

REVIEWS

"A Muse Does Not Wear Whiskers": A Review Of The Robert Graves Programme, Volumes 1-4

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Centenary Selected Poems. Patrick Quinn, ed. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995. £15.95

Complete Short Stories. Lucia Graves, ed. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995. £25

Collected Writings on Poetry. Paul O'Prey, ed. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995. £35

Complete Poems, Volume 1. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, ed. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995. £25

My first encounter with Robert Graves was courtesy of an essay entitled "Lars Porsena, or the Future Of Swearing". The title took my undergraduate fancy, in part because it sounded transgressive, but also because at school I had been weaned on minor Victorian verse. I thus recognised the reference to the opening salvo of Macaulay's "Horatio at the Bridge", which, if memory serves aright, begins; "Lars Porsena of Clusium / By the Nine Gods he swore." How typical that Graves should combine both literary allusion and disconcerting pun in his title, thereby setting the tone for a piece which, if conceived during an unhappy stay in Egypt where his language "recovered much of its wartime foulness," still takes some beating—seventy years on—for sheer gusto and readability. The titular joke, moreover, seems to carry personal resonances. After all, Macaulay's poem, with its rocking-horse rhythms, is so alien to Graves's poetic principles that he must have cursed on first reading it. The swearing "Lars Porsena" does not put in an appearance in the first four volumes of Carcanet's monumental *Robert Graves Programme*, a project timed to coincide with the centenary of the poet's birth. No matter. In due course and somewhere in the next seventeen volumes he will. Indeed the enterprise, under the overall stewardship of the well-known Graves scholar Patrick Quinn, promises to leave no significant stone unturned or expletive deleted.

An enticing foretaste of things to come is provided by Quinn's *Centenary Selected Poems*. Deploying a chronological approach which

allows the reader to appreciate the successive moults of style and substance which the poetry underwent over nearly sixty years, the edition offers helpful divisions into sections: Georgian [1914-20], Modernist [1921-26], Laura Riding [1927-42], White Goddess [1943-59], and [Black Goddess [1960-72]. Such phases, apart from Graves's temporary enthusiasm for Georgian poetics and his flirtation with Modernism, hardly coincided with what was happening in literary England. But then Graves rarely genuflected at the altar of artistic fashion. As the editor reminds us, he not only committed the cardinal sin of cocking a snook at London's literati but, by bidding goodbye to all things English in 1929, effectively severed most of his links with the artistic establishment. Not that it bothered Graves. He was so impervious to most opinions that he could write, more than a mite arrogantly, of a reader at once "strutting" and "sycophantic" "over my shoulder". Yet great writers, like mere mortals, thrive on mutual adulation, and Graves was no exception. The poems of the Laura Riding period, fifteen fraught years, exhibit an embryonic muse dependency, which would later issue in a series of indulgences with four goddess/nymphets and inspire much of the verse of the concluding two sections of this edition. It is fitting that "Pygmalion and Galatea" should introduce the Riding material, with Galatea promising to release the artist from the "bonds of sullen flesh".

That Quinn regards this as a key episode in the Graves odyssey is evidenced by the number of poems—sixty two in all—which he includes here. While many chart intense moments between "dark and dark", others privilege Ridingesque rationality at the expense of Gravesian feeling. At times this tension is resolved—magically—as in "The Cool Web"; elsewhere the conflict produces poetry—"Leda" and "A Jealous Man" for example—of the highest order. But it would be a mistake—and one avoided by the editor—to concentrate too much attention on one phase. What this edition successfully achieves is a balance that the poet's own selections unfortunately lack. Compared with the Penguin Graves, the centenary version is, moreover, a model of scholarly organisation, with informative headnotes and the kind of publication details that less carefully conceived editions fail to provide. It is true, as Blake Morrison notes, that the book offers only 146 pages compared to the Penguin's 264, and that the price is off-puttingly high. But Quinn's vantage point is a rewarding one, offering an insight into many of Graves's neglected war poems and a pathway through the insistent growths—450 poems in all—of the "Black

Goddess" period.

That Graves has a less exalted reputation as a writer in other genres is a reflection of his status as a poet. And composing poetry is, after all, considered by many to be the most prestigious of literary activities. But such an assumption does less than justice to Graves's ability as a teller of tales, and Lucia Graves shows us what we have been missing by bringing together all fifty two extant stories in a single volume. Of course the term "short story" needs to be stretched a bit to accommodate all these efforts. Some, as Lucia Graves is ideally placed to remind us, are first hand accounts of actual family events, more autobiographical reportage than fictional narrative; others, while displaying the baroque side of Graves's imagination, seem to flout most of the formal procedures of the form. "School Life in Majorca, 1955" and "A Bicycle in Majorca" come close to the real thing, while "Trin-Trin-Trin"—the title is a give-away—is couched in the form of a telephone conversation requiring Don Roberto [a.k.a Robert Graves] to listen to a rambling and inconsequential monologue that bores reader as much as listener. The leaps back to childhood are predictable; the use of an epistolary formula [letters to Auntie May or Uncle George] less so. Perhaps the most rewarding reads are those in which the author's imagination and emotions are obviously involved. "The Whitaker Negroes" is a case in point—a sequence of nightmarish events which, in the very act of enunciation, perform a necessary therapy for the writer. That theme was one that Graves returned to time and again—in poems and critical essays as well as stories.

Of course a great deal of the most illuminating criticism of literature has been produced by creative writers and especially poets, for example Eliot's "Selected Essays" and Auden's "The Dyer's Hand". Graves's "Collected Writings on Poetry" deserve that kind of recognition; one hopes this compilation will assist the process. One can guess why canonisation has been slow to arrive, for these are critical pronouncements which toe no party line. Indeed, their very unpredictability is the product of an iconoclastic outlook that earlier had provoked his exasperated Oxford tutor into complaining that Graves preferred "some authors to others". As these pieces attest—all five hundred and fifty pages of them—Graves never departed from this prejudiced stance, famously championing Skelton to the point of aping his ragged rhythms in his early verse, satirising Pound's misuse of Latin sources or deriding the voguish melody of Dylan Thomas. But as editor Paul O'Prey points out in his brisk and informative introduc-

tion, Graves's main critical obsessions stayed pretty constant: the role of the poet; the pragmatic possibilities of poetry; the nature of poetic inspiration (has anyone written more exhaustively on this topic?) and "the professional standards of modern poets" (whom he mostly disliked).

On the evidence of this collection, the formally structured "academic" essay is rarely his bag: just as his stories often ignore or extend the conventions of the genre, so these pieces celebrate the idiosyncratic and the "magical", the associative strategies of "poetic unreason". Certain passionately held convictions recur, motif-like, in this motley brocade. In the aftermath of war and consequent upon his reading of Freud and his friendship with Rivers, Graves expanded on his notion of poetry as therapy, "a kind of secondary elaboration that the poet gives them [poems] when no longer in a self-hypnotised condition". True poetry, he argues in "The Personal Muse", is the result of an "emotional trance", an invocation of the White Goddess or Muse that makes "the hair rise or the heart leap." Not that Graves undervalued craft. No poet has written more knowledgeably on a subject which for him was intuitively but painstakingly acquired. Not for him the arid "technique" of Pound or the late Yeats. Instead he preferred to celebrate the craftsmanship of a Hardy or Frost that somehow invoked "magic". On the poets of World War Two his unconventional assertions carry conviction (only Alun Lewis survives unscathed); in "The Road To Rydal Mount", Graves mercilessly targets the grand old men of Nineteenth Century poetry: Wordsworth, we are informed, "disowned and betrayed his Muse", while Tennyson "never had one, except Arthur Hallam and a Muse does not wear whiskers".

What finally impresses, Graves's schoolboy humour and insouciance apart, is the sheer catholicity of his vision, a cast of mind at once irreverent and profound. He can effortlessly dismember "Dover Beach" with all the close reading skills of a formalist critic; offer an unforgettable vignette of "Mad Mr Swinburne", touching the boy Graves not for the King's Evil but to transfer a poet's gift; even pronounce, shaman-like, on hallucinogens in an Oxford lecture entitled, with suitable prescience, "Ecstasy". To open this book is to encounter something surprising or subversive on every page. Small wonder that Sassoon, all those years before, had "listened to Graves as to an 'oracle which I could, now and then, venture to contradict', confessing that he reversed their ages' since he knew so much more about almost everything except foxhunting."

Graves the "oracle" used his talents most memorably as a poet. Though his hands, like Shakespeare's, might be stained by immersion in the vats of commercial writing, he wished to be remembered as a poet, perhaps the best English love poet of his age. How timely then that all those verses, previously only available in slim and increasingly rare volumes, here rub public shoulders for the first time in volume one of the *Complete Poems*. As the editors, Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, remind us, 1926 was a watershed year. With indecent haste Graves had amassed nineteen books—eleven in verse—and had taken the decision to publish—at the precocious age of thirty one—a *Collected Poems*. But like many another poet, Graves culled his work mercilessly and not always judiciously. Less than half an oeuvre of two and eighty poems made it into that first collection. And while Graves's own *ex cathedra* remark that his suppressions had ensured that "no silver spoons had been thrown out with the refuse" was disarmingly modest, it simply did not accord with the facts. Only one inclusion from *Over the Brazier* and *Fairies and Fusiliers* signals an authorial over-reaction not just to the experience of war but also to the verse it engendered. That he would become a less astringent editor—like Sassoon—of his later poetry meant, as the introduction confirms, that "the canon was left unbalanced."

There is nothing unbalanced about this collection. Its editorial procedures are a model of good sense. Most important, it maintains both a strict awareness of each publication's place in the poet's progress and of the order preferred by Graves within each volume. The end-notes, unfussy yet informative, not only indicate substantive textual revisions but draw attention to publication details, intertextual matters, authorial glosses and much more. The editors deserve our plaudits for a work of loving and attentive scholarship that is all the better for being so unobtrusive. It augurs well for their continuing endeavour—two more massive volumes and the publication of the entire corpus of the great man's poetry.

So, too, Carcanet who have been prepared to back such an ambitious enterprise. The books look splendid in their attractive livery, with the poems a pleasure to read in their ten point meridian type face. The individual editors, whether members of the poet's immediate family or acknowledged experts, have responded sensitively to the overall editorial vision of Patrick Quinn. I did wonder why there was no index, particularly in relation to the pieces on poetry, since there is often no clue in individual titles about the ostensible subject matter.

Perhaps a general index is intended once the programme is completed—a minor cavil. This is an enterprise which deserves to succeed and one which the poet would assuredly have welcomed. Robert Graves furnished his study with talismans; these volumes, his name truculently borne on their spines, deserve to become consecrated objects on every admirer's bookshelf.

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