

A Flash of Lightning and a Crown of Jewels: Robert Graves and Basanta Mallik

Michel Pharand

When he wrote to Edmund Blunden in August 1922 and announced that “an Indian philosopher is presenting a new philosophic system in brief which is (by the way) going to have a shattering effect on the philosophic dove cotes” (O’Prey 145), Robert Graves was in the throes of yet another new intellectual passion. He had recently met Basanta Kumar Mallik (1879-1958), a Bengali student who had once been—according to Graves—“chief tutor” to the children of the Maharajah of Nepal, and “the only man in Nepal with an up-to-date knowledge of international law,” for which services the Maharajah had sent him to Oxford in 1912 “to study British political psychology” (*Good-Bye* 293). Plausible as it sounds, this version in Graves’s memoirs appears to have been somewhat mythologised. It would be more accurate to say that Mallik had been tutoring the sons of the Prime Minister, who sent him to Oxford to study law in order to qualify him for further governmental duties. “British political psychology,” according to Mallik’s biographers, “is Graves’ own fanciful invention, perhaps a mischievous mirror-reversal of anthropology” (Sondhi and Walker 118).

Armed with Bachelors and Masters degrees in Philosophy (1902, 1903) from Calcutta University, Mallik was thirty-three when he enrolled at Exeter College. His studies proved fruitful: he took a BA in Jurisprudence (1916), a certificate in Physical and Cultural Anthropology (1918), a Diploma in Anthropology (1919) and, after the war, a B.Litt. in philosophy with a thesis entitled “The Problem of Freedom”. It is with some justification that R.P. Graves calls him “a perpetual student on the grand scale” (276), and no surprise that he became at Oxford “an amateur philosopher with a cult following” (Seymour 116). One of that following was Robert Graves, then twenty-seven, sixteen years younger than his new mentor.

“Metaphysics soon made psychology of secondary interest for me,” wrote Graves in 1929 in *Goodbye to All That* (in a passage expunged from the 1957 edition); “it threatened almost to displace poetry. Basanta’s philosophy was a development of formal metaphysics, but with characteristically Indian insistence on ethics. He believed in no hierarchy of ultimate values or the possibility of any unifying religion or ideology. But at the same time he insisted on the necessity of strict self-discipline in the individual in meeting every possible demand

made upon him from whatever quarter, and he recommended constant self-watchfulness against either dominating or being dominated by any other individual. This view of strict personal morality consistent with scepticism of social morality agreed very well with my practice" (*Good-Bye* 293-294).

Although these and other remarks have been called "imaginative and misleading" (Sondhi and Walker 109), they are nonetheless typical of Graves's eagerness to embrace those whom he believed shared his enthusiasms and affinities, and if need be to defend his mentors against dissenting voices. But with Basanta Mallik—as opposed to Idries Shah, for example—no defense was necessary: Mallik was "charismatic, handsome and soft-voiced, [and] charmed almost everybody he met" (Seymour 116). Graves admits that Mallik even managed to disabuse him of his "strong prejudice, amounting to contempt, against anyone of non-European race; . . . He [Mallik] did not behave as a member of a subject-race—neither with excessive admiration nor with excessive hatred of all things English. Though he was a Bengali he was not given to flattery or insolence" (*Good-Bye* 292).

Mallik's arrival marked a new (albeit brief) phase in Graves's thinking. He had recently explored Freudian psychology under the aegis of Dr. W.H.R. Rivers, the anthropologist-cum-psychoanalyst. He was now seeking a new set of principles to give meaning and structure to a psyche still shattered by the Great War, and Mallik provided it.

"Relativity had its stimulating aspects," writes Seymour. "It was comforting to think that an unsuccessful marriage was no worse than a good one, that no one thing was more certain than another and, more significantly for Graves, that all things affect each other" (117). This relativistic way of thinking was to leave its mark on his poetry, although not for very long.

The forty-three-year-old Bengali had been to one of Graves's Oxford talks and subsequently met him at the Lotus Club, where he soon became a regular member. There, Mallik expounded on what he termed his "Conflict Theory" to a group that included Graves, T.E. Lawrence, and Tom (Sam) Harries, who was to become Nancy and Robert's closest friend in 1925. The group would meet at the Club itself, or at Mallik's rooms at Farndon Road, or at World's End, Graves's Islip home. One member, Alan Collingridge, relates how Mallik and Graves would spar together in Graves's cottage: "Mallik would formulate his point in a beautiful, balanced, delicate structure, when suddenly some strong intuition of Robert's could no longer be

contained, and he would burst out in some vivid comment. But hardly had one seemed to hear the fragments of Mallik's structure fall tinkling to the ground, before he had erected another, swiftly and perfectly and sympathetically adapted to meet Robert's point. As Tommy Harries said: 'Mallik's talk is like a crown of jewels, while Robert's is like a flash of lightning'" (quoted in Sondhi and Walker 112). By the autumn of 1922, Mallik had replaced Rivers as the significant intellectual presence in Graves's life at a time when he was in desperate financial straits and still psychologically traumatized by the aftermath of war. Whether or not one agrees with Mallik's idealistic philosophy of conflict resolution, there is no doubt that he helped restore some badly-needed peace of mind to Graves at World's End.

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Mallik's philosophy is actually very simple, and if we follow his relativist ideology, we can achieve an equilibrium of values, at least theoretically. His "Law of Contradiction"—formulated on Armistice Day 1918, according to Sondhi and Walker (118)—forms the basis of his Conflict Theory and may be summarized as follows: Conflicts oppose pairs of values—freedom and order, individuality and community, monotheism and polytheism, etc.—in which the affirmation of one value leads to what Mallik calls "mythology": persuasion, conversion, suppression and dominance of the other value. "Thus the predisposing mental attitudes to war and other forms of conflict result from the *illusion* of thinking one's cherished values to be absolute and universal, and of those opposed to them as *contradictories* which must be completely negated or eliminated. Such thought processes naturally lead to divers expressions of *mythology*: missions of religious or political (ideological) conversion, military conflicts, patterns of structural dominance, economic expansionism or political revolution." Once "mythology" is seen as ineffective, the parties can try to locate the source of the illusions that engender tension and eventually abstain from conflict entirely. "These efforts will transform individuals who have lived in illusion and perpetual conflict to people with confidence and certainty." But since all opposing values are "mutually dependent" and none is totally "wrong," none are dispensable. "All therefore are deserving of respect tempered with reservation." And since no individual is expendable, "all cultural and social groups needs must be accorded a similar and equal respect" (cf. Sondhi and Walker 119-126 [their emphases]).

Mallik's utopian movement towards global harmony probably appealed to Graves for any number of reasons. The idea of perfect equanimity must have seemed very intriguing to a man still shell-shocked from a near-death experience in the trenches. Moreover, Mallik promoted "a healthy scepticism about received, conflict-prone traditional dogmas" (Sondhi and Walker 124), which also would have been attractive to a man who was habitually at odds with social convention. However, according to Sondhi and Walker any "domination" is to be discounted in Mallik's relationship with Graves. "There is no reason to believe that he was out to dominate Graves against his own best advice" (8). Indeed it would appear that Graves was merely receptive, if somewhat susceptible, to Basanta Mallik's new ideas and theories.

Nonetheless, Mallik's way of thinking had a decidedly pervasive (many will say negative) impact on Graves's poetry over the next three years. Although this is not the place for a detailed examination of the influence of Mallik's ideology on *Whipperginny* (1923), *The Feather Bed* (1923), *Mock Beggar Hall* (1924), *The Marmosite's Miscellany* (1924), and *Welchman's Hose* (1925), one can cite here a number of so-called "Mallikean" poems that provide an overview of his effect on Graves's work. From *The Marmosite's Miscellany*: "Between good and evil I strive not to judge . . . Wherever there is conflict, all sides are wrong"; in "The Bowl and the Rim" (from *Whipperginny*), Jesus and the Pharisees are both victims of "blind religion rooted strong"; in the Introductory Letter to *The Feather Bed*, Lucifer is "the spirit of reconciliation" proposing a "doctrine of mutual responsibility for error, and of mutual respect between individuals, sexes, classes, groups, and nations"; in "Mock Beggar Hall: A Progression," the Philosopher suggests "mutual abstention from conflict" as the way to conduct human relationships; and in "The Clipped Stater" from *Welchman's Hose*, the lines "The Finity is true Godhead's final test, / Nor does it shear the grandeur from Free Being" echo Mallik's idea that determinacy does not limit freedom (cf. Sondhi and Walker 128-132).

One poem, the possibly autobiographical "The Lord Chamberlain Tells of a Famous Meeting" (from *Whipperginny*), is even more revealing of the Graves-Mallik relationship and merits closer scrutiny. The 129-line poem relates how two princes (Graves and Mallik?) of East and West (Europe and Asia?) meet in a Middle Kingdom—"perhaps the symbol of middle-class Philistinism," according to Sondhi and Walker (131)—"[o]ver a ragged pack of cards, by chance" (l. 4). The

narrator, "East's man," keeps score as the princes play in the soldier's mess, "shortly before Retreat" (l. 9). They play slowly, "Serene and passionless like wooden men" (l. 51), and at various stages the Lord Chamberlain cautions us against believing what "credulous annalists" (l. 18), "elegant essayists" (l. 52), "vagabond dramatists" (l. 76), "allegorical painters" (ll. 95-96), or even "authentic and approved biographers" (l. 112) would tell us about this famous meeting: "each one [is] misleading or misled" (l. 114). What really happened, he says, is that East gave West a subtle signal—"his eyes shoot out mirth"—so that "West then knew East, checked, and misdealt the cards" (ll. 90-91), presumably resulting in a stalemate, with neither victor nor loser. In the end, what characterizes the players is

Their silent understanding and restraint,
Meeting and parting like the Kings they were
With plain indifference to all circumstance;
. . . Though each knew well that this chance meeting stood
For turning movement of world history. (ll. 119-121, 127-128)

Because of the princes' "understanding and restraint," world equilibrium is maintained. The poem seems to be Graves's allegorical attempt to illustrate Mallik's Conflict Theory, with the card game symbolizing the ineffective "mythology" of military opposition. This opposition could have resulted in outright conflict (global warfare?) had it not been for the players' mutual (and silent) collaboration.

"The Lord Chamberlain" and the other poems mentioned were something of a departure from Graves's habitual writing style and worldview. This new approach was especially noticeable in *Mock Beggar Hall*, where "Graves began to sharpen his metaphysical disputations into his own esoteric version of Mallik's Eastern wisdom" (Quinn 103), albeit not very successfully. Seymour calls these poems "cold, pragmatic" (117); Quinn terms them "philosophically slick" and the entire volume "drily intellectual" (105, 108). Even Graves recognized that his new work would probably have a limited appeal. Writing to Edward Marsh, he referred to *Mock Beggar Hall* as "a book of philosophical poems (with a few ones you'll like very much perhaps interspersed but the bulk dull to people who are not interested in thought along these lines)" (undated, O'Prey 150). Even the omnivorous reader T.E. Lawrence wrote to Graves (who had sent him a copy) that *Mock Beggar Hall* was "not the sort of book that one would put

under one's pillow at night" (quoted in *Good-Bye* 292).

Graves also wrote to Siegfried Sassoon at this time, justifying his new volume somewhat hyperbolically: "I *loathed* philosophy until I met Mallik (as he *loathed* poetry till he met me) . . . at the places where traditional metaphysics break down we have fundamental suggestions to make. . . . so please read *Mock Beggar Hall* in the hope of finding some sense in abstract ideas" (undated, O'Prey 151, Graves's emphasis). But most critics failed to find sense in them, and the volume was universally condemned. George Stade offers this witty synopsis of the pattern behind these Mallik-influenced poems: "He [Graves] considers problems, questions, uncertainties, contentions, arguments, antinomies, imperfections; hesitatingly offers hypotheses, theses, syntheses, and counter-arguments; but ends up with incertitudes, irreconcilabilities, contrarities . . . conundrums, equivocations, paradoxes, riddles" (quoted in Quinn 105). No wonder the critics were baffled. Moreover, according to Quinn, "the realization that all the poems will have the same unresolved relativistic conclusion quickly dissipates a reader's enthusiasm for, or enjoyment of, the poems" (108). Graves had been right after all: the "bulk" of these poems was "dull."

Mallik's influence was also present in Graves's next anthology, *Welchman's Hose*. In "Alice," for example, Alice recognizes the relativity of truth in both her real Victorian world and in the world beyond the looking-glass, and in "Ovid in Defeat," Graves tackles the perennial but ultimately unresolvable conflict between men and women. However, this collection is lighter in tone than *Mock Beggar Hall* and "shows signs of ironic and even mocking awareness of the implications of the philosophic direction" in which he had been moving (Quinn 111). Although Mallik's influence eventually subsided, his presence continued to be felt in Graves's writing and worldview throughout the decade.

Although many of these "metaphysical" efforts were later dismissed by Graves himself as a digression from the true path of poetry, the effects of Mallik's thought were not completely nefarious. It has been said that Graves's short-lived foray into philosophy "brought him to a full appreciation of detachment, verbal calm, irony, stoicism, and the celebration of the ephemeral but timeless moment when complicated phenomena are understood" (James Courtright McKinley quoted in Sondhi and Walker 133). Moreover, Graves's encounter with Mallik produced "a distinct increase in poetic power and concentration, and

the beginning of an ability to come to terms with the 'goddawful' external world" (Seymour-Smith 116). In the early 1920s—Graves's denials to Sassoon to the contrary—this was a world comprised in the early 1920s of financial penury, domestic drudgery, four young children, and a domineering spouse. Seymour writes that "Mallik's insistence on self-watchfulness left little room for delusions," and that Graves "acknowledged the death of hope for his marriage" in the last stanza of "Full Moon" (written in the summer of 1923 and included in *Mock Beggar Hall*): "Love went by upon the wind / As though it had not been" (118).

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The most tangible result of Mallik's influence remains the very short, semi-allegorical closet drama, written by Mallik but heavily-revised by Graves, published in *The Winter Owl* in 1923 (reprinted in *Mock Beggar Hall*, 1924): the enigmatic "Interchange of Selves," which had to be rewritten by Graves so as to make it intelligible. Even then, this "Indian Actionless Drama for three actors and a Moving Background" (Mallik 28) remains "uncommonly obscure" for the lay reader (Seymour 117). A discussion between The Poet [Graves] and The Philosopher [Mallik] sets the stage for Practicus, Mysticus, and Liberalis. "If I show you a conflict of views between a practical man, a mystic, and a man with your English genius for compromise," says The Philosopher, "these men will not remain true to character for long. In the end, when each has momentarily dominated and been defeated by the others, there will be no practical man, no mystic and no compromiser left on the stage. Neither virtue nor villainy will prevail" (Mallik 28). This is Mallik's Conflict Theory in a nutshell.

Thus our three travelers expound on the human condition in long monologues, and with each change of scene (dawn, day, night) enact an "interchange of selves," one man adopting the opinions of another. The tone is one of foreboding—"Something catastrophic is going to happen," predicts Mysticus—in a world gone awry ("This age of ours is as restless as it is stupid," asserts Practicus) after a recent calamity: "we fought a war: why? To end all war, yet the wonder is not that war has not ended but that we believed that we could end it by war," laments Liberalis (Mallik 30, 35, 33). These discussions take place while in the background others are engaged in bitter disputes and arguments, from which the three pilgrims stand aloof.

All the while it has rained and now the floods have risen, threatening death: "all the quarrels and disputes end, . . . theories, principles and views clash no longer" (Mallik 39). Suddenly the waters recede, and the last part of the drama takes place in the calm after the storm. Our pilgrims have been profoundly changed: "I feel as if I never knew what was true or what was false," says Mysticus, "but my heart's cry is to believe that our enemies are not our enemies, that those with whom we differ are no more in the wrong than we are, nor are we any more in the right than they are" (Mallik 40). Affirms Practicus: "My life also has changed and I have not the strength to hold a view which claims to be decisive" (Mallik 41).

In a similar way, thanks to Mallik, Graves's life also changed, and even after his return to Calcutta in October 1923, Mallik's views continued for a time to resonate in Graves's creative consciousness. Relativism "became a way of interpreting the world," with Graves "grasping for some form of metaphysical standard by which he could live" (Quinn 109). Mallik maintained a regular correspondence with Graves and was even instrumental in getting his work published in India. Mallik actually proposed that Graves and his family join him in Nepal—at the Nepalese government's expense! Stranger still, Graves was willing, but only if T.E. Lawrence went with him. However, since he had only recently entered the ranks of the Air Force, Lawrence declined the invitation and Graves remained in England. Lawrence's refusal was perhaps fortuitous: the only one of the Islip group to visit Mallik in Calcutta was Sam Harries, in 1924; two weeks later he was dead of cerebral malaria.

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Less tragic but rather inexplicable is the sudden death of Graves's friendship with his Bengali mentor. And yet there are few clues to their future estrangement in Graves's final tribute to Mallik, the dedication of *The Marmosite's Miscellany* (1925), which takes the form of "To M. in India" (Ward 287), a forty-seven-line poem that begins with Mallik "cross-legged these long years waiting / Beneath your peepul tree." Since the 'peepul' tree is in fact the sacred 'pipal' tree or bo-tree, beneath which the cross-legged Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment and became the Buddha, it would appear that Graves has enveloped the philosopher in something of a sacred mantle. As a meditating yogi beneath the bo-tree, Mallik becomes the very embodi-

ment of non-violence. Moreover, the poem goes on to praise

. . . friendship that makes light
Of broad dividing seas, broad continents,
That thrives on absence, that denies the force
Of scandal, contrariety, jealousies.

Unfortunately, these beautiful sentiments did not prevail: the friendship did not last and the two men did not meet again. "In India you / Exiled at your own home as I at mine" was to be the case from now on.

Unfortunately, little is known about this period in Mallik's life. After some time in India, where a friend had died and left him "to support a typical large Hindu family of aunts and cousins remotely related" (*Good-Bye* 294), Mallik returned to Nepal in 1929, then acquired a farm in Bengal to experiment with his conflict-avoidance techniques. It was not until 1936 that he returned to Oxford, where he wrote a series of philosophical works and lectured at the University, and where he remained until his death in 1958. One account relates that "Graves did not even come to meet him [Mallik] as he hoped and expected. The letters Basanta received after he reached England struck a discordant, accusing note out of all proportion to the past and to Basanta's neglect of him in the intervening years" (Lewis 46). The two men became completely estranged: Mallik dropped Graves's name from the introduction to *The Real and the Negative* (1940), and Graves excised all references to Mallik in the revised edition of *Goodbye to All That* (1957). Each maintained a silence on their relationship. One might say that the Poet and the Philosopher carried "the ethics of mutual abstention" to its ultimate end.

But the circumstances surrounding the breakup of this very strong friendship remain ambiguous. Just months before Mallik returned to England, however, Graves had written a letter to Basil Liddell Hart (on 15 January 1936) in which he named "3 people who think": T.E. Lawrence, Mallik, and Laura Riding. He explained that he was using "thinking" in "a very special sense," to imply "a complete unification of the mind, and the person along with the mind. (There may be more. I myself am only a partial thinker)." What is interesting is that Graves believed that Lawrence and Mallik had stopped thinking, and that, moreover, Mallik's thinking "was Indian and in the end led to a standstill" (*O'Prey* 263-264). Although such reasoning might explain

the decline of Graves's adherence to Mallik's ideology, it does not shed light on the dissolution of their friendship.

Moreover, if Graves was initially drawn to Mallik's harmonious complementarity of opposites, that idea became overshadowed by Graves's recognition of suffering and tension as necessary to achieving poetic truth. Just as he abandoned psychology and Rivers for Mallik, Graves was now moving beyond philosophy and Mallik into a new phase. According to Seymour, Graves "wanted to clear the confusion of shell-shock while retaining the raw contact with violent emotion, terror, shame, fear, on which he drew for his poetry. His relationship with Riding provided ample scope for these feelings. Weary of Mallik's relativity, he wanted to be in touch with sharp, clear-cut views again" (133). Thus the powerful Laura Riding easily displaced Mallik from Graves's intellectual orbit. "Riding's value-laden conceptions about poetry and other poets soon infected and destroyed Graves's relativistic standards," (Quinn 131), and Mallik's metaphysical objectivism was abandoned. Riding's arrival "coincided with his (intellectual) return to a purely European haven, if not into Eurocentricism, from which 'Indian' thinking might indeed be dismissed as incorrigibly self-enclosed and static" (Sondhi and Walker 140)—or as Graves had called it, thinking that "led to a standstill." With Riding, a new (and this time pivotal) intellectual passion had been born.

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Yet Mallik left behind him what Riding once called "a cloud of uncertain influence on all his [Graves's] associates" (quoted in R.P. Graves 289). Ironically, this cloud may have enveloped Graves himself in ways more subtle than he or Mallik (or even Riding) could have realized during their brief encounter. In Bengali culture, where the Mother Goddess is fervently worshipped, there is a strong *shakti* (goddess-energy) tradition. At annual festivals, one honours that energy in its various manifestations: as white goddess (Devi), black goddess (Kali), or as the goddess of learning (Saraswati). Although Graves's White Goddess is a much later conception, Sondhi and Walker believe that it was through Mallik that Graves "first became aware of the notion of Goddess-worship and of an incarnating Goddess as a living institution" (115). If this is the case, Mallik may unwittingly have been a far more important influence on Graves than has generally been thought.

In the case of Mallik—as with Rivers, Riding in the 1930s, Gordon Wasson the “magic” mushroom specialist in the 1950s, and Idries Shah the Sufi in the 1960s—Graves had been seduced by the ideas of an eccentric original. Although Mallik’s “new philosophic system” did not have the “shattering effect” Graves had predicted in 1922, its principles nonetheless nourished his creative energies for a few years. He and Mallik had much in common: a distaste for received tradition and morality, a distrust of organized religion, and a desire to come to terms with the chaos of personal and social conflict. What Graves learned from Mallik is perhaps best summarized in these lines from “To M. in India”:

You with no ambition
As I have none, nor the few friends we share,
Except this only, to have no ambition;
With no sure knowledge but that knowledge changes
Beyond all local proof or local disproof.

In the long run, however, Graves was unable to sustain such a dispassionate stance toward life’s complexities. That kind of equanimity was perhaps best suited to Mallik’s cultural temper than to the poet’s more emotional and volatile personality. In the end, wrote Graves, “India re-absorbed him and we changed” (*Good-Bye* 294). But Graves had been right about one thing: thanks to Basanta Mallik, “metaphysics” had certainly “threatened almost to displace poetry” in his life, and many will argue that between 1923 and 1925, it did.

FURTHER READING

For a thorough analysis of Mallik’s thought, cf. Madhuri Sondhi, “Basanta Kumar Mallik: Conflict Patterns in War and Peace,” *Interdisciplinary Peace Research* (La Trobe: La Trobe University Press) 3.2 (October-November 1991): 28-50. Cf. also “Mallik’s Theory of Knowledge” (111-131) and “The Ethics of Abstention” (138-145) in *Basanta Kumar Mallik: A Garland of Homage*.

For a synopsis of *The Towering Wave* (1953), Mallik’s allegory illustrating his ethics of “mutual abstention,” see Sondhi and Walker, 22-23. For a synopsis of the Graves-Mallik relationship, cf. Sondhi, “Interchange of Selves’: A Dialogue between Robert Graves and Basanta Kumar Mallik,” *Mainstream* (New Delhi: Perspective Publications) 30.8 (14 December 1991): 11-13, 27.

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