

The 1995 Graves Biographies

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Richard Perceval Graves. *Robert Graves and the White Goddess: 1940-85.* London: Weidenfeld, 1995. £25

Miranda Seymour. *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge.* London: Doubleday, 1995. £20

The Graves centenary year 1995, not surprisingly, witnessed an upsurge in publications on Graves, unmatched in number over the past decades. This review article will examine the biographies by Richard Perceval Graves and Miranda Seymour, two of the most important contributions to Graves studies since Martin Seymour-Smith's biography (1982). Both books are written by professional

biographers, but these biographies are also of considerable interest to literary criticism.

Richard Perceval Graves's *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940-1985* is the third and final part in a series of biographies by Richard Perceval beginning with *The Assault Heroic 1895-1926* (1986) and continuing with *The Years with Laura 1926-1940* (1990). The third part is the largest one and has demanded more time from its author than the previous two—"the culmination of ten years' patient research", as the dust-jacket proclaims. The *White Goddess* is a demanding subject and, as Richard Perceval himself says in the introduction, there is "a vast quantity of raw material" to draw on from this period.

Miranda Seymour's *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* covers the long life from 1895 until 1985. It is a carefully researched volume providing incisive psychological insight into the complex motives behind Graves's choice of life-style and artistic expression. Further, her study is the first major work on Graves written by a woman, and the female angle is welcome as a balance to the hitherto male-dominated view on such difficult gender-related subjects as Graves's Muses. Graves himself was particularly sensitive to gender issues, and it seems somewhat paradoxical that biographical and critical research on Graves should have been so male-dominated until now. Miranda Seymour is not afraid of the difficult questions and has done a brilliant job in pointing out where to look for answers.

Richard Perceval Graves's *Robert Graves and The White Goddess* obviously has the advantage of being written by someone who has a deep and thorough insight into Robert Graves's background. This includes not only family—Richard Perceval is Robert's nephew—and friends, but extends to the educational background as well. Richard Perceval was, like Robert, educated both at Charterhouse and at St. John's, Oxford. This familiarity makes him generally reliable on facts about Robert Graves's life: Richard Perceval knows the people and places he writes about; he has heard people discuss them ever since he was a child, and he himself has participated in the formation of opinion about them. Apparently, he also knows that his familiarity with fact is his strength and that he can well afford to leave to others the opinions which inevitably sooner or later are going to clash one against the other. Martin Seymour-Smith's biography did not shun sometimes even controversial opinions on the subject he wrote about. Now Richard Perceval remarks in his "Select Bibliography" to *Robert Graves and The White Goddess* that Martin Seymour-Smith's biography is

"good on criticism, though factually unreliable" (596).

The choice of a strategy of presentation for the biographical material with the emphasis on basic fact may have one minor disadvantage though; Richard Perceval's book runs the risk of becoming almost too centred on detail. It enumerates events in a chronological order with a minimum of commentary, avoiding interpretation. He simply tells us what happened, trusting that historical and biographical fact will aid readers in making their own interpretations. Behind this enterprise lies an enormous labour of assembling material from Graves's publications and collections of letters and manuscripts scattered over the United States, Mallorca, and England, and including a substantial private collection owned by Richard Perceval himself. Once collected, the material has been arranged in a chronological order, and less interesting and less relevant information has been weeded out. The result is a text which follows Graves's life almost from day to day, week to week, and month to month.

The advantage of the chronological arrangement is that it provides a colourful picture of the context of Graves's imagination. Now we can see what events went on around Graves when he wrote a poem, and although it is certainly rash to conclude that each poem is a response to an event close in time, the event can, nevertheless, be a fascinating contrast to the poem and bring out aspects one would not immediately think of when reading the poem in another context.

Thus, even on the first page of Chapter 1, Richard Perceval links one of Robert Graves's best-known love poems to the experience of living with Beryl in a house in Great Bardfield, "the early hours of a February morning in 1940. A very cold, white world with snow heavy on the branches and more falling. Beryl is four months' pregnant and turns towards Robert and murmurs something sleepily in his ear. "Later Robert will write of this moment" (3):

She tells her love while half-asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low

The scholar in me looks in vain for a footnote to something which either Robert or Beryl would have written to the effect that "She tells her love" would refer explicitly to "this moment". But the plain reader of poetry in me tells me that this is just how it happened: the details of February 1940 in Great Bardfield enhance the reading experience of

"She Tells Her Love". They add a dimension to the poem I had not felt before.

Surely Robert Graves would have liked the numerological arrangement of chapters in the book. As a tribute to the nine Muses, the book consists of nine main chapters, each containing nine subchapters. What could, however, be improved in the general lay-out of future editions of the book is an even clearer chronological signposting: why not write the year the text refers to in the margin of each page?

Although much of the material Richard Perceval has been using for his biography was available for research already when Martin Seymour-Smith wrote his pioneering work, Richard Perceval's three volume study will remain the standard biographical work on Graves for its reliability, comprehensiveness, and thoroughness.

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Miranda Seymour's biography is, in terms of interpretation and commentary, the opposite to Richard Perceval Graves's. Richard Perceval promises in the Introduction to *Robert Graves and The White Goddess* that in his biography "the story of [Robert Graves's] stormy relationships with four muses ... is told in detail for the first time". Richard Perceval keeps his promise. What the reader gets is details, but very few questions. Miranda Seymour, on the other hand, shows the problematic nature of the Muse relationships in her introduction:

There was never a shortage of candidates [for Musedom], or a lack of readiness on Graves's part. 'I could fall in love with my big toe if I wanted to,' he told one woman-friend before revealing that she had entered his dreams, a sure sign that she was in line to become a muse.... The muse was presented, not with a verbal declaration, but with a sheaf of poems which told her that she had already been adopted. Few could resist.... As justification for his beliefs, he poured out a flood of poems, year after year, in which the story of love, betrayal, and love refound was poignantly unveiled. Facts were doctored by the creation of poetic sequences, with which Graves ensured that the muse would always be seen to have lost her divine power, never simply to have left him for a younger man. (xv)

Later in her biography, when discussing the poems addressed to Judith Bledsoe as Muse, Miranda Seymour remarks that the poems

raise the question of whether Graves had a growing hunger for beautiful young women which he chose to disguise as poetic inspiration.... Did he believe, as his poems suggest, that Judith, as the Goddess's agent, had sought him out? Even at this early stage of the muse years, no tidy lines can be drawn between lust, art and superstition. (336-7)

Miranda Seymour is not the first to raise this question, but she has done more than others to show that there is no simple answer. Graves's real-life Muse relationships and his love poetry will continue to thrill and fascinate readers for generation after generation. Aesthetic success lies in the artist's distinction from all the other artists, and in his muse relationships at an advanced age, Graves is very much different from most other poets. This is one area where Graves explores a territory unknown to most and expressed metaphorically in the poem "In Dedication" on the first page of *The White Goddess*:

It was a virtue not to stay,
To go my headstrong and heroic way
Seeking her out at the volcano's head,
Among pack ice, or where the track had faded
Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers[.] (5)

Both Miranda Seymour and Richard Perceval Graves have daringly followed Graves in his heroic pursuit and helped the readers to see the uniqueness of his Muse poetry.

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In most respects, Richard Perceval Graves and Miranda Seymour agree on biographical detail and the chronology of events. There is, however, one significant disagreement with consequences for literary history. Richard Perceval dates the writing of *Seven Days in New Crete* or *Watch the North Wind Rise*, as the American edition is entitled, to the period immediately preceding its publication, in other words to the autumn of 1947. Miranda Seymour, on the other hand, claims that Graves had started writing the novel in 1944. She points out that the same month that Graves wrote "To Juan at the Winter Solstice", he had in a letter to Beryl described a typescript which he referred to as 'The Cretan Novel'. Seymour remarks that;

it has always been assumed that Graves began writing [*Seven Days*] in 1947 after his return to Mallorca. In fact, he was then working on

a second draft; the book was first written in 1944 as a blueprint for life under the rule of the Goddess. Playful references in the dialogue to the poems of Edward Lear, which Graves was reading to William for the first time at Christmas 1944, provide additional confirmation of this earlier date. (295-6)

If Seymour's observation is correct, the first draft of *Seven Days in New Crete* was written immediately after the first draft of *The White Goddess*. With the previous chronology of events, *Seven Days* reads as an Utopia allegorically based upon the 'theory' of *The White Goddess*. One senses the theory was there already, almost as a cause, when *Seven Days* was written. With Seymour's corrected chronology it is easier to see *The White Goddess* as an attempt to provide a rational explanation for the imaginative speculation which went on in Graves's mind in the mid-forties, including the futuristic *Seven Days*. At the time, in fact, he was exploring the themes of *The White Goddess* from all perspectives: poetic, mythological, religious, historical, and biographical. The discovery that the first draft of *Seven Days* was written in 1944 also supports Martin Seymour-Smith's observation that the importance of *Seven Days* "as a key to Graves's personality cannot be overestimated" (422).

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Seven Days in New Crete also raises the issue of the validity of the biographical method in literary criticism. In an era when influential authorities on literary theory seriously debate the death of the author, literary biography may seem an anachronism. But if we look at what books are bought and read, we must acknowledge that literary biography today has a powerful impact. Roger Sell argues that:

Precisely in the periods when the taboo against literary gossip has been strongest, literary biography has been at its greatest and most popular. In 1875 Dowden, undaunted by the scarcity of solid facts about Shakespeare, produced a life of novelistic proportions and roundedness, simply by reading the plays imaginatively. Ellman was writing on Yeats in the heyday of New Criticism, and in post modern times we have the theoretically anomalous magnificence of Ellman on Wilde. (Sell, 224)

However, what has given the biographical method in criticism a bad reputation from time to time among literary scholars has apparently been its elevation into an absolute: the fallacy that poems and novels have meaning only in so far as they can be related to the life of the

author. Evidently events in authors' lives do enter into their literary work, and biographers are right in pointing out instances where these links exist. Even sceptical critics do well in treating the author's biography as a relevant and important intertext. But it is also easy to see that when biographers spend years working on their authors' lives, they may get carried away and lose sight of the uniqueness of the literary imagination—not to mention Graves's hobbyhorse: the uniqueness of inspiration. There is a danger that everything in poetry and the novel will be reduced to biographical events. For example, Richard Perceval finds that the character of Erica in *Seven Days* is moulded upon Laura Riding, "thinly disguised" (146). Miranda Seymour, on the other hand, thinks that Erica is Elfriede Faust (202). Erica in *Seven Days* may well resemble Laura Riding and she may also resemble Elfriede Faust. But she may, in addition, resemble some third person, as yet undiscovered and what would be the explanatory value of such *reductio ad absurdum* be?

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