited to offer myself as a candidate for the post of Professor of English Literature at the newly-founded Royal Egyptian University, Cairo. . . the salary, including the passenger money, amounted to fourteen hundred pounds a year. . .

I got the appointment. The indirect proceeds from poem-writing can be enormously higher than the direct ones (264).

The prospect of going to Egypt threw the Graves household into chaos. An offer was even made to Sassoon that he might join Nancy and the four children in the Graves retinue--an invitation that he wisely refused (O'Prey 159-60). Instead, Robert and Nancy extended the offer to join them on their Egyptian adventure to Laura Riding; and the disgruntled Riding surprisingly agreed to go. Graves' decision to invite along Riding--a poet whom he knew only by letter--and Riding's decision to follow this family of six have never been adequately explained. However, R.P. Graves' speculations do have a ring of truth, as does the possibility that Nancy saw in Riding the usefulness of a potential child-minder:

Nothing could have pleased Robert more (than Riding's decision to come to Egypt). He still had considerable misgivings about the way of life they would encounter in Egypt; and Laura's strength, for she was evidently a strong-minded woman, would enable both him and Nancy to face whatever lay ahead with greater confidence and greater equanimity (R.P. Graves 321).

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