

“ ‘Sullen Moods’: Extant Drafts to Completed Poem.” Extract from a work-in-progress: *Robert Graves: Poet (1914-1927): The lunatic, the love and the poet.*

Frank Kersnowski

Love, do not count your labour lost
Though I turn sullen, grim, retired
Even at your side; my thought is crossed
With fancies by old longings fired.

And when I answer you, some days
Vaguely and wildly, do not fear
That my love walks forbidden ways,
Breaking the ties that hold it here.

If I speak gruffly, this mood is
Mere indignation at my own
Shortcomings, plagues, uncertainties;
I forget the gentler tone.

You, now that you have come to be
My one beginning, prime and end,
I count at last as wholly me,
Lover no longer nor yet friend.

Friendship is flattery, though close hid;
Must I then flatter my own mind?
And must (which laws of shame forbid)
Blind love of you make self-love blind?

Do not repay me my own coin,
The sharp rebuke, the frown, the groan;
Remind me, rather to disjoin
Your emanations from my own.

Robert Graves wrote “Sullen Moods” in the spring of 1921 when he and his wife Nancy Nicolson were living at Boar’s Hill in Oxford. The

cottage in which they and their first two children lived was owned by John Masefield and his wife, who were upset when Nancy decided to open a shop on the grounds. The undertaking was a financial failure and, at first glance, seems to have been a most unnecessary distraction for Graves who found himself drawn into the role of shopkeeper, as well as children's nurse, when Nancy was not well. The distractions and irritations were many, understandably causing tensions and, clearly, unpleasant moods. In "Sullen Moods" he apologizes for his unpleasantness, but this seemingly simple poem had much more complex concerns. The drafts of the poem reveal that Graves had very much placed himself under the control of his wife, so much so that in "A Valentine," which also first appeared in *Whipperginny* (1923), he offered his suicide as homage. He would offer the White Goddess no more. In the poems in this volume, *Country Sentiment* (1920), and *The Pier-Glass* (1921), Graves tells of the healing power of his wife's love, as he recovered from the effects of World War I, as he made clear in "Author's Note" to *Whipperginny*:

The Pier-Glass, a volume which followed *Country Sentiment*, similarly contains a few pieces continuing the mood of this year, the desire to escape from a painful war neurosis into an Arcadia of amatory fancy, but the prevailing mood of *The Pier-Glass* is aggressive and disciplinary, under the stress of the same neurosis, rather than escapist. *Whipperginny* for a while continues so ... (v)

His "amatory fancy" resembles the sentiment found in traditional love poems in the complete devotion of poet/lover to his beloved; but the beloved is cut from the same pattern as Keats's *Merciless Lady*. However, Graves's beloved takes command of his body and spirit to heal, not destroy, him.

What seems to be the first draft of "Sullen Moods" was written on an envelope with these words:

Oxford Times
 11 rooms
 Nice Gardens
 Every Convenience
For Sale

Clearly, Nancy had already set him the task of finding a new place to

live, and she knew exactly what she wanted as Virginia Woolf recorded Graves explained to her at their first meeting in 1925:

He cooks, his wife cleans; 4 children are brought up in the elementary school; the villagers give them vegetables; they were married in Church; his wife calls herself Nancy Nicholson; won't go to Garsington, said to him I must have a house for nothing; on a river; in a village with a square church tower; near but not on a railway—all of which, as she knows her mind, he procured. Calling herself Nicholson has sorted her friends into sheep and goats.
(*Conversations*, 8)

The cottage was World's End in Islip. Graves may well have been writing out of peake when he put the first words of "Sullen Moods" on the envelope:

Self-love with love of you betwined
And must which laws of shame forbid

These two phrases will essentially inform all drafts of the poem: Graves cannot separate love of himself from love of his wife and is bound by laws other than those of marriage vows. Self-love, as Graves uses the phrase, is *amour propre*, one's own self-respect. In Graves's case, he can make no separation between his love for his wife and his own sense of worth. "Betwined" perhaps, but without doubt his self-love is dependent on her acceptance.

I assume the drafts to be earliest which are brief, incomplete, and with extensive strikeouts. There are three such drafts, which may well have been written in the order of my discussion. The first is very rough with more words stricken than not. Several clauses, though, emerge as "Help me see you as before;" "When overwhelmed ~~and~~ ~~clazed~~ and almost (unreadable) I stumbled on that ~~hidden~~ secret door ~~that separates~~ which saves the ~~living man~~ from the ghost" Graves's concern with the world of the living and the world of the ghost is repeated in many poems at this time, reflecting his own inquiry into nature of the unconscious. He repeatedly in *The Meaning of Dreams*, *On English Poetry*, and *Poetic Unreason* wrote of the similarity of dreaming and writing poetry, both concerned with conflict. The difference seemed to be that poet (Graves) did not want to resolve the conflict but to use it as a doorway into the unconscious, much as would a psy-

chologist working with a patient's dreams.

The verso of this page has few strikeouts and is in a clearer hand: "~~Think it no sign of~~"; "~~Never Do not think that our believe that our faithful love is not lost~~"; "Forgive me, do not think all lost"; "Think it no warning of ~~true love~~ love lost"; "Do not think our love is lost It is no sign of love half lost". In the published version, this page resulted in: "Love, do not count your labour lost," which is very different from Graves's pleading in the draft. He did well in this early draft to strike out "true love", though he did not immediately abandon the phrase. The differing versions reflect Graves's investigations into the "sub-personalities" of the poet. Or to be clearer: he was role-playing, as probably Nancy was as well. Quite likely, the role-playing and his dependence on Nancy were essential to his recovery from his war trauma. In a letter dated 31 October 1997, Catherine Dalton, daughter of Robert and Nancy wrote me about this time in the life of the Graves family and mentioned her mother's "enormous care (and cure) of his neurasthenia". Graves extrapolated variously and well from his experience, constructing such love poems as "The Pier-Glass," "Incubus," and "Richard Roe and John Doe" from his married life. But this early draft of "Sullen Moods" goes beyond extrapolation and role playing into the abject fear of the poet that his slighting of his wife may cause her to leave him.

At the time, such a breakup is not indicated by any source. They needed money, had a growing family, and were happy. Later Graves's fears would be realized, as he told me when we talked in 1969: "I was a virgin until I was married and never slept with another woman until my wife forced me to. She left with that woman's husband, and I left with that woman". The "woman" was, obviously, Laura Riding, the man Geoffrey Phibbs. Though the two were not married in fact, they were so in Graves's mind. The story of this foursome and their breakup and the consequent injury to Laura Riding is too well known to need repeating here.

The next draft was written on the verso of a letter (dated 2nd April, 1921) from Holbrook Jackson, editor of *To-Day. A Journal of Literature and Ideas*, asking Graves for a poem to include in the June issue. Although there are numerous strikeouts and some unreadable words, the concern is clear: Graves believes their love is changing, perhaps into a kind of friendship:

~~But then~~ know that
~~But listen,~~ since you
~~Stoutheart you have come~~ came to be
 And hold ~~guard~~ my life at either ~~both~~ ends
 Thy whole life's care from start of end
 I think of you as wholly (unreadable)
~~Of flattery due to common friends a mere~~ friend
~~No more a lover~~ Lover no longer nor ~~than~~ yet a friend
 Friendship is flattery, who could ~~need~~ use
 The flatterers art on my his mind will cause a worse abuse
 Self love ~~is subject to is always discovers of~~ much mistrust
 deception
 Than (unreadable) behind that laying
 (Unreadable)
 do not hurt yourself from me
 (Unreadable)
 And pay me back
 I seldom think

Graves used two pens in this draft, suggesting he went back to it. One is very sharp and dark, the other lighter. The last two lines are in the clearer pen. This page provides an early draft for the last two stanzas and makes the connection between the two which Graves did not make when he published the poem: self-love results in the deception of flattery as a way of distancing people from each other; hence disguised moods are flattery (paying undue homage) which he will not do with her, accepting blame for his bad mood. He hopes she will be open with him, not pay him back with flattery. This reading differs from that of the published version, in which he simply asks that she not repeat his mood. Keeping the concern with flattery, Graves wrote: "Must I then flatter my own mind?" Lacking her love, his own self-love would be diminished to friendship, scarcely a condition to provide him with the will to live.

The next draft is on an opened envelope from The Bocardo Press, Oxford, dated 16 April 1921. The half with the address is almost unreadable, though the words "fear" and "alarm" are decipherable. The other half of the page begins:

His harshness is no proof of friendship lost
~~That~~ It grow sullen ~~and~~ and retire

Even in your presence my my
 With fancies ~~that no thinking end~~
 Or if by old fears crossed tired
~~And that~~ I answer you sometimes days
 Vaguely and wildly so that you stand
 That my love walks in other ways
 Forgetting That it ~~home and children~~ what ~~once bound~~ me
 should bind here
 Tired Grown! With scorn ~~all that binds me~~ for me
 Sick For sweetheart long since came to be all
 But you have ~~become~~
 So ~~intimate a part~~ of me
 Essential Essentially to to me
 And past the ~~flattery~~ of

Such flattery as I give my friends
~~Essential part of my own~~

Graves does not enter new material in this draft, but seems to be trying out words, which he will largely, and wisely, reject: "Essential Essentially," "sweetheart" like "Stoutheart" in the previous draft were not retained in the published version. The word "fancies" will be echoed in "Author's Note" to *Whipperginny* indicating that "Sullen Moods" is one of those "amatory fancies" that helped his recovery from his war neurosis. "Sullen Moods" can be termed a fancy most easily if fancy is thought of as a distraction or illusion, though caprice may be closer to Graves's meaning.

The next draft has one strikeout, and in a clear hand Gives the title and a few phrases:

Sullen Moods
 It is no proof
 Bound
 Blind to the laws that hold it here
 Denying
~~Despising~~ home and children
 here

The title and the incomplete sentence appear on the page as if Graves intended a more formal draft of the poem, but he breaks off the draft.

The rest of the page has only two irregularly spaced phrases. Graves may well be again testing words. But the irregular spacing of these phrases and the stricken out "Despising" suggest Graves fell into a deeper and darker mood soon after he began writing the draft. Whatever the case, his withdrawal from "home and children" is the concern of this draft. No more should be made of this, however, than would be of anyone's irritation.

And in the next draft, he completes what he began with the above failed draft, a test version of the poem, close to what will be the published one:

True love

~~Kindness~~

It is no proof of ~~friendship~~-lost
That I grow sullen, grim, retired
Even in your presence, my mind crossed
With fancies by old longings fired,

Or ~~if~~ that I answer you some days
Vaguely and wildly, so you fear
That my love walks in alien ways
With scorn for what once bound it here.

~~When~~ If I speak harsh this harshness is
which ~~Sign of great fury~~ indignation with my own
Short comings, plagues, infirmities
And I forget to change my tone
For you who long ~~since came grown~~ proved to be
My ~~whole~~ one beginning, prime, and end.
I think of you as wholly me
Lover no longer nor yet friend

Friendship is flattery, ~~who can~~ who could use ~~my his own~~ his
own mind?

The soothing art

The laws of shame refuse
Self-love ~~would earn a worse abuse~~
~~That self mistrust, lagging behind~~
~~Any you as~~
And love ~~for you is with self~~ entwined

~~How then~~ Your self with myself close
~~Then~~ do so do not pay me my coin,
 With sharp reproof or ~~sullen~~ frown or groan,
 But ~~let our your memories~~ my memory to disjoin
 Your emanation from my own.

Become once more the distant light
 The hope of glory not yet proved
 Of a perfection wasted quite
 Since by such imperfection loved.

Graves signed this draft as he did a very similar one. Most of his changes in the two drafts concern diction. Increasingly, he replaces the flat and prosy and the self-consciously poetic with words that reflect his own poetic language, a heightened poetic one not yet free of the Georgian influence.

In these drafts, however, he wrote a final stanza that he did not retain in the published version:

Be once again the distant light
 Promise of glory, not yet known
 In full perfection—wasted quite
 When on my imperfection thrown.

He retained this stanza in four of the last five drafts, eliminating it only from an incomplete draft. This final stanza is quite remarkable in anticipating what will be his relationship in the future with Woman/Muse/Goddess.

Four of these drafts begin:
 Think it no proof of love half-lost
 That I grow sullen, grim, retired
 Even in your presence, my mind crossed
 With fancies by old longings fired

And two of the drafts retain the stanza from a very early draft:

Help me to see you as before
 When overwhelmed and dead almost
 I stumbled on that secret door
 Which saves the live man from the ghost.

This stanza was retained in what I assume was the final draft which began as did the published version:

Love, do not ~~think~~ count your labour lost
 Though I turn sullen, grim, retired
 Even at your side; my thought is crossed
 With fancies by old longings fired.

With the exception of the final stanza, this draft is essentially the same as the published one. Graves did well to eliminate the final stanza with its Victorian, even Tennysonian, resonance. He was at this time still struggling with his father's influence, an influence he credited Edward Marsh with having helped him overcome.

Aside from the final stanza, the most important part of these late drafts is a marginal comment Graves made on what is probably the next to last since it retains the opening: "Think it no proof of love half-lost". At the bottom of the page, underneath his signature, Graves wrote in a very clear hand:

Proof of hypnotic
 not being able to
 remember
 original
 drafts

This statement indicates Graves's understanding of the poetic process as trance-like or dream-like, a belief familiar to those more acquainted with Graves's later writings, those initiated by "The Roebuck in the Thicket," the inspired beginning of *The White Goddess*. Graves's "Postscript 1960" to *The White Goddess* explains that his awareness of the Goddess occurred while he was working on *The Golden Fleece*. He wrote about 70,000 words in three weeks, probably in a near trance-like state (488).

Another similarity between the poem "Sullen Moods" and Graves's later writings, especially those concerned with the Goddess is the utter dependence of Graves as poet (and as man) on the love and will of the woman/Muse/Goddess. His acceptance of her domination is unreversed as he made clear in both "Sullen Moods" and in "Postscript 1960": "Being in love does not, and should not, blind the poet to the cruel side of woman's nature—and many Muse-poems are written in

helpless attestation of this by men whose love is no longer returned" (491). In "Sullen Moods" Graves had accepted that his love was "no longer returned" and questioned whether friendship could suffice. He seems to conclude his dependence excludes the possibility of friendship.

The major difference between Graves as writer in the twenties to Graves from the thirties (at the latest) on is that he has rejected the information from psychological sources for that from historical and mythological. The reasons for this change are fascinating and will occupy much of the rest of this chapter.

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The drafts of "Sullen Moods" are in the Modern Poetry and Rare Book Collection at the State University of New York at Buffalo and are published here with the Permission of William Graves and the State University of New York at Buffalo.