

A Poem by Norman Cameron Lying Behind a Passage in the *White Goddess*

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The story of the composition of Robert Graves' *White Goddess* is well known, not least because Graves himself informs his readers how what was originally a short draft entitled 'The Roebuck in the Thicket', wholly concerned with mythology and religious history, came to be expanded over the next few years with material relating to Graves' theories of poetry and other matters (*White Goddess* 342). When considering the work we must also take into account the extensive additions and changes made by Graves for its revised edition in 1962. The text of *The White Goddess* that we have is in fact a heterogeneous and intensely personal work and this feature can be detected throughout the work.

One very interesting passage occurs in Chapter 25 of the revised edition (there is no trace of it in the 1948 version). Here Graves has been giving a grim account of the suffering necessary for the true poet, using the Middle Irish poem *The Madness of Suibne* as his text. However, suddenly he breaks off, and from essentialist arguments turns to much more relativist ones:

Yet is the alternative between service to the White Goddess, on the one hand, and respectable citizenship, on the other, quite so sharp as the Irish poets presented it? Suibne in his tale has an over-riding obsession about poetry; so has Liadan in hers. But was either gifted with a sense of humour?

Doubtless not, or they would never have punished themselves so cruelly. Humour is one gift that helps men and women to survive the stress of city life. If he keeps his sense of humour, too, a poet can go mad gracefully, swallow his disappointments in love gracefully, reject the establishment gracefully, die gracefully and cause no upheaval in society. Nor need he indulge in self-pity, or cause

distress to those who love him; and that goes for a woman poet too. (456)

Behind this passage, and the following paragraph we can detect the friction between Graves' history of ancient religion and his history of poetry, between his prescriptive thoughts on poetry and his more reasonable deductions from his own poetic career and those of his friends and contemporaries. There may also be the suggestion, here and elsewhere in the book, that Graves, now approaching old age, also probably at the time of the drafting of this passage between Muses, suspected that his days as a Muse poet were over. However, beyond this I should also like to suggest that an immediate inspiration for this passage was the poem 'A Visit to the Dead', by Norman Cameron (*Collected Poems* 68).

Norman Cameron was a Scottish poet and translator; he fell into the Graves and Riding circle in London in 1927, shortly after completing his studies at Oxford. About this time he took a job with the Colonial Service in Nigeria, but quitted it early and turned up again in Majorca. After a year or so there he returned to London, having married Elfriede Faust, another some-time member of the Graves/Riding circle, and took up copywriting as a way of earning a living whilst avoiding literary hackwork. His poems and translations from authors such as Rimbaud were few, but well-regarded, by Graves and many others. He was one of Graves' closest friends and throughout his later life whenever Graves spoke of poetic companionship he would always mention him, along with Laura Riding, as a contemporary poet whose company he had enjoyed and whose poetry he respected. He was also much in Graves' thoughts in the 1950s, after his death, at a comparatively early age, in 1953 (Seymour Smith 458).

In this poem Cameron imagines himself as a latter-day Odysseus, returning to the world of the living:

Long was I caught up in their twilight strife,
 Almost they got me, almost had me weaned
 From all memory of life.
 But laughter supervened:

Laughter, like sunlight in the cucumber,
 The innermost resource, that does not fail.
 I Marco Polo, traveller,

Am back, with what a tale!

The verbal parallel is not that close; Graves has 'a sense of humour', Cameron has 'laughter'. But there are other reasons for considering that the poem was in Graves' mind when he penned the passage. Firstly the poem was published, along with poetry by Graves and Alan Hodge in a collection entitled *Work in Hand* in 1942, so Graves is unlikely not to have known it. Secondly Graves himself stated that 'Though I never made a deliberate attempt to memorize Norman's work, a good half of it has become firmly fixed in my head...' (quoted in Barker 10) and this poem, one of Cameron's more striking ones, is likely to have been one of those so memorised. Thirdly the poem itself actually deals with events in the life of Graves and Laura Riding: Cameron wrote the poem in 1932 or 1933, after his spell of discipleship at the feet of Graves and Laura Riding in Majorca (Hope 140), and Graves can hardly have been unaware of the circumstances of its composition. Indeed, although he never publicly criticised the personality and actions of Riding after his own break with her in 1939, privately he probably shared Cameron's strictures on her grandiose views of herself and her calling in the same poem:

The regions of the dead are small and pent,
 Their movements faint, sparing of energy.
 Yet, like an exiled Government,
 With so much jealousy

As were the issue a campaign or Crown,
 They hold debates, wage Cabinet intrigues,
 Move token forces up and down,
 Turn inches into leagues.

Finally, Graves always believed that genuinely inspired poems could function as direct advice on how to interpret and live one's life. In his novel *Seven Days in New Crete*, for example, he has the poets of New Crete waiting for inspiration, then composing poems containing explicit advice on how to act.

Bearing these considerations in mind it is not hard to reread the passage from *The White Goddess* as commenting directly on Graves' personal experience, as interpreted by Cameron's poem. Cameron is

the poet whose sense of humour enables him to survive city life. Cameron did not go mad, but he did reject the Establishment gracefully and caused no upheaval in society; nor was self-pity or distressing behaviour a characteristic of his (Hope *passim*).

If, however, Cameron is the ideal of a poet in these pages, the antithesis is Laura Riding. In the paragraph before the one quoted Graves mentions with approval Laura Riding's renunciation of poetry, but the characteristics mentioned in this paragraph are not hers. She had little sense of humour, and although she rejected the Establishment, she did not swallow her disappointments in love, she often suffered from self-pity and she nearly always caused distress to those who loved her (at least during her life up to 1939) (Seymour Smith 103-311 *passim*). Graves' final clause in the paragraph underlines this contrast with marked irony.

As *The White Goddess* does draw upon Graves' personal experience to such a great extent then it is hardly surprising that so many passages in it should have a personal application. The only difference between this passage and many other such is that here there is a readily identifiable literary source, which can be used to unlock its personal meaning.

Works Cited

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