

On Metaphor in the Early Poetry of Robert Graves: Anticipating an Alternative Poetics

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Ever since Robert Graves' poetry has been written about, it has been difficult to ignore his poetics based on the Muse. This seems to be quite a natural state of affairs, given the weight which the Muse carries in his poetry, and also the great enthusiasm which Graves showed in presenting her to the world. This enthusiasm has been picked up by a good many observers of him and his verse and has led in many cases to linking the Muse with Graves' experiences in real life. All of this has contributed to an irresistible force which tends to attract attention to the Muse whenever Robert Graves is mentioned.

Most students of Graves' poetry are familiar with Randall Jarrell's view that "there is a great deal of Graves' life in what he has written, and a great deal of his writing seems plausible—explicable, even—only in terms of his life" (302). It is the sort of observation still regularly come across in criticism of Graves. It is generated by interest in the confluence of biographical events, Graves' presentation of his Muse poetics, and the thematic element of his poetry which is seen to result from this.

This interest turns out to be almost inevitable, embracing individual sub-themes such as the abstract ones of love and treachery, and more historically- and biographically-oriented ones, especially concerning the women in Graves' life. More recently than Jarrell, the preference for this thematic approach can be seen expressed by D.N.G. Carter.

Discussing Graves and Riding, he declares his concern for the "poetic as opposed to the biographical reasons" [my italics] for Graves' collaboration with Laura Riding (225). The poetic aspect of their collaboration, however, is not given a great airing apart from discussion about the stylistic influence Riding had on Graves, and comments on the pursuit of Truth. Soon after, however, when Carter discusses Graves' passage to the Muse, it is biographical detail which, for him, is at the root:

In the years between the publication of *Collected Poems 1938* and the first rough draft of *The White Goddess* in 1944 there occurred two events of central importance to the pattern of experience that was to claim Graves's faith in it as archetypal. The first was the excessively painful break-up of his relationship with Laura Riding ... The second was the rediscovery of love through the woman who

would become his second wife ... These two events, high points in a concentrated story of death and resurrection, would shortly be reconciled in the figure of the Goddess. (Carter, 329)

Carter's approach is openly thematic, and such a thematic approach has a pervading tendency to over-promote the Muse.

Viewed in such a way, the poems in which the Muse is to be found are to be seen to serve the Muse. This simple observation corresponds to Graves' outspoken declaration in the foreword of *The White Goddess*, delivered with typical assertiveness:

'What is the use and function of poetry nowadays?' is a question not the less poignant for being defiantly asked by so many stupid people or apologetically answered by so many silly people. The sole function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites. (14)

This perception of the relationship between the poems and the Muse gives rise to a tendency whereby critics use them as tools to explain and demonstrate the developing and fluctuating state of an other relationship—that between the poet and the Muse—the poet being either Graves or the mythical one he evokes in his poems. We should note that sometimes these two poets are not distinguished from each other, as seems the case with Douglas Day when he discusses the poem "On Portents". Day begins, talking about Graves, by telling us that "he was moving toward a romantic conception of himself as a poet dedicated to the service of a mysterious and supra-rational Muse. This shadowy figure to whom he now begins to pay his homage appears for the first time in 'On Portents'." After quoting the poem, Day slides comfortably from the biographical into an affirmation of the mythical: "This Muse, who possesses such frightening power, and who is superior to Time, is not an easy mistress to serve; but the poet who does so becomes temporarily invested with her magical gifts, and is superior to those not inspired by her" (142-3). This leads to confusion of the poet in the real world with the poet in the written world, and only serves to amplify the rhetoric of, rather than discuss, Graves himself.

A further sign of this insistence on the Muse is the frequent attempts by observers to locate her in the early poetry in an anticipatory form. This, it should be said, is not to be dismissed as a meaningless preoccupation. A striking correlation can indeed be made between Graves' presentation of the Muse and certain elements found in the early poems. Examples of this are numerous, and awareness of this is begin-

ning to be reflected in more recent criticism—for example, Quinn’s observation of Hoffman discussing “Love in Barrenness”: “Hoffman, it seems, sees an ur-White Goddess figure in the making wherever a marmoreal female figure in classical garb appears” (6)—with “wherever” being the operative word. There are strong reasons for resisting treating the early poetry as a hunting ground for the Muse since it is in those poems that we can observe an alternative type of poetics evolving, separate from the Muse. It is possible to shift the emphasis away from Graves’ relationship with this mythical entity—without denying his poetics centered on her—and to focus attention on his relationship with language.

The title of this paper indicates that metaphor can be a useful tool. A slightly obtuse explanation of this is due. Laura Riding, not as Muse, but as poet and critic, provides a starting point. The preface which she wrote to her *Collected Poems 1938* has received mixed attention, often being dismissed as an exercise in petulance. If we can manage to remain objective, however, there is enough to be found in it which indicates that a poet’s first responsibility is to his poem and not to forces Riding identifies as being outside that relationship. In mocking tones, Riding castigates “Poets (who) have attributed the compulsion of poetry to forces outside themselves—to divinities, muses ...” (Riding, 410) and thus she castigates Graves for doing precisely that. Her declaration is equally assertive as Graves’ in his foreword to *The White Goddess*, and it is equally deserving of attention.

Riding’s insistence on the exclusion of interfering imposters, such as the Muse, was designed to promote a personal determination of Truth, as well as her concern for language and the way it is used. Her preface, most would say, fails to demonstrate a way to that Truth, and this is no doubt because her goal was beyond words. However, she has left firmly in place the question of what happens between the poet and his poem—and this relationship rivals the one between poet and Muse.

A more attentive recognition of this important part of the equation we call “poetry writing” enables the reader to relocate the spot where meaning is determined: in the relationship between poet and poem. Arguably, Laura Riding’s most important work was to have brought this question more clearly into the open.

The relationship between poet and poem is, of course, a limitless field, so it is useful to narrow down the field and address a particular question concerning one of the mechanisms which are seen to operate when the relationship between poet and poem is given priority: what

happens to metaphor in Graves' poetry?

In the early poems, certain tendencies come to the fore which indicate that he was quite naturally formulating a non-thematic poetics which was not to do with anticipating the Muse (although it does overlap the period in which observers are apt to find her anticipatory signs). It was rather a poetics concerning the use of metaphor.

In these poems, we find metaphor, of course, in its usual function—to elucidate or intensify or embellish themes. But we also find it, in certain poems, functioning as a structural network—a gradually cohering system upon which Graves imposes himself with increasing sense-giving powers.

Firstly, and from a thematic point of view, metaphor in the early poems can be seen to lend itself more freely to certain themes than others. In other words, Graves retained greater power over metaphor in certain types of poems. The divergence can be seen most clearly when we examine those poems he wrote concerning The Great War, and those he wrote concerning Love. We can generally observe a strong metonymic tendency in the former as opposed to a metaphoric one in the latter. At their most divergent, War is presented almost entirely in literal terms, as a narrative of events, whereas Love is presented entirely in metaphorical terms. Two poems which illustrate this are "The Savage Story of Cardonette" in which metaphor serves only in a very limited way to emphasize the detail in a historical narrative of a war situation, compared to "The Troll's Nosegay", which is wholly metaphorical, an allegory.

In the poems about Love, Graves was able to impose upon metaphor the function of contributing to the exploration of a theme, Love, which he was, therefore, able to separate from literal discourse. This stands in opposition to his apparent inability to break down the literalism of war by use of metaphor—a struggle which indicates that the war itself, as much as the poet, was imposing its meaning on the metaphor.

This dichotomy is not always so striking. Where it is not demonstrated in such an emphatic way, metaphor can be seen, for example, to bow to literalism during the course of a poem. "The Patchwork Quilt" demonstrates this. Graves maintains a constant network of metaphor through the poem until the very last line in which the war as a literal, and not a literary, event interferes:

Here is this patchwork quilt I've made

Of patterned silks and old brocade,
 Small faded rags in memory rich
 Sewn each to each with feather stitch,
 But if you stare aghast perhaps
 At certain muddied khaki scraps
 Or trophy-fragments of field grey,
 Clotted and torn, a grim display
 That never decked white sheets before,
 Blame my dazed head, blame bloody war.

Graves' disinclination, which comes in varying measures, to take full advantage of metaphor when applied to war, pervades. When allegory is used, it simply reproduces a war theme, such as criticism of the administrators of the war in "The Legion". In other allegories, we see the physical results of war simply grafted onto another situation, with the graphic description being retained, such as in "The First Funeral":

The whole field was so smelly;
 We smelt the poor dog first:
 His horrid swollen belly
 Looked just like going to burst.

These few lines are the shortest of steps away from another poem which comes immediately to mind, "A Dead Boche", in which we find the following description:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
 In a great mess of things unclean,
 Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
 With clothes and face a sodden green,
 Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
 Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

The recoil of metaphor before literalism takes many different forms in Graves' war poems. Space does not permit a detailed study of it here, but in compensation we might note that he reserved his most committed reflections on the War for prose, in the highly unmetaphoric *Goodbye To All That*.

Graves did write a small quantity of late poetry concerning the War, but it falls well off what had become his chosen poetic path. The poem

"Recalling War", for example, written about 1938, is rooted in literal description and metonymy, and shows Graves' lack of interest, or inspiration, in war as a vehicle for a metaphorical poetics. Curiously, such poems can be compared against one very early one which shows that War had, in fact, shown signs of starting out as a promising vehicle for metaphorical exploration: in *Over the Brazier* we find the poem "On Finding Myself a Soldier" (ironically, in this respect, one of the first two published poems Graves edited out of his canon). In this poem, the strict maintenance (except in the title) of the flower symbol enables Graves to turn the poem completely towards himself, as a symbol-based psychoanalysis, in clear priority over the War. But this type of exploration was not followed up and disappeared more or less with this poem.

Occasionally in his war poems Graves did make a dash for a metaphorical world, but it was indiscriminate. In "The Bough of Nonsense", two homecoming Fusiliers recount a nonsense story which finishes with the striking image of "A row of bright pink birds, flapping their wings." This represents a clear attempt to get clear of the War and literalism, and into something else. But it actually goes nowhere because Graves had no established poetics to carry it and to convince us that this over-emphatic metaphorical excursion had been used in a coherent personal way.

Patrick Quinn explores Graves' early poetry in his recent book, and this question arises indirectly. Quinn concludes that Graves, as well as Sassoon, had realized by the late 'twenties that "poetry was no longer a medium capable of communicating what he wished to articulate" (272)—which also sounds, it might be noted, like a description of Laura Riding's plight later on, which led to her abandoning poetry altogether. In Graves' case, however, to take up this point, an alternative formulation could be that it was the War which was never a medium in which Graves could, by his own burgeoning poetic criteria, comfortably write poetry: war poetry never allowed him the freedom from literalism which was essential to his long term development as a poet. Graves continued to address the issues from his war-time verse in his poet-war poetry, but he did so through his manipulation of the function of metaphor rather than by the meanings that his imagery suggests. It is to *how* Graves is writing things rather than *what* he is writing that the present article would like to draw attention.

Graves' disinclination to take control of metaphor in his poems concerning War is not found in his poems concerning Love—either of the

same period or later. In these poems, he confidently treats his subject with boundless metaphor which enables him to transform his themes into a play of meaning independent of their literal origin. This relationship between the poet and the words he manipulates is as important as the thematic element of the poem. It is something Laura Riding was concerned with, but with which Graves seemed less and less preoccupied as a problematic element in his poetry. He simply continued, for the rest of his life, marshalling words to serve his avowed poetics, which was "serving" the Muse. But, in order to do this, his first step in this continuing procedure was to appropriate words into a new, and developing, and coherent, framework of reference. From this point of view, very early poems such as "Pot and Kettle", which is a rather ramshackle cobbling-together of metaphors, and much later ones such as "The White Goddess", which is an example of a carefully constructed and refined network of metaphor, can be seen as steps in the same evolutionary process. This seems sacrilegious—since the former, like "On Finding Myself a Soldier", was destined (deservedly, many would say) to be suppressed as an unworthy poem. However, it is by not being concerned with the Muse as poetic deity, but as a metaphor used at the heart of a network of metaphors, which Graves uses according to the meaning and function he ascribes to it, that such comparisons can be justified.

Just as we can treat the Muse, then, as a thematic, religious, and teleological goal in Graves' development as a poet, we can also treat her as a vehicle which Graves needed—though not the only one available—to enable him to govern his relationship with language in a way that permitted him to reformulate and limit meaning on his own terms. In this latter sense, the Muse is not a deity, but a tool used in that reformulation—and to locate that reformulation, it is essential not to think of the Muse as a deity, but as a functional metaphor. Graves, then, can be seen as a poet not through his devotion to a mythical figure, but through his manipulation of words—through his influence on their meaning and function.

This approach swims against the current of criticism of Graves. Michael Kirkham further illustrates the relentless indifference to the primary word-manipulating act of the poet and the equally relentless interest in thematics and the Muse. Kirkham is here discussing what he describes as Graves' "gradual and obviously painful maturing of self-knowledge":

The most interesting evidence of ... the progress in self-knowledge

during Graves's first period is in the sporadic use of a set of related images to express the poet's psychological insights which ... anticipated the mythological symbolism fully worked out in *The White Goddess*. As I have explained in my previous discussion of Graves's earlier poems, the occurrence of this imagery indicated the poet's recognition of a pattern of experience; in this recognition we have the first signs of his growing self-knowledge. I am thinking, for example, of the moon imagery, used to express different aspects of the love relationship ... of the conception of the divided self ... himself and a cursed or despairing alter-ego, precursors of the rival heroes in the Myth who alternately destroy each other in their struggle to enjoy the undivided favour of the Goddess. (180)

Graves' "use" of images is at the heart of his poetry. Kirkham, however, accepts their referential value according to Graves' directions and passes quickly on to the referents—the "use" is abandoned in favour of what the "use" is for.

As already indicated, such readings have their own validity—but to take the emphasis away from them can be an equally fruitful approach. For example, the recurrence of an image such as the moon in Graves' poetry can equally be used to plot his developing and increasing imposition upon language regardless of myth. The moon in the poem "Reproach", for example, is a metaphor of Graves' self-questioning, which Graves has left to ambiguity. However, when it turns up later on in a fully-fledged Muse poem, such as "Mankind and Ocean", it is not just the mythical coming to fruition of the seed of the Muse anticipated in earlier poems; it is, just as importantly, the same word being used with its ambiguity clipped and, therefore, with a modified capacity for meaning. It now participates in a mythological, thematic poetics enabled and held together by the poet's appropriating that word in a certain way for his own purposes: gone are the symbolic uncertainties which the moon carries in "Reproach"; the moon is now in uniform, drilled by Graves as he had not drilled it in the earlier poem. Such observations concern the relationship between poet and word, or poet and poem, and not between poet and the Muse.

Graves' increasingly confident use of metaphor in his early poetry was part of the development of this other observable poetics centred on the poet's dealings with the word. It played an enabling role: it was the terrain upon which he imposed himself, and it allowed him to

move further away from the literalism we find subjugating him in the war poems. As the Muse poetics supposedly moved from poems written to real women on to poems written in honour of a mythical figure, this non-Muse poetics continued to evolve gradually, and seemingly unseen by observers—which is a pity, since it is Graves' treatment of words, his demand on them to adhere to a system of meaning, which allows us to observe the poet working with his raw material, where we can observe the poet in contact with his poem rather than with what he supposedly intended the poem to be about.

This approach is obviously very different from the one which puts the Muse at the heart of Graves' poetics. Almost by decree, the Muse is firmly in place, easily erected as a fact of Graves' poetry, and is a highly visible theme to which the meaning of words, or images, can be directed. However, an approach which emphasizes a poetics consisting of the poet's manipulation of words is never so stable, and requires the observer to judge how successful Graves was in introducing a word, or image, to a new way of functioning. "Successful" is only one possible adjective; how brutal was Graves? How sensitive was he? These qualities in Graves' dealings with words could never be measured accurately: a true understanding of this quintessential relationship will remain as elusive as the values Laura Riding was attempting to determine with words; and so the study of this poetics must remain, at least in part, an abstract equation.

We may doubt that Graves' transformation of straight-forward metaphor in his early poems into a sort of slave-metaphor serving the Muse in his later poetry was his only concern. We may suspect that behind all the rhetoric, Graves was more aware of his pen than his hat—that he was aware the words he used he had drawn from a world of meaning which could neither fulfil his requirements, nor be prevented from penetrating his mythical poetic context on their terms.

Thus, the conditions of his dealings with words, which constituted the poetics the present article has been trying to identify, meant that despite the thematic force which enabled him to gravitate towards the Muse, he was, at the same time, in his poetry, being pulled away from her simply because he was at the same time operating in a domain in which she was not present: where words were capable of resisting the religious vocation he prepared for them.

In his foreword to *The White Goddess*, as part of his castigation of the twentieth century, Graves states that the moon is "despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth" (14). The implication is that the

moon should be revered as something else which could be part of his faith. The truth, however, is equally made up of the fact that the moon is a burned-out satellite of the Earth, and that it is not despised for being so. Only in his mythologizing could Graves attempt to show the contrary. But the words he used to do so were not, by their own nature, necessarily wholeheartedly committed, and it is in that struggle that an equally gripping poeticizing is to be observed.

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