Avoiding the Psychoanalytic Confession-Box: Robert Graves and W.H.R. Rivers

Michael Pharand

In late July 1917, a young Captain Graves was ordered to escort Second Lieutenant Sassoon to Craiglockhart, a hospital for war invalids on the edge of Edinburgh. Unfortunately, Graves missed his train and was several hours late. When he finally arrived, Sassoon introduced him to one William Halse Rivers Rivers, M.D.: physiologist, psychologist, psychiatrist, neurologist, ethnologist and anthropologist. More interesting than all of these accomplishments, however, is that Dr. Rivers holds the unique distinction of having administered psychiatric care to three of the most eminent soldier-poets of the Great War: Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, and Robert Graves. Or so the purveyors of literary myth would have us believe...

W.H.R. Rivers (1864-1922) had a happy upbringing, hampered only by a bad stammer. Despite his father's research into stuttering and stammering—he worked in an institute for speech therapy near Hastings—Rivers continued to speak with a slight stammer throughout his life. He received his Bachelor of Medicine degree at the University of London in 1886, and in 1893 was appointed Lecturer in Experimental Psychology at Cambridge University. At the time he met Graves, Rivers was a Fellow of St John's College, Cambridge, and a temporary captain in the Royal Army Medical Corps. By all accounts, he was a rather serious yet affable and gentle man. Sassoon described him in his 1922 diary as "neither sporting, nor Bohemian, nor eccentric, nor 'Socialist', but merely human and clear-headed and wise" (quoted in Moeyes 114). Perhaps it was these qualities that attracted Graves to the man he once referred to as "the first scientist in England" (letter of July 1922, *In Broken Images* 143).

That Rivers must have been clear-headed and wise is evidenced by his impressive scholarly output. Although usually quite busy treating patients, he found time to deliver numerous lectures, publish articles, and write a dozen books. Some of those book titles give an idea of the scope of his interests: *The Influence of Alcohol and Other Drugs on Fatigue* (1908), *Dreams and Primitive Culture* (1917-18), *Instinct and the Unconscious* (1920), *History and Ethnology* (1922), *Conflict and Dream* (1923), *Psychology and Politics* (1923), *Medicine, Magic, and Religion* (1924), and *Psychology and Ethnology* (1926) (cf. Moeyes 275-278). But as we shall see, what fascinated Graves was not so much Rivers the

ethnologist as Rivers the dream-analysing psychologist.

In his 1949 introduction to *The Common Asphodel*, Graves explains how his interest in Rivers coincided with a period when Graves identified himself closely with what he termed "convalescent and reconstructive humanity." At twenty-three, he was hoping to recover his mental health through the writing of "'therapeutic' poems," as he called them. "As a neurasthenic," he wrote, "I was interested in the newly expounded Freudian theory: when presented with English reserve and common sense by W.H.R. Rivers, who did not regard sex as the sole impulse in dream-making or assume that dream-symbols are constant, it appealed to me as reasonable. I applied his case-history method of accounting for emotional dreams to the understanding of romantic poems, my own and others'" (*Collected Writings on Poetry* 1). We will examine some of those rather idiosyncratic analyses later on.

Graves is correct: in several of his papers, Rivers had taken a very un-Freudian (and un-Jungian) stance in demonstrating that specific symbols were not necessarily universal. Moreover, he disagreed with psychoanalysts generally on the issue of what he called the "universal sexual significance" of dream-symbolism (quoted in Moeyes 77). Graves was fascinated with Rivers' ideas and attempted his own version of the doctor's "case-history method" in three books: *On English Poetry* (1922), *The Meaning of Dreams* (1924), and *Poetic Unreason* (1925). Actually, the influence of Rivers on Graves' critical writings is posthumous: in 1922, at age fifty-seven, Rivers died suddenly of a severe intestinal obstruction. When he learned of the news, Graves wrote to Sassoon asking if Rivers had ever finished his book on dreams, and in February 1923, when Sassoon sent him a copy of *Conflict and Dream*, Graves replied: "I find nothing in it that contradicts and much that confirms the work I'm doing now on Conflict and Poetry" (*In Broken Images* 147). During their brief friendship, Rivers had managed to become, in the words of Miranda Seymour, Graves' "mentor on the psychological aspects of his literary work" (105).

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In *On English Poetry*, which Graves dedicated jointly to T.E. Lawrence and "to W. H. R. Rivers of the Solomon Islands and St John's College, Cambridge," the influence of the latter can be seen in three contentions: first, because of his heightened awareness, the true

poet is different from other human beings; second, some form of mental conflict is needed in order for the poet to write poetry; and third, the process of writing poetry is closely akin to the dream state (Quinn 90).

According to Seymour, it is to Rivers that Graves owes the very idea that all poems have their origin in a state of mental conflict (115). Moreover, at the time of writing *On English Poetry*, Graves himself was in just such a state: "irritable, hyperemotional, solitary, and acutely sensitive to any change from the norm" (Quinn 90). This may explain in part the book's subtitle—"an Irregular Approach to the Psychology of This Art, from Evidence Mainly Subjective"—and its loose, fragmented structure: a hodgepodge of sixty-one short sections comprising poems, quotations, anecdotes, definitions and sundry meditations on literature and poetry. Although Graves is playful throughout, he is often oracular: Poetry, he asserts, is "the unforeseen fusion in his [the poet's] mind of apparently contradictory emotional ideas; . . . the more-or-less deliberate attempt, with the help of a rhythmic mesmerism, to impose an illusion of actual experience on the minds of others" (13). Poetry can also act as "a solution to some pressing emotional problem" (21). "When conflicting issues disturb his mind, which in its conscious state is unable to reconcile them logically, the poet acquires the habit of self-hypnotism, as practiced by the witch doctors, his ancestors in poetry" (26). And although all poems are "expressions of mental conflict, in Classical poetry this conflict is expressed within the confines of waking probability and logic," whereas "in Romantic poetry the conflict is expressed in the illogical but vivid method of dream-changings. The dream origin of Romantic Poetry gives it the advantage of putting the audience in a state of mind ready to accept it; in a word, it has a naturally hypnotic effect" (73-4).

In short, the process of dream-interpretation mirrors the process that the poet undergoes when he emerges from his poetic trance to interpret the disorganized rough draft of a poem. Only when recast in an understandable, logical, metrical pattern can the poem "become a form of psychotherapy for both poet and reader" (Quinn 91). Thus one might say that the process of poem-revision is similar to that of dream-interpretation: the poet creates order out of chaos, and "the poem, like the interpreted dream, becomes a symbolic representation and resolution of the individual's emotional conflicts" (Quinn 91). Although it sounds rather simple when compared to Rivers' scientific

observations on psychoses and neuroses in *Instinct and the Unconscious* (cf. Quinn 90 for a synopsis), this explanation shows how Graves, following Rivers, was struggling to provide a methodical framework for a very complex process.

Graves continued to explore the ideas of *On English Poetry* two years later in *The Meaning of Dreams*, where he discusses the concept of "Dissociation," the break-up of the individual into two (or more) "selves" as a result of difficult circumstances. Graves' shell-shock (as well as his domestic and financial problems) had certainly provided him with the basis for such a feeling. "When a person is in a conflict between two selves, and one self is stronger than the other throughout the waking life, the weaker side becomes victorious in the dream" (24). Graves agrees with Rivers that heavy sleep brings dreams fraught with symbols, and hence less subject "to the strict rules of time and space and probability which govern our logical thinking" (36). Moreover, these symbols "are often the condensation and dramatization of an enormous range of experience" (37). He praises Rivers for his "admirable observations" on dreams, but finds these observations "disappointing where they do not allow that associative thought is as modern and reputable a mode as intellectual thought, regarding it as a rather useless survival like the human appendix or the tassel on an umbrella" (56-7).

Although he goes on to refute the dream symbolism theories of Freud (too sexual), Jung (too rigid) and Bergson (too simplistic), Graves' own dream-theory is nothing if not eccentric. "In dreams as a matter of fact," he writes, "we not only form judgments of the most important kind about our friends and foes and see a new and unexpected light thrown on their actions, but as I have suggested we sometimes actually communicate with them in some other way than by eye and ear" (106). Moreover—and here he diverges from Rivers—Graves believes that deep sleep dreams produce what he terms "Romantic, that is Illogical or Fantastic, Poetry" (135) as opposed to the "Classical" poems that result from light sleep. Eccentric perhaps, but quite in keeping with Graves' deep-seated belief in his own intuitive powers and their intrinsic value as creative agents.

The most interesting section of *The Meaning of Dreams* is the last chapter, "Dreams and Poetry," which begins with a tribute to Rivers' *Conflict and Dream*, in which "that state known as 'inspiration' much resembles the dream state.... Moreover, he [Rivers] says truly, few

poems are written straight down as they occur to the poet but are corrected and polished and expanded by, so to speak, the waking self; in this process they lose a great deal of their dream-symbolism, and interpretation becomes extremely difficult" (135). Difficult but not impossible, for Graves ends his book with a detailed "interpretation" of three poems: "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (cf. also *On English Poetry* 50-55), which he sees as symbolic of Keats' consumption (as well as venereal disease) and of his relationship with Fanny Brawne; "Kubla Khan," which represents Coleridge's escape from "the mazy complications of life" (158) as well as his uneasy relationship with his wife; and Graves' own 1921 poem "The Gnat" (from *The Pier Glass*). According to Graves, this poem illustrates his objections to being treated by a psychologist. It is, he explains, "an assertion that to be rid of the gnat (shell-shock) means killing the sheep dog (poetry) and when the sheep dog is dead, the shepherd ceases to be a shepherd and must become a labourer; that is, I would have to give up being a shepherd and become a labourer; in fact, I would have to give up being a poet and become a schoolmaster or a bank-clerk." If therapy were successful, "I might be too completely cured," and this would result, he feared, in "killing the goose of the golden eggs" (164). Better to be a neurasthenic poet than a sane schoolmaster.

In fact Graves was fortunate that Rivers was different from other analysts in encouraging him to mine his neuroses to creative effect. "Rivers taught Graves to see that shell-shock gave him special powers to draw on as a poet. In Rivers' view, the neurasthenic state which he [Graves] had tried to suppress was his most potent creative source. Pain was the key. The cure was to write out of his unconscious and then use the poems to examine his state of mind" (Seymour 106). Hence *The Pier Glass* (1921), a volume which, according to Quinn, "is primarily Graves's poetic investigation into the sources and manifestation of his neurasthenia with the hopeful aim of being able to understand and overcome the affliction through the therapeutic nature of poetry" (88; cf. 78-88).

The third volume influenced by Rivers appeared immediately after *The Meaning of Dreams.* In *Poetic Unreason* (1925), Graves acknowledges his friendship for Rivers as well as his admiration for Rivers' *Instinct and the Unconscious* (100). The important essay "Secondary Elaboration" opens with a long quotation from Rivers' *Conflict and Dream* about the images in a poem being "symbolic expressions of some conflict which is raging in the mind of the poet," images that

express "many different experiences" in condensed form (99). Graves agrees that one must examine what Rivers calls "the immediate unelaborated product of the poet's mind" (100) to fully understand a poem, which is what he had done with "La Belle Dame sans Merci" and others. Here, he offers the example of the many versions of his own poem, "Cynics and Romantics" (cf. 102-3), which he quotes verbatim from *On English Poetry* (103-106), to show how "between the interests dominant in the emotional state and the interests dominant in the intellectual state a conflict ensued apparently in terms of mere verbal re-arrangement, but really involving profounder differences also" (101).

His second and more interesting example is his 1918 poem "The Bedpost" (published in *Whipperginny*, 1923) and its revised version of 1921 (cf. 104-110), in which "a Freudian argument has suddenly changed the whole complexion of the piece while apparently preserving its original conflict" (108). Although Graves emphasizes that he is no longer sympathetic with the poem's "psychological tenets" (108), he admits that in the poem, the child "emblemizes myself" and Abel symbolizes "psycho-therapy" (109-110). Each draft, he explains, produced a new phase in the progress of an idea, and the poem's conflict or harmony was "staged concurrently on several planes"—imagery, rhythm, sound-texture, logic—and found "a fitting expression on each plane as different versions of the poem appear" (114). Yet, as Douglas Day points out, such (Freudian) 'secondary elaborations', although they create "a therapeutic device" that might help cure the sexual trepidations of some readers (75), also distance the reader from the poem's original (trance-like) state.

Notwithstanding this contradiction, Graves had come to believe that since the production of poetry and dreams were analogous processes, so should the analysis of both phenomena. The key is to distinguish (and trace the differences) between the original or 'inspired' poem and the finished, revised one. "From Rivers," writes Day, "Graves had learned that before the psychoanalyst can get at the real significance of a dream, he must first separate it from its 'secondary elaborations'—the conscious order imposed upon it by the dreamer while in the process of recounting his dream to the psychoanalyst" (74). The same applies for poetry: to arrive at meaning one must first extract the poem's "original, unconscious sense" from the layers of secondary elaboration the poet has employed to give it structure. Only illogical Romantic poetry, writes Day, "will reward the reader

with a glimpse of eternal, universal values" (74), according to Graves.

And this is the subject of the next essay in *Poetic Unreason*, "The Illogical Element in Poetry," in which "illogical" is defined as poetry that does not conform to the logic (of cause and effect, capable of empirical proof) that governs intellectual thought, an example of which is "The Faerie Queene" (125). Here Graves quotes an even longer passage (over three pages) from Rivers' *Conflict and Dream*, which he prefaces by quoting verbatim from *The Meaning of Dreams* his disappointment in Rivers' observations on the mechanism of dreams; this time he changes the phrase "a rather useless survival like the human appendix or the tassel on an umbrella" to "a return to infantility" (127). The long excerpt by Rivers concerns the difference between dreams occurring in light sleep—"readily accessible"—and those of deep sleep—"soon forgotten" (cf. 127-131), a subject Graves had treated the previous year in *The Meaning of Dreams*. He ends by a short history of the clash between the Classical and Romantic schools of poetry, presenting Edith Sitwell as "an extreme champion" (133) of the latter.

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Notwithstanding "The Gnat" and the fear of "killing the goose of the golden eggs," Graves had to admit that therapy of the Rivers variety could be beneficial. "The confession-box which the psychanalytic [sic] consulting room has become has its good points; once a hideous secret is told to an ear accustomed to similar confessions, it is apt to become less hideous" (*The Meaning of Dreams* 119). Yet the question remains: was Graves ever "treated" or psychoanalysed by Rivers? Given his confused state of mental health at the time they met, and his deep admiration for Rivers' work, one would think the tormented poet would have sought practical, professional help (aside from his own poem-therapy) for his frayed nerves.

The opening of the Boar's Hill general store in the late autumn of 1920 had been followed by six months of misfortunes that culminated for Graves in financial ruin, a bout of influenza, and a return of shell-shock. Graves even admits in *Poetic Unreason* that in early 1921 he had been thinking of putting himself "under treatment" (106), of "psycho-analysis as a possible relief" (109) from his shell-shock. According to Seymour (100), Graves actually consulted an unidentified professional neurologist who could have been either Rivers or

his friend and colleague, Dr. Henry Head, the neurologist who treated Robert Nichols for his mental breakdown. In fact Graves had even dedicated *Poetic Unreason* to Head. However, the only thing we know for certain is that by the end of the summer of 1921, Graves was visiting Rivers regularly in his rooms at St John's in Cambridge, and Rivers was making "several visits to Islip; Nancy, too, was devoted to him" (Seymour 105). Rivers' friendship and casual advice may have been therapy enough.

Moreover, if as Seymour states, "pain was the key"—as it has been for so many poets of love, from Catullus to Lawrence Durrell—what better way to serve the poetic Muse than by avoiding the psychoanalytic confession-box altogether? This is exactly what Graves did: "I had made several half-hearted approaches to various doctors but never took treatment," he wrote in *The Meaning of Dreams* (164-5). He had already voiced his distrust of analysis in "The Gnat," whose last line—"His harsh spade grates among the buried stones"—he interpreted this way: it "probably refers to psychoanalysis; meaning that all that will be left for me when I have ceased to be a poet will be scraping among the buried and unfruitful memories of the past" (165). And in *Poetic Unreason*, he had written: "Poetry presupposes a conflict in the poet's mind of which this poem is the expression or the expression of its solution" (124). For Graves, conflict and pain are the poet's sustenance, not a bane.

Interestingly enough, Graves provided his most adamant rejection of psychotherapy four decades later in a footnote to a 1965 essay, "The Duende," where he makes it clear that he never sought psychiatric help either from Rivers or from anyone else. "Two of my biographers," he writes, "neither of whom can claim to be my friend, have written that I had gone for psychiatric treatment to Professor W.H.R. Rivers, who cared for Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon. This is wholly untrue. I have never in all my life gone to any psychiatrist for treatment" (*Collected Writings on Poetry* 468, n. 1). Ironically, if the true nature of Graves' relationship to Rivers has often been misunderstood, Graves himself is mistaken here about Rivers and Wilfred Owen. According to Rivers' biographer, Owen was not one of the patients under Rivers' direct care, nor is there evidence that Rivers knew him (Moeyes 62). Thus it appears that the only famous soldier-poet of the Great War to receive personal psychiatric care from Dr. Rivers was Siegfried Sassoon. So much for literary myth!

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Aside from his acknowledgments and tributes to Rivers in various books, Graves also defended Rivers against the posthumous criticism of the most famous anthropologist of the day. In a letter of December 1926 to Sassoon, Graves mentions he has written an article "about Malinowski's attacks on Rivers in his new anthropology book: he must be a cad" (quoted in *In Broken Images* 174). Graves was referring to his two thousand-word review in *The Criterion* (May 1927) of Bronislaw Malinowski's *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* and *Myth in Primitive Psychology*, and Rivers' *Psychology and Ethnology*. Malinowski had disparaged Rivers' achievements and Graves was not amused.

His essay is in fact less of a book review than a spirited defense of Rivers, "whose error lay in being genuinely first class in too many subjects and exciting jealousy by relating together too brilliantly the result of his researches in medicine, physiology, morbid psychology, social psychology, ethnology, magic, religion and other over-specialised departments of human knowledge" (*Criterion* 248). One of Malinowski's criticisms centres on Rivers' discussion of the social organization of the primitive tribe in terms of the group-mind,"to which individuality becomes subordinated," adds Graves (248), who claims that Rivers never denied the existence of individual minds within the group, as Malinowski suggests. "What Rivers said was that when group-sentiment comes into play (it is normally latent) the individual as such has to forget himself" (248). "Though he does not definitely make the charge against Rivers, nobody could read his two books without concluding that Rivers was one of those theorists who lived in a 'closed study' and never 'ventured into the open air'. Whereas actually Rivers was one of the pioneers of anthropological field-work in three continents" (249).

Graves defends Rivers from a number of other charges: Malinowski's insistence on "the supreme importance of field-work in deducing general anthropological formulae" (249); his objections to Rivers' explanation of "the origin of the dual organization of certain primitive tribes in psychological terms, as a fusion or splitting of tribal consciousness" (250); and his attacks against "'Dr. Rivers and the Historical School which regards a sacred tale as a true historical record of the past'" (250). "That Rivers regarded a sacred tale as necessarily historical is untrue" (250), writes Graves, citing a chapter in *Psychology and Ethnology* on a modern megalithic culture in the Pacific and its pure solar myths, and debunking Malinowski's example of a

typical myth of origin (251-2). In short, concludes Graves, "there is more 'meat' in any ten pages of this latest collection of his [Rivers'] scattered essays than in any fifty of Mr. Malinowski's," and the review ends with praises for the "restraint, power and fineness of Rivers' mind" (252). That Graves went to such lengths to defend the integrity of that mind shows how strong had been impact of Rivers' work on the young mythographer.

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As the *Criterion* essay demonstrates, the influence of Rivers on Graves' thinking extends far beyond the idea of poetry as psychotherapy. According to Alastair Reid, "Rivers planted in Graves's mind an interest in matriarchal societies and woman rule" (70), a seed that germinated years later in *The White Goddess*. Rivers had studied primitive kinship and had become, writes Seymour, "a leading authority on the subject of 'mother right'. He believed that myths could be analysed to show that the earliest societies had worshipped a figure known as 'the Great Mother'. .... It was he who introduced Graves to the idea of an early world governed by women.... Rivers encouraged Graves to look for a more general pattern and to assume that it would show widespread worship of a 'Great Mother' figure. This was one of Rivers' most important gifts to Graves's fertile mind" (108). Graves' conversations with Rivers in 1920 and 1921 about the Great Mother, and about Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (12 vols, 1890-1915), "opened his eyes to the possibility of a primitive world in which women had ruled their tribes and been placed by men above the gods" (Seymour 415-6). Ironically, although he could not know it, Graves' own era of 'woman rule' was almost at hand.

Thus there were two phases to the impact of Rivers on Graves' work: a few years, immediately following their first meeting, that produced many poems and three volumes of criticism influenced by Rivers' ideas about dream-therapy, and then a long gestation that culminated in Graves' best-known writings on muse-worship and the Great Goddess. If Rivers did not administer "psychiatric treatment" to a neurasthenic Graves, he nonetheless provided the young poet with a scientific lens through which to view the creative process. As we have seen, the result for Graves was his keener awareness of how poems are conceived, of the importance of the unconscious in their genesis, and of their therapeutic potential. If anyone was instrumental in helping Robert Graves say good-bye to all that war-neurosis—

or at least transmute it into poetry—it was Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, "the first scientist in England."

Michel Pharand, University of Ottawa

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