

the Great English Vortex (1914-1915) or the four Imagist anthologies of 1914 through 1917, reveals a poet whose muted traditionalism is assimilable to what was, in its time, an influential school of modern verse. However, as critics have observed, the easy Georgianism of Graves's early work - the product of imaginative inclination rather than a knowledge of contemporary literary movements - is disturbed in those of his poems that record Graves's experience as a front-line soldier. Of little merit beside the more achieved work of Owen or even Sassoon, these poems are of considerable interest in that they provide an illustration of the collapse of the Georgian lyric in the face of the horrors of modern warfare. Owen's poetry suffers the same fate but makes of the implosion of its own lyric delicacy a self-reflexive commentary on poetry and mechanised warfare: the inability, in short, of the former to map fully the latter. In this respect, Owen's poetry achieves a kind of modernist self-consciousness of form, as his late poem, "Strange Meeting" most clearly demonstrates. It was not to be until 1937, in the aforementioned work of David Jones, *In Parenthesis*, that English-language poetry was to find a form sufficient to record adequately mass warfare. Graves's war poetry simply reveals the inability of the Georgian lyric to accommodate itself formally to trench experience; and, in this respect, however moving, it shows itself unable to move beyond the impasse reached by the Georgian mode when confronted, and confounded, by the wholesale carnage of the First World War.

I can substantiate this point more carefully by comparing a passage from one of Graves's war poems collected in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917) with a passage from Jones's *In Parenthesis* (1937), both of which centre on the same violent locale: Mametz Wood during the battle of the Somme. Graves's poem is called "A Dead Boche" and contains the following lines:

Today I found in Mametz Wood
 A certain cure for lust of blood:
 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. (45)

elicit the reader's sympathy for the dead German soldier: "There is something fundamentally wrong with a poem that aims at nothing more than an excitation of loathing, that does not attempt to go beyond disgust to some sort of sympathetic understanding of the object, and 'A Dead Boche' fails because it does not do this" (13). One simple retort to Day's judgement is that the aim of Graves's poem is not to "go beyond disgust" and reach sympathetic comprehension of the German's corpse: it is precisely such imaginative reach that, in this specific situation, is unrealisable for the speaker. It is fairer to claim that Graves's poem fails, not through its lack of "sympathetic understanding," but because it does not take the measure of its own Georgian shortcomings in the fashion that, say, Owen's "Greater Love" does:

Red lips are not so red
 As the stained stones kissed by the English dead.
 Kindness of wooed and wooer
 Seems shame to their love pure.
 O Love, your eyes lose lure
 When I behold eyes blinded in my stead! (41)

Owen's stanza is manifestly self-conscious of the discrepancy between its hackneyed poetic diction and its grotesque referent: the point of the poem is its own language's inadequacy to the task at hand. The result is a wrenching gap between the conventional images of the Georgian lyric and a reality which those tropes can never hope to bring home to the poem's reader. This is, perhaps, one way of interpreting Owen's famous pronouncements in his "Preface": "This book is not about heroes. English poetry is not yet fit to speak of them"; and: "Above all I am not concerned with Poetry" (31). The passage quoted above from Jones's *In Parenthesis* also centres on a discrepancy or gap, in this case between the mythological and religious implications of the allusions that structure his account of the slaughter in Mametz wood and the slaughter itself. However, it would be wholly erroneous to apply Owen's second adage quoted to this passage and to the text as a whole, for Jones is concerned less with the pity of war than with the creation of a poetic artefact from the raw materials provided by war.

The specific fashion in which Jones achieves his aesthetic end is not, as in Owen, simply to foreground the discrepancy between trope and referent, but to transform our perception of the literal event by means

of its figurative recasting. To put this another way, the literal destruction that is occurring in the passage, the shattering and fall of branches in the wood due to the intense gunfire, obviously recalls Graves's poem's reference to the "shattered trunk" against which his dead Boche rests. However, in Jones's text the collapsing foliage alludes to, becomes figurative of, a myriad of vegetation rituals and myths: his passage moves beyond denotation to connotation as the collapsing branches become the boughs bestowed by the Queen of the Woods. Jones's mythological scaffolding may be interpreted as a way of placing death in a larger natural perspective, without losing the individuality of each ruined soldier (notice how precisely they are named). In this respect the Queen of the Woods is a redemptive presence in the poem, implying, in Thomas Dilworth's words, "that human life has value even when it is lived and lost in the apparent absurdity of war" (139). For Paul Fussell, this analogy falsifies the reality of war, which refuses to be "subsumed into . . . heroic myth" (144). It is more rewarding, I feel, to interpret Jones's use of myth here and elsewhere in *In Parenthesis* as an attempt to distance, and thus objectify, his emotively charged subject-matter in a fashion that Graves's poem eschews, and which Owen can only realise in an ironic and negative fashion. Jones's poem, in this respect, clearly recalls Eliot's famous dictum, in "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," that what Eliot terms the "mythic method" provides "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history," or in this case modern war (177). More profoundly, Jones's strategy in *In Parenthesis* must be seen as inseparable from his post-impressionist aesthetics - as refracted through the scholastic aesthetics of Jacques Maritain - which demand that the artwork be an object in itself, rather than the impression of an extraneous reality. Interestingly, Graves's developing poetic views, as found in his critical writings between the two wars, gradually moves to a position not unrelated to Jones's in its deployment of a variant of Eliot's mythic method.

A sense of Graves's opinion of poetry in the mid 1920s can be gleaned from his witty monograph *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry: A Political Analogy*. The analogy Graves draws in this essay is between the poetry and the political parties of the day. There are Conservative poets, he writes, in whom "the Just, the Good, the Beautiful, though temporarily dimmed, must always have the last word: horror and pain must be outweighed by admiration and joy. Emotion (which is a

dangerous quality in the ruling classes) must be under the strictest restraint" (8). Amusingly, Graves also dubs these poets Unionist: the term Conservative is chosen merely "in deference to their predominance in Parliament" (7). The Left Wing, in contrast to the Conservatives, "do not believe at all strongly in Parliamentary methods, though they have a few members sitting, and who label themselves Communist, Syndicalist, Anarchist, Non-co-operative, and so on; they are the Third rather than Second Internationalists" (6). Many, like Aldous Huxley and Nancy Cunard "have no great passion for revolution, and if the pinch came would defend no street barricades" (9), though there are "Others who started as malcontents [but] are now definitely committed to revolution," in which category Graves lumps together such diverse writers as T. S. Eliot - that well known socialist! - and Sassoon, both under the unlikely "doyen of the party" Ford Madox Ford (10). The Liberal camp are those Georgians on the benches of which party Graves had once sat: poets whose work appeared in the pages of Edward Marsh's *Georgian Poetry*. Of them, Graves comments that they write "a sweet-flavoured, well-mannered, highly-polished" poetry (10); Georgianism has "as much genius as is covered by the definition about taking pains" (11). Graves adds to his analogy that, just as in politics, so too in poetry there are Independents: Hardy, Frost, de la Mare, and Housman.

The elegance of Graves's conceit makes for delightful reading, but, as my synopsis of his argument should suggest, it is a somewhat confused analysis. Of course, with the benefit of seventy years hindsight, it is easy to see the literary landscape of the 1920s more clearly than was possible for Graves in 1925. Nevertheless, the poets - largely unread today - whom Graves considers Conservative and Liberal do make up recognisable groupings; it is his catch-all Left Wing who, consisting of some of the major poets of the period, seem to comprise an unlikely alliance. Still, if we except the war poetry of Sassoon, Graves's Left Wing does possess some cohesion: it embraces an interest in avant-gardism, including many of the poets we would now dub modernist. The implication of the essay is that, while in certain respects sympathetic to this group, Graves does not wish to be associated with it; the further implication is that he judges himself to be among the Independents. Graves's subsequent career as a poet, however, shows an increasing closeness to some of the preoccupations of certain key figures of his Left Wing, principally their concern with the irrational in poetic composition. It is telling that *Contemporary*

Techniques in Poetry ends with an endorsement of the "dreams, nightmares, and fantasies" (46) central to Left-Wing poetic structure. Over the next two decades Graves can be seen to grope slowly towards his own structuring fantasy: that of the White Goddess.

After meeting Laura Riding, Graves's poetry and critical writing maintains the arrogant aloofness from current fashions and movements we find in *Contemporary Techniques*. Graves and Riding's co-authored *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), an important and neglected contribution to twentieth-century literary theory, attacks movements of any kind. Imagism and the Georgianism whose accents were once to be heard in the young Graves's poetry are castigated in favour of a resolute individualism and an independence from the merely modish. Genuine literary modernism is to be found in the poet who writes poetry without following a pre-established literary programme: "One must always keep this distinction in mind: between what is historically new in poetry because the poet is acting as a barker for civilisation, and what is intrinsically new in poetry because the poet is an original interpreter of the fortunes of mankind" (154). It is clear that Graves - and Riding - wished to be perceived in the latter character. In Graves's case this was to be achieved only through embracing a poetic theory post-dating, though clearly informed by, their relationship and creative partnership.

From this point, to the *Collected Poems* of 1938, Graves's poetry returns to personal preoccupations, executed in an uncompromising yet elegant mode. It is in 1944, with his imagination gripped by his research into matriarchal religion, that Graves's work finds a structure comparable to that of his modernist contemporaries. It was while working on the historical novel, *Hercules, My Shipmate* (1945), that Graves became obsessed with the figure whom he would eventually discuss at greatest length in his "Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth": *The White Goddess* (1948). The details of Graves's theory are of little relevance in the present context: what is significant is that the Goddess, in Graves's account, was a transcultural phenomenon in European culture, suppressed, at various dates, by the emergence of patriarchy. Concomitant upon this suppression was the growing dominance of rational and logical thought over magic, mystery and (genuine) poetry. The historical validity of this cultural archaeology is not my concern; rather, my primary point is that, after 1944, Graves's poetry is based on a poetic presupposition that enables us to link his work to other writers and, in so doing, help to place more carefully this

ambivalent figure within the literary history of twentieth-century poetry. The basic premise of Graves's theory is that the White Goddess is the Muse. The genuine poet recognises this and allows her to inspire his work. This central belief entails what is, at bottom, a romantic poetic in that poetry inspired by the muse has pre-rational origins: in dream, trance, reverie, whatever. This, as Graves recognised, recalls the various poetics of the romantics in that the poet, initially at least, is passive rather than active in the early stages of poetic composition. This dimension of Graves's theory is a latter-day variant on the notion of the poet as an Aeolian harp, played upon by the wind of poetic inspiration; "the heirophant," in the words of Shelley's *Defence of Poetry*, "of an unapprehended inspiration."

However, there is a crucial difference between Graves's poetic theory and the various poetics of the high romantic poets; a difference, moreover, which helps us to contextualise Graves's poetry within the modernism he and Riding analysed in their 1927 book. I have already noted Graves's 1925 endorsement of Left-Wing poetry's reliance on the fantastic and dream-like with regard to poetic structure. Graves's growing interest in these aspects of the poetic act are valuably touched upon in Harold Bloom's characteristically idiosyncratic distinction between "First and Last Romantics." In contrast to high romanticism's call to cleanse rationality, the "last Romantics" - among whom Bloom numbers Yeats, Lawrence and Graves - propose "a preternatural catharsis to heal a magical spirit in us" (9). This transfusion of "irrationalism" into an enervated and anaemic romantic tradition is, in a typical Bloomian fashion, viewed as a form of decadence, a perversion of the spirit of those lofty, first romantics. It is perhaps more valid to see this turn to the so-called "primitive" and magical, in Graves and elsewhere, as symptomatic of the lack of faith many twentieth-century modernist poets have felt in the ability of the rational mind to transform itself under its own energies. Humanity, the last romantics' argument runs, now requires everything it once choose to exclude in the name of reason. This is one form of modernism, to be found in writers Graves tentatively admired, like Lawrence, but also in those poets A Survey of Modernism disparages, such as W. B. Yeats. It is a modernism composed out of the shards of the romantic tradition shored up by a veneration of the irrational, the unconscious, the body; informed by Jung in some cases, Freud in others (though Graves had little time for either); coloured in some writings by the pessimistic cultural historicism of Spengler and/or the anti-rational philosophy of

Nietzsche. It is a form of modernism that deploys, in some form, the "mythic method" of which Eliot speaks in his 1923 review of *Ulysses*, albeit stripped of Eliot's classical predilections (Graves's admiration for Eliot was of a consistently muted form). Graves's poem in praise of "The White Goddess," and the many poems to which this acts as prolegomenon, is an example of this variety of modernism. The poem has been much analysed, and I have little to add to the existing criticism. Its opposition between the Goddess and Apollo, worked through at some length in *The White Goddess*, has an obvious affinity with Nietzsche's distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian; it also echoes Yeats's distinction between the antithetical and the primary; and, more distantly, but more contemporaneously, Jones's distinction between the gratuitous and the utile. Graves here clearly feeds from and into a certain strain of modernism given to binarisms, many of which, including that of Graves, constitute in the last instance a critique of means-end rationality.

To return to the relationship between Graves and Jones with which I began, Graves's Goddess differs considerably from Jones's Queen of the Woods, in that the feminine principle throughout Jones's work is not identified exclusively with the irrational and the magical - a non-identification in Jones's work allied, if not reducible, to his Neo-Thomist beliefs. Graves's Goddess is also significantly more malign than the female presences that pepper Jones's texts. Nevertheless, the deployment of myth in both Graves's and Jones's writings brings their work into line with those whom Bloom calls "last Romantics" and whom Graves terms, regardless of their politics, the Left Wing of modern poetry.

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