Stones-Stories Come from the World: The Idea of Rewriting and Manipulation in Robert Graves' Mediterranean Themes.

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Robert Graves was one of the first to realise that our common culture is less and less a book culture, and more and more a culture of cinema, television, and popular manipulation. Throughout his life and in his works, Graves tried to cope with this new way / wave of reception. Apuleius, the author of "the greatest and most daring mystic text in European Literature" (Pietro Citati, *La Repubblica*), was a constant source of knowledge and inspiration for Graves and his poetics. As early as 1925, Graves wrote: "In Poetry one is continually straying into the bounds of a Thessaly like the land Apuleius celebrated, where magic is supreme and where therefore things happen which realistically minded strangers find difficult to understand" (*Poetic Unreason*, 125). That masterpiece of classical decay, *The Golden Ass*, which Graves translated in 1950, with its predominant sense of a mobile society in rapid transformation completely absorbed in reconstructing new religions, myths, and stories out of the old ones that had broken into pieces, must have been something of a fatal attraction to the young Graves engaged in the same task for his own soul.

And the soul, its place in the world, its always uncertain wanderings was the central theme of that nineteen-page-masterpiece, "The Shout," a story of ordinary folly where Graves, as early as 1924, revealed his most authentic genius, if genius is a quality that can be assigned to those lives that, in Graves's own words, "symbolise and include the principal conflicts of the periods in which they lived", and are able to signify in their work a mutation as a result of a synthesis of various generations (*Poetic Unreason*, 243-253).

The very fact that in "The Shout" Apuleius is the name that accompanies us from the epigraph to the end obliges us to go back to *The Golden Ass* and its hero and examine the problems of his transformation: Lucius transformed into an ass has problems with writing and reading, a good metaphor indeed for our own generation and civilisation. When Lucius as an ass hears the bella fabella narrated by the robbers' cook, he laments at its conclusion that he did not have handbook and stylus to set it down for posterity. And we will discover

later that his greatest dream was to became a book! The astrologer' s answer to his questioning about the outcome of his travel, as he reported it, was in fact: "...nunc enim gloriam satis floridam, nunc historian magnam et incredundam fabulam et libros me futurum" (2, 12).

In "The Shout," Graves indirectly poses the problem of the book through the problem of telling and retelling, the question of the manipulation of a story and of the multiple answers it can elicit, just as the Asinus Aureus can be interpreted either as an autobiographical meditation on some important themes of the author's life, as a conversion and a physical metamorphosis or, finally, as a free translation of a Greek work. In every case, all interpretations would be true, because they all assume a Rosetta stone, a master signifier that would allow us to make sense of what sometimes might be an ambiguous message:

> "My story is true", Richard Crosley says, "every word of it. Or, when I say that my story is 'true', I mean at least that I am telling it in a new way. It is always the same story, but I sometimes vary the climax and even recast the characters. Variation keeps it fresh and therefore true". ("The Shout," 12)

What is being focused on here, it appears, is not so much a problem of form, but rather and above all, a problem of authority and legitimacy, mainly a problem of power. When Crossley underlines the truth of his tale, advocating that it has really happened and that the people in it are all known people, friends of the place, he is reproducing the same mechanism as Apuleius' Asinus Aureus or Cervantes' Don Quixote when they professed to be translations of lost originals. Crossley, the main character, is the centre of a cross-cultural communication that has much to do with translation-manipulation of the different languages of power, especially in their relationship with class, unity, and authority. There is a game to be played which, like the storytelling itself, is made possible due to the co-presence and co-operation of the narrator-performer Crossley and the narrator-audience, both of whom are engaged in integrating themselves, in copying from each other. The audience is an indispensable part of the story, since the same tale may change and must change its meaning according to different audiences.

In this "moonstruck story", worthy of being placed alongside his best poetry, Graves succeeds in focusing on the central theme of his early years as a writer: the problem of resignification, of revealing new

meanings that in a sense are already there. "The power of surprise which marks all true poetry," he writes, "seems to result from a foreknowledge of certain unwitting processes of the reader's mind, for which the poet more or less provides.... The poet may be compared with a father piecing together a picture-block puzzle for his children. He surprises them at last by turning over the completed picture, and showing them that by the act of assembling the scattered parts of 'Red Riding Hood with the basket of food' he has all the while been building up unnoticed underneath another scene of the tragedy, 'The Wolf eating the Grandmother'" (*On English Poetry*, 24-25).

The seventh line of "The Shout" surprises us with a question: "The other scoresman?", reproducing Apuleius' most problematic seventh line : "Quis ille?" The incongruity of Apuleius' question, coupled with an answer of the same incongruity—open to quite different readings—is echoed in Graves's "the other scoresman?", in which the other sounds as a real autre, an autre who comes from afar, from a ship of Fools, a lunatic asylum that parallels Apuleius' idea of an autre far removed in time, space and experience, speaking different languages, able to jump from one story to another, with an almost astonishing, and miraculous "scientia desultoria".

And one of Graves's special skills in this story is to set different time-space levels resonating against each other, realising new analogical webs of symbolic and artistic correspondence with other ages, places, poets, tales: the Australian magic world, the ancient Irish warriors, Hector the Trojan, the God Pan and the woods of Greece, the Celtic Cromlechs, the Stone Age! In its shocking conciseness, "The Shout," following his golden model, seems to cater both to the sophisticated philosophical reader and to the hedonist who wants to enjoy food, sex and fiction. Together with the disquieting defamiliarization of the sand hills, there is in "The Shout" a great deal of eating and drinking, sleeping and speaking, thinking and, above all, desiring. If the hedonist may be content with the glittering surface of the story and its quite unexpected apocalyptic surprise ending, the sophisticated reader will be assaulted by questions regarding the hermeneutic games of "what is true, what is false, who's responsible for the crime" and other narratological cues. The continuous shift of perspective and slippage of roles leaves that reader puzzling about the incompatibility of perspectives: Crossley as narrator of the story inside the story gives his companion an account that possesses all the qualities of good fiction, and yet the story ends as an account of his irreversible, real-life mad-

ness, alienation and death.

The mutual reflection of frame and tale celebrates the secret of reading as a ludic process whose two 'players' are Author and Reader. However, like many of the computer systems we use today, they need a secret password to "log on" to the system to proceed. When Crossley at the end of his story asks his listener whether he liked the story, he receives an answer that breaks the secret, violates the game rules: "Yes,—said I—, busy scoring,—a Milesian tale of the best—Lucius Apuleius, I congratulate you" ("The Shout," 28). The rule-breaking, the violation, the sin, cause an expulsion from Paradise, a Fall, the end of the contract, sometimes even death itself. From this moment, the story turns into real drama: Crossley dies, together with his "miserable Snake and Apple pie man", while the narrator- author (presumably) of the story survives thanks to Fortuna.

It is precisely this slippage of role and character that makes this story effective cinematically. It is a slippage that involves, above all, the author-director Graves and the narrator-actor Crossley, a quite ordinary feat of impersonation, easily broken down into author (scriptwriter) behind actor (person who reads the lines) behind character (role played) in any stage comedy that allows the construction of a double effect upon the spectator. It is not so much the case of a story built upon the central image of stones bouncing against each other, an image that well illustrates the essential flippancy of the text in bouncing from transcendental to material reality, from image to sound, from music to noise, from extreme defamiliarization to "fireside nook", from highly intellectual to modest working class, from one to many, from authority to helplessness (compare Charles's stature during story-telling, "a man of unusual force, even, perhaps, of occult powers" (11) and after it: "his face fell suddenly and became childishly unhappy and anxious" (29). Rather, the present speaker can no longer master and manipulate the past self by interpreting him, so the control of the story is lost, and the dramatic end is no longer avoidable. The Author and his narrating persona seem on the point of merging: "I was feeling rather mad myself" (29), and the reader is left distressed, wondering: What the devil is going on—Why—Where—When? The wide reader, the first-class chessplayer, the editor and stage manager, in one word the direct inheritor of our written culture is inexorably defeated, and the "true story" runs the risk of not being told again. Now focused on the stage is a submerged, largely unwritten and unlettered cultural tradition in which poor Crossley, like Poor Loving

Mad Tom, whose song Graves tried to reconstruct with miraculous mastery in 1927 (*The Common Asphodel*, 197-212), speaks both comically and dramatically against the tyranny of his own hate, terror, lust and frenzy.

By yoking Apuleius to his narrative, Graves has driven us towards a common vision of cultural criticism that is informed by a peculiarly self-denying intelligence, appealing to the popular, the visible and the strange only in order to involve the reader in the carefully contrived pattern of his network, the web of codes that Author and Reader must learn to break and violate only to reconstruct, reinvent and revive them. In introducing into this "moonstruck" story an aural-oral-visual strategy of discourse, Graves must have been dreaming—like Lucius, but quite unlike him—of a film! The problem of reception has always been central to Graves's poetics.

However, in his countless attempts at a more precise definition of the poetic process, he has never dissociated the poet from his reader. From 1922, when in On English Poetry he compared the poet to a father piecing together a picture block-puzzle for his children, to 1955, when in a home Service Broadcast he addressed his audience, "Frankly, honest Public, I am not professionally concerned with you and expect nothing from you" (*The Crowning Privilege*, 185), Graves has propounded many different stances: "There are two meanings of poetry as the poet himself has come to use the word-first, Poetry, the unforeseen fusion in his mind of apparently contradictory emotional ideas; and second, Poetry, the more or less deliberate attempt, with the hold of a rhythmic mesmerism, to impose an illusion of actual experience on the mind of others" (*On English Poetry*, 13).

And again:

> Poetry is for the poet a means of informing himself on many planes simultaneously, the plane of imagery, the intellectual plane, the musical plane of rhythmical structure and texture—of inform ing himself on these and possibly on other distinguishable planes of the relation in his mind of certain hitherto inharmonious interests or other selves. And for the reader, poetry is a means of similarly informing himself of the relation of analogous interests hitherto inharmonious on these same various planes. (*Poetic Unreason*, 1)

And finally:

> ...the plain reader must modify his critical attitude. In the first place, he must admit that what is called common intelligence is the mind in its least active state: that poetry demands a more vigorous imaginative effort than he has hitherto been willing to apply to it; and that, if anthologies compiled to refresh tired minds have indulged his lazy reading habits, poets can be pardoned for using exceptional means to make him do justice to their poems.... What then, of the plain reader's rights? They are, like the poet's, whatever his intelligence is able to make them. (*The Common Asphodel*, 61-68)

One of Graves's most suggestive and up-to-date definitions of the reader's mind, while benevolently criticising Nabokov's 'democratic eclecticism,' refers to Nabokov's declaration that "I do not care if a word is 'archaic' or 'dialect' or 'slang': whatever suits, goes..." Graves rebukes: "No, pray, it does not go; or not very far. Nabokov ought to recognise that the reader's brain is a sensitive electrical, receiving machine and cannot readily accept messages on more than one wave-length at a time, however high its fidelity" (*The Crane Bag*, 98). This computer-like description of the reader's brain has the flavour of those Elizabethan Anatomies and Treatises of Melancholy that were a rather bizarre mixture of 'divine', 'natural' and 'moral' philosophy. Graves was one of the first English writers to introduce the terms of psycho-analysis into the analysis of the artistic process, even if he never accepted the Surrealist renunciation of syntax. Instead, he made a choice to practice, both in prose and poetry, the more ancient 'desultory science', the somewhat Shandean ability to go through and cross over the diachronic and synchronic levels of the Langue in order to recapture his own original and idiosyncratic Parole.

The attitude he chose to adopt in those crucial nineteen twenties, when he identified himself with 'convalescent and reconstructive humanity' (*The Common Asphodel*, 7) was an extremely coherent starting point for a poet who was beginning to rewrite and translate the past into the present and this into the future in more than one sense:

> The triangular feud between Victorian Conservatists, 'Georgian' liberals and post-Georgian anarchists was being fought in the columns of scores of literary magazines. My attitude had become increasingly historical. Contemporary Techniques of Poetry was a

> review of modern poets as writing behaviouristically according to the political camps into which they were divided. I welcomed the modernistic tendency as an effort towards the conversion of today into tomorrow, though recognising the irony, which was the keynote to modernism, as a passing historical phenomenon. The Future of the Art of Poetry was an attempt to historicize even the future towards which modernism was tending. (*The Common Asphodel*, 9)

For an author like Graves, always questioning the "cool web" of language, its mutability, its spell and "watery clasps," the problem of the philosophy underlying the language is of central importance. As J.P. Forster pointed out in his 1979 essay:

> Eliot's reflection looks back to nineteenth-century idealism and metaphysics is widely acknowledged. His interest in the philosophy of the best known British exponent of absolute idealism has often been discussed. On the other hand that Robert Graves's thought reaches forward to the British analytical reflection of a J.L. Austin and, to some extent, Ludwig Wittgenstein, has passed unnoticed. (Forster, 471)

Geoffrey Hartman's tentative location of Graves's work enlightens and focuses on some central strategies of Graves's prose and poetry. Hartman writes that:

> Graves is the most classical of the modern Romantics.... The individual talent is subordinated to tradition. But to tradition of a special kind Graves's classicism goes back to the strict oral discipline of Celt or Greek: an esoteric craft, needing not only long apprenticeship but also the right cultic attitude toward inspiration. (Hartman, 262)

There is some truth in what Hartman says, but it appears that the terms in which the observation is made are too simplistic and do not do justice to the ampleness, depth, and scope of Graves's work for several reasons: Firstly, even without reading "Tradition and the Individual Talent," we might all share the conviction that the two terms are so closely linked to each other that we could hardly say which is the explanans and which the explanandum. Secondly, the

tradition to which Graves's classicism goes back is not, or at least not only "the strict oral discipline of Celt or Greek." Graves's familiarity with the ancient and pre-alphabetic tradition could never have reduced the extremely complex and rich sense of tradition to a simply oral concept of it. Actually, he expands and enriches the meaning of tradition by relocating or dislocating the voices of the great authors of the past within a new, sometimes anterior, sometimes present past, finding for them a new syncretic location thanks to the rich variety and the mastery of his literary means, through myths, disguised "personae", the Goddess herself in her various disguises. Finally, his "strict oral discipline of Celt or Greek" was not only "an esoteric craft," but also an exceedingly intelligent semiotic system of pre-alphabetic cultures with a capacity to manipulate reality, to create a cultural form out of the total absence of forms, by a constant process of elimination, substitution and symbolisation able to describe the culture of a people in all its aspects: from the mythological, religious, and historical, to the ideological, technical and artistic.

From this perspective, Robert Graves is neither a traditionalist or nor a Romantic, but rather a classic 'son of Modernism,' so to speak, having enacted throughout his work a poetic of complex and precise forms capable of seeing things whole, through centuries and from different points of view, in a vision of life and art of all-inclusive significance. In their pioneering study on Modernist Poetry, Riding and Graves succeed in articulating what Modernism was pointing to in extremely enlightening and precise terms:

> Such are the shifts to which the poets are driven in trying to cope with civilisation and in rejecting or keeping up with the social requirements which seem to be laid upon poetry. In the confusion which results, it is clear at least that modernist verse, however much it has been weakened or perverted by its race with civilisation, embodies the best and most enduring contemporary poetry. 'Modernist' should describe a quality in poetry, which has nothing to do with the date or with reacting to the demands of civilisation, though the poets in whose works this quality is most evident are not so stupid or unhumorous as to ignore their contemporary universe. Evidences of time naturally occur in their writing, but its modernism always lies in its independence, in its not relying on any of the traditional devices of poetry-making nor on any of the effects artificially achieved by using the atmosphere

> of contemporary life and knowledge to startle or to convey reality; the most intelligent attitude towards history is not to take one's own date too seriously. (*The Common Asphodel*, 136)

This design not to take his own date too seriously is what drove Graves—since he always nourished on the best popular culture—towards an increasingly conscious inclusion in his work of what we define as the 'feature' of oral literature. It meant to open both his prose and poetry to those features of extemporaneous speech, that peculiar kind of language which, more than any writing takes its distance from the trap, the drama, what Maria Corti calls "il segno di cimitero" that any writing bears, together with its victory over time, its "substractio to panta rei" (Corti,12). When Graves says that the Modernist poets' work is especially characterised "by a lack of strain, by an intelligent ease" (*The Common Asphodel*, 136), he is simply inviting our "Age of Anxiety" not to feel too anxious, not to feel too conditioned by the Anxiety of Influence, namely not to feel a slave to Thoth, the inventor of the alphabet who, in Socrates' words, would have cancelled any individual and collective memory (Plato, *Phaedrus*, LIX).

If Plato, living in a period of transition and coexistence of written and oral communication, chose the written tradition on the grounds of a more scientific and conceptual knowledge—actually only because he was afraid of the strong appeal and hypnotic power of orality— the Middle Ages will characterise the oral poetic text as a demonic instrument of the body and of all those sinners who make a commerce of it: turpes histriones, ioculatores, cantores and cantatrices. Instead, the philosophers of the Middle Ages exalted the written text which favoured an extremely controlled speaking and above all silence: silentium sola bona locutio.

The ever-changing and differently-graded combination of the two (and more) systems has a deep significance in every culture, and Graves was a master in his handling of this consciousness. From this perspective, we might better understand and enjoy some strategies of Graves's poetry when we have the disquieting feeling that we often do not get in touch with the poem because its form, as Forster puts it, "belongs more probably to the order of schematization than of full-blown structure (Forster, 477). Half-way between oral and written code, between stage dialogue and ordinary conversation, the reader may reasonably have the impression that Graves's poetic form escapes the attempt and temptation to any static, forever-designed form. It

masters all the techniques, but has a need to change them at every moment: precisely as it is in the dialogue, an activity which, far from being a reproduction of already internalised social rules, is above all an activity based on a challenge model, and therefore an economy of language exposed to the risks of all difficult transactions. The subtle combination of different codes sometimes has the effect of a collage whose incongruity forces readers to become actively involved in all aspects of the issue and react with their own resources.

Throughout his literary / cultural poetics and politics, Graves had been pointing to a rediscovery of our common heritage, our cross-cultural identity, language and experience. He had been pointing to a new Renaissance in which the independent poet would be the best guarantee for all present-past-future tradition, his models being the masters of the past and above all Shakespeare, "the 'master poet' who insisted in his own absurd courses and carried on something of the city-mystery tradition in which each guild contributed an episode of a topical or humorous kind strung on a loose thread of Scriptural history" (*The Common Asphodel*, 28). No author of our century more so than Robert Graves has been working towards a comprehensive and comprehensible simplification of the enormously complex system of communication, of the world-wide network in which we live.

In fact, Graves has proved a prophet. Only a few years ago, the post-modern American 'avant-garde' decided to nourish their poetry on the best of oral poetry provided by cultural anthropology and, above all, by the most authoritative American classical philology which has its most outstanding voice ina journal called *New Literary History*, and in authors such as George Quasha, whose words in 1977 sounded like something of a poetic manifesto. His purpose echoes Graves's exactly: "I'm trying to reclaim for poetry a domain lying somewhere between the oral tradition of Homer and Socrates ... I want to get back to the intelligence inventing while talking-walking, while moving" (Quasha, 491). "It is easier to talk when I am walking" said Charles Crossley in "The Shout." And Graves himself writes: "Personally I expect poems to say what they mean in the simplest and most economical way; even if the thought they contain is complex" (*The Crowning Privilege*, 98). "Good poets, I think," he writes elsewhere, "write poems that correspond with how they themselves talk; or, at least, how they would talk if they had the perfect gift of extemporaneous speech" (*Steps*, 139).

Graves's unbelievable variety, scope and range of subject matter

might seem daunting, but his reassuring criticism invites the reader to love him, imitate him, even steal from him:

> Isn't everyone a thief? We must concede the existence, if not of an immediate, collective property, at least of a common stock, our 'cultural inheritance', on which even the most inventive mind must draw.... Though a common historical background certainly exists, yet what we individually do, or are, today implies specific additions to and manipulations of this background. (*The Crowning Privilege*, 202)

Thus, if I apologise for my own possible thefts, yet from my experience as one of Graves's many translators, I would not have been able to translate him had I not caught myself playing at being Robert Graves from time to time. When one translates a poet, one loves him. Graves himself could not have translated Homer, Apuleius, Terence, or Omar Khayyam if he had thought—as Fitzgerald did—that the Persians were not poets enough and wanted a little art to shape them (*The Crane Bag*, "Translating the Rubaiyyat" 225-239). Graves would never have accepted, either in life or in literature, any dominant/dominated relationship. He would never would have dared to take liberties with any culture, not even a 'marginal' or 'exotic' one, as the unpoetic stream of social or political life might define the Persian and Islamic culture: it would have been anti-baraka, an act springing from 'willful lovelessness' (*Oxford Addresses on Poetry*, 99-107).

Authority has always been, in Graves' poetry and prose, or even in life, a laughable subject: he laughed at the academic critic, at the "reader over his shoulder", at the philosopher, and at all those who claimed to be always right and to know everything. In his practical scepticism, his 'flying crooked', his 'approximation to poetry' (*The Common Asphodel*, viii), his "practical poems, namely the lyrical or dramatic highlights of the poet's experiences with the Goddess in her various disguises" (*The Crowning Privilege*, 90-91), and in his long storytelling, a long quest for wisdom and truth, Graves has given his readers countless opportunities to play the rich variety of games that only the best literature provides.

His voice has been the "loose thread" upon which so many times we have found ourselves stringing our own stories and feelings, our fears, doubts and emotions, while Homer, Apuleius, Skelton, Shakespeare, Blake, the Moderns and Modernists passed by and returned, trans-

formed into the voice of Time itself, lovingly nourished on the honey of the Muse: "gluchere oi apo stomatos reei aude" (Hesiod, *Teogonia*). As Graves put it so eloquently:

> The vague sea thuds against the marble cliffs
> And from their fragments age-long grinds
> Pebbles like flowers.

Let these flowers, like marble pebbles, make a grateful garland to Robert Graves.

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