

Critiquing the Churchwarden: Robert Graves and T.S. Eliot

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• Part I •

In the early fall of 1927, Robert Graves wrote to a fellow poet that he had arrived at "the point of always saying exactly what I mean in matters concerning poetry," that he expected "reciprocal activity on the part of those to whom my views are distasteful" (undated, *Images* 177). Graves knew many prominent poets personally: Siegfried Sassoon, John Masefield, Edmund Blunden, Robert Bridges, Ezra Pound, Edith Sitwell, Walter de la Mare, Thomas Hardy, and the author of what many consider the most famous "modernist" poem: T.S. Eliot. It was to Eliot (1888-1965) that Graves had written, five years after the appearance of *The Waste Land*, about being scrupulously honest in matters of poetry. Indeed, over the next thirty-five years, Graves would write "exactly what I mean" about Eliot and his poetry. But for the moment, Graves concluded his letter with a prophecy: "When, as will shortly happen, I have no literary friends left, this will provide a natural and graceful end to my literary career" (undated, *Images* 177). That career soon entered new and even more successful phases, but during the next two years Graves did in fact alienate some friends—Sitwell, Blunden, Sassoon—but not, at least for the moment, T.S. Eliot.

They had first met eleven years earlier, in 1916, when Graves was twenty-one and Eliot twenty-eight. Much was to happen between that moment and Graves's recollection of his first impressions of Eliot written four decades later. In "These Be Your Gods, O Israel!" one of his Clark Lectures of 1954-55, he described Eliot as "a startlingly good-looking, Italianate young man, with a shy, hunted look, and a reluctance (which I found charming) to accept the most obvious phenomenon of the day—a world war now entering its bloodiest stage, and showing every sign of going on until it had killed off every man in London but the aged and neutrals. I was due to return to the Somme any day, and delighted to forget the war too in Eliot's gently

neutral company" (CWOP 231). But by the time Graves wrote the above—and as early as 1926, as we shall see—Graves no longer found Eliot's reluctance "charming," and his relationship with the older poet had been anything but "gently neutral."



In light of their later frictions, it is interesting that in the beginning, Graves seems to have held views similar to Eliot's on a number of topics. For instance, according to Seymour-Smith (145), some of the ideas in the collaborative study Graves wrote with Laura Riding, *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928), are elaborations of those that Graves had put forth in his letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* (1 December 1921)—four years before he met Riding—in support of Eliot, who had attacked certain anthological practices in a previous issue. In "Poets and Anthologies," Graves heartily commends "Mr. T.S. Eliot's courageous letter on the damage done to the individual poet by most anthologies of contemporary verse," and goes on to suggest that "poets should take concerted action to boycott irresponsible anthologies."

Another instance of Graves's affinities with Eliot is found in Graves's first critical book, *On English Poetry* (1922), where he argues that poetry involves at the outset "the unforeseen fusion" in the poet's mind "of apparently contradictory emotional ideas" (13), a process strikingly similar to that of Eliot in "The Metaphysical Poets" (1921), where "a poet's mind . . . is constantly amalgamating disparate experience" (287). The poet, writes Graves, "hears, observes, weighs, guesses, condenses, idealizes, and the new ideas troop quietly into his mind until suddenly every now and then two of them violently quarrel and drag into the fight a group of other ideas that have been loitering about at the back of his mind for years; there is great excitement, noise and bloodshed, with finally a reconciliation and drinks all round. The poet writes a tactful police report on the affair and there is the poem" (26). In a similar vein, using the analogy of a chemical reaction—and Graves had used "fusion" to describe the poetic process—Eliot writes in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919): "The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phras-

es, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together" (19).

Interesting as these parallels are, however, the similarities may be coincidental, especially if we believe Graves who, writing to Douglas Day as late as the early 1960s, claimed that he had not yet read Eliot's criticism (36, n. 11). Although Day concludes that in any case Graves was not likely to be influenced by anything Eliot said, he does point out that only the year before Graves began thinking that he should be striving for a poetry of detachment—after the troubled poems of *The Pier-Glass* (1921)—Eliot had already made the case for impersonality in poetry in *The Sacred Wood* (1920). Nonetheless, Day maintains that "Graves made his decision for objectivity independently, without any appreciable influence by Eliot" (36). Possible cross-pollination aside, it does appear that both poets were thinking along the same theoretical lines.



Perhaps it was these affinities that led Graves to seek Eliot's collaboration on what was to become one of his most important critical works. In 1922 Eliot had founded *The Criterion*, soon to become an influential (highbrow) literary journal. Although the following year, in his capacity as editor, Eliot turned down some poems that Graves had submitted, this did not deter Graves for proposing, two years later, that Eliot collaborate with him on what he described to Sassoon as "a survey of the untraditional elements in modern poetry" (undated, *Images* 159). But Eliot was reluctant: he was very busy and told Graves that although he would be "honoured" to assist him, he might have little time to devote to the project (qtd in *Images* 161). Graves persisted: when he accepted a teaching position at the Royal Egyptian University, he wrote to Eliot that he would work on the book in Cairo. He also enclosed some unpublished criticism by a recent acquaintance, one Laura Gottschalk, for publication in the *Criterion* (see *Images* 161-62, undated, Nov/Dec 1925).

Graves sailed for Egypt with his family on 8 January 1926, taking Laura Riding (Gottschalk) with him. From Cairo, Graves continued to promote Riding to Eliot, writing on 16 February to inform him

that his literary agent, Robert Pinker, would send Eliot a revised copy of her essay, "The H.D. Legend," as well as her "Criticism and the Poet" and "Genius and Disaster." Graves also asked Eliot if he would allow Riding to work with them on their study of modern poetry once Eliot had read her essays. "Her list of poets corresponds exactly with yours," he wrote, "and her critical detachment is certainly greater than mine," adding in a post-scriptum: "I am/we are, much enjoying your *Collected Poems*: and admire your ruthlessness in suppressions" (*Images* 164).

When Graves returned to England after a disappointing year of sporadic, frustrating teaching, Pinker informed him that Eliot had turned down some of Riding's poems and essays, but suggested that a visit from Graves might help Eliot change his mind (*RPG Years* 31). From Islip, Graves wrote to Eliot on 24 June to suggest that "The H.D. Legend" might nonetheless fit into the section of the now provisionally-entitled *Untraditional Elements in Modern Poetry* devoted to legends such as "the other Imagists, Sandburg, D. H. Lawrence" (*Images* 166). He added that although he would be able to secure Eliot the Cairo teaching position—"a sinecure at £1170 free of Income Tax between October 1st and June 1st (passage paid)"—the low academic standards and "comic opera" aspects of the University were such that he did not recommend the job at all: "Cairo is about the only possible sequel to 'The Hollow Men'" (166-67).

Given such an endorsement, it is not surprising that Eliot never went to Egypt. Nor did he collaborate with Graves and Riding in a partnership that might have influenced Graves's views on poetry. In any case, such was Riding's influence on Graves at this time that there could be little room for a third party in this (or any other) Graves-Riding collaboration. As Miranda Seymour suggests, "Eliot was more than willing to resign his interest" (137).

If Eliot did not contribute to what ultimately became *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927), his presence is strongly-felt. Graves had written to him on 18 September that because the book was being published by Heinemann instead of Faber, he and Riding would be permitted to discuss Eliot's poems: "and without your work a discussion of modernist poetry is *Hamlet* without . . . well . . . at least . . . the Gravediggers and the Ghost. There is no Prince of Denmark obvious-

ly discoverable. We hope you'll forgive us in this" (*Images* 169).

Whether Eliot forgave is not known, but his work certainly gets more buffeted than eulogized. There is some initial praise for *The Waste Land* as a long poem: it is given high marks for its "delicate transitions from one atmosphere to another, where the separate parts are joined into a single continuous poem" (50), which is not the case with *In Memoriam* or the *Aeneid*, where length means bulk. Eliot's poem, in fact, must be read "as a unified whole" (51), without skipping a passage. But in "Modernist Poetry and Civilization," where Graves and Riding state that contemporary poetry "elaborates its superior attitude" (168) toward civilization by means of "a cultivation of fine-writing" (168), they cite Marianne Moore, the Sitwells, D.H. Lawrence, and Eliot as examples. The following lines from *The Waste Land* are used to illustrate "the tendency in contemporary poetry to outdo the past in elaborate and elegant writing" (170): "In vials of ivory and coloured glass / Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered or liquid—troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours," and so on for another seven lines.

Contemporary poetry, they go on, does not always succeed in its "tremendous and sometimes a strained effort at overmatching its age" by loading itself with "learned vanities and sophistications." How is this done? By the inclusion into poetry of "the modern science of anthropology," as when Eliot borrows heavily from the work of James Frazer on primitive myths; by "literary internationalism—the incorporation of foreign tongues and atmospheres," as Eliot does with French and other languages; by "an abnormal cultivation of the classics," as in *The Waste Land*, where even the English works (Peele, Kyd, Lyly, Beddoes) are "known only to the cognoscenti"; and by using "the vocabulary of low life," as with Eliot's "unexpurgated and unsentimentalized cockney" (see 171-4). So much for Eliot's "vanities and sophistications."

It should be emphasized that although *A Survey* was a purported "word by word collaboration," Graves admitted later that "he alone was responsible for the 'detailed examination of poems' in the book," (CWOP xi). One poem to undergo such an examination is Eliot's "Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar" (1918). It is used in "The Humorous Element in Modernist Poetry" "as an example

of how limited the humorous appeal of modernist verse may become. The extreme particularity of some of the references may be called the teasing element of modernist wit" (235). The poem is quoted in full and given a detailed exegesis: it is meticulously explicated, often using the same free-ranging imagination found in Graves's later interpretations of Greek myths. The final verdict: "It is aristocratic writing, and its jokes are exclusive; but only exclusive if the reader has no capacity or interest for sharing in them: the Baedeker is common to all men, so are the Classical Dictionary and La Rousse [sic]" (242).

The close reading of "Burbank" focuses mostly upon its prominent racial aspects. Somewhat surprisingly, in view of the poem's blatant anti-Semitism, the exegesis concludes with an apologia for Eliot's theme: "The jokes are against modern civilization, against money, against classicism, against romanticism, against Mr. Eliot himself as a tourist in Venice with a Baedeker. One of the privileges of the comedian is to have prejudices without being held morally accountable for them; and the modernist poet is inclined to take full advantage of this privilege, to have caprices without being obliged to render a dull, rationalistic account of them. The anti-Jewish prejudice, for instance, occurs frequently in modernist poetry, and the anti-American prejudice also. It is part of the comedy that a Jew or an American may equally have these prejudices" (242). Perhaps. But nowadays it is impossible to condone such literary "caprices" or "prejudices," as recent Eliot scholarship demonstrates.¹

In their "Conclusion" to *A Survey*, Graves and Riding deplore that poetry should have become "poetically introspective philosophy," a "complex interrelation of metaphysics and psychology" that "blighted the creative processes wherever it was the predominant influence in the actual moments of writing" (265). The point is then made that Eliot's critical works had a nefarious effect on his creative writing: as he refined his criticism, there resulted the "gradual disintegration" of his post-*Waste Land* poetry. Moreover, *The Waste Land* had a deleterious effect generally: as the poem became dissociated from the poet, it found itself in a "forced relation" to its historical period. Henceforth, "any poem which could not be related to its period could not be said to have any immediate critical value, and critical value was the only value by which poetry could become current. The only virtue of this

critical tyranny has been to make the world in general more conscious of poetry in a specialized sense and more conversant with its processes and problems" (266).²

Perhaps the only genuine note of praise is accorded to Eliot's individualism: as a "transplanted American," he remains "uniquely himself" (212), "inimitably himself" (214), despite "contemporary sympathies with modernist English poets" which are "only incidental to his work" (213-14). Nonetheless, in light of the book's criticisms of Eliot's elaborate writing, "learned vanities," and esoteric humour, one remains puzzled by Robert H. Canary's claim that *A Survey* "treats Eliot's work with considerable respect and acuity" (344). Still, the book remains an important document, "probably the first study that could be thought of as 'post-modernist,'" according to a recent critic, "since it self-consciously considers Eliot's generation with historical (as opposed to contemporary) sympathy" (Longenbach 177).



Graves predicted that one day he would have "no literary friends left." Although one can say that the disagreements between he and Eliot were less serious than quarrels, Graves's irritation reached its apex when defending Laura Riding. When John Gould Fletcher reviewed Riding's *The Close Chaplet* in the August 1927 *Criterion*, he pointed out "the derivations of her manner" from Marianne Moore, John Crowe Ransom, Gertrude Stein, and Graves. What was also troubling was that prior to dismissing Riding's work, Fletcher had praised Graves's *Poems (1914-1926)* and called him "a leader of the modernists" (168). The indignant Graves wrote an angry letter to Eliot, requesting him to publish it in *The Criterion* as a response to Fletcher's review. Eliot replied that it would be unwise to print what he called such a "warm" letter, but if Graves insisted, he would. Graves answered that "Fletcher's attack was personal and uncritical," and he declined (somewhat ungraciously) Eliot's invitation of verse contributions on the ground that he (Graves) was unsympathetic to the "popularistic policy in regard to contemporary poetry" of recent issues of *The Criterion*, something which he found "critically indefensible" (undated, *Images* 177).

When Eliot requested that Graves clarify his remarks about *The Criterion*, Graves replied that although he had respected Eliot "in the past as a man who has really cared for poetry on its own account and conducted himself with dignity in the bad atmosphere of literary politics," he considered his "editorial consent to reviews by literary politicians such as Wolfe, Flint and Fletcher as a gesture of complete hopelessness and bankruptcy; and your editorials and book-notes as a humorous ventriloquial entertainment with a journalistic dummy on your knee" (undated, *Images* 177-78).³ Eliot replied "briefly and indignantly" that of course he wanted to sell issues of his journal, but that Graves was being unjust in suggesting that he had "vulgarized it for commercial reasons" (*Images* 178). Graves's response, headed "PRIVATE," was firm but conciliatory. It began with "No insult intended," and went on to say that although Eliot had nonetheless "compromised" enough to keep *The Criterion* "afloat," he was "not responsible" for Wolfe, Flint and Fletcher being "literary politicians as is manifest in their writings. . . . Let's stop this correspondence, which perhaps shouldn't have been allowed to get as far as this. . . . Let's nod and walk on" (undated, *Images* 178-79). Eliot did publish Graves's letter in *The Criterion*,⁴ but the friction generated by Fletcher's review had done its damage: Graves and Eliot did not correspond for almost two decades.



During this hiatus, Graves and his literary collaborators continued to criticize Eliot. Around 1936, Graves and Riding commented on *The Rock and Murder in the Cathedral* in one of their *Epilogue* essays entitled "Poetic Drama," reprinted in *The Common Asphodel* (1949). Here Eliot is taken to task for having transferred an entire "poetic paraphernalia to the stage and there attempted to reconcile" dramatic and poetic realities "in a way that can only be called profanity." The two plays are mentioned as examples of "profane drama—more profane even than W.H. Auden, because he keeps his poetic paraphernalia solemn and well-conditioned, while Auden lets his run into farcical shabbiness. It is by no accident that Eliot sets 'God' in the midst of his theatrical world: here is the assertion of a deliberately profane inten-

tion" (*Asphodel* 286).

Passages from *Murder in the Cathedral* are quoted to show how the play "combines telescopically all the literary devices of the ancient and modern stage": "Elizabethan beauties," "Classical French comedy wit," "Swinburnean Greek choruses," "Vachel Lindsay jazz," and "Bernard Shaw crossed with Euripides-in-school-translation" (see 286-87). Much is made of Eliot's 1927 essay on Seneca—one recalls here Graves's letter to Douglas Day—which discusses Seneca's technique of repeating one word of a phrase in the next phrase, especially in stichomythia, a trick used also by Marlowe. "So, because Seneca used the trick and 'several scholars' have noted it and Marlowe has made it respectable in English drama, in it goes into *Murder in the Cathedral*" (287), and an appropriate passage is quoted.

If Eliot is being chided for cleverness, Riding and Graves provide an ambiguous general assessment: "The effectiveness of *Murder in the Cathedral* therefore lies in its appeal of dramatic astuteness, its well-documented ingenuities: in the cynical candour with which Eliot uses drama as a means of journalizing a poetic theme. He throws his theme to the audience, which is delighted to gnaw away at it—delighted because it has been confidentially told that not merely is it a very special bone, but it has been carefully cut away from the poetic corpse so as to reach the audience generously loaded with dramatic meat" (288). Less ambiguous, however, are their remarks on *The Rock*, "where the profanity is less gracefully blended with dramatics" and the Chorus expresses "irritably and awkwardly . . . the author's personal disappointment with the vulgarity of modern life." Generally the play is ineffectual: "though the general pretence is poetic and the drama itself is offered as a convenience of truth, nowhere can any meaning be dissociated from dramatic artifice" (288).

The uneasiness felt by Graves and Riding with these plays is echoed in their unflattering psychological portrait of the author. In profane drama, they conclude, the poet "attempts to throw truth back into temporal action and confuse poetic with moral values and knowledge with action. Why? Because he feels lonely in poetic ground and hungers for human disorder. To introduce disorder into poetic values gives an illusion of realism to a timid poetic mind Dramatic realities are supported by numbers, by the mass suggestibility of audi-

ences, as poetic realities are not; it is therefore the timid, lonely poets who are most subject to the temptations of dramatic technique—those who are unhappy in poetry, as Eliot confesses himself to be" (289). "Profane poetic drama can interest only an audience that is cynical both about humanity and about poetry, and claims the author as a fellow-cynic" (292). One wonders if lonely, cynical, timid, unhappy Eliot ever read *The Common Asphodel* (1949), in which "Poetic Drama" was reprinted.

A few years after that *Epilogue* essay, Graves and Alan Hodge published *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (1940), in which Eliot joins Wyndham Lewis and James Joyce as one of the "struggling 'Literary Bolshies'" (54). The thumb-nail sketch of the young Eliot is telling: Prior to his fame as poet and critic, Eliot was merely "a young expatriate, polymath American, working in a bank, and known for a few slight, bitter *vers de société*" (55). In the 1920's, when "a hard, cynical, gay disillusion" (127) had set in, Eliot gave it expression in "The Love-Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and *The Waste Land*. The latter poem was "read by the side-burned aesthete to a large gathering at Oxford . . . through a megaphone" (127). Less playfully, Graves and Hodge point out that unlike Evelyn Waugh and G.K. Chesterton, Eliot "clung with a poet's conscience to a modicum of liberty for thought, and would go no further than Anglo-Catholicism: it was he who eventually supplied, in *The Rock* and *Murder in the Cathedral*, the spiritual plays for cathedral performance which the 1922 Church Congress had demanded" (128). Others, meanwhile, wholeheartedly "'embraced the Scarlet Woman'" (127). It is interesting that, according to R. P. Graves, Eliot had voiced his objections to having his earlier poems described by Graves and Hodge as "rather pornographic" (17)! Graves explained resentfully to Hodge on 23 October: "Faber changed it himself, giving me no time to approve: he just omitted it" (*Images* 295).

Three years later, Graves collaborated with Hodge again, this time on handbook for writers of English prose entitled *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* (1943), in which a short passage from Eliot's *Elizabethan Essays* (1934) is dissected for shortcomings: numerous ones are found. To be fair, however, it must be said that Eliot is in good company: the work of J.B. Priestley, I.A. Richards, H.G. Wells, Bernard Shaw, and

thirteen others is examined by Graves and Hodge under forty-one categories, which include everything from irrelevancy and poeticality to circumlocution and too much alliteration. Among other faults, the authors found no less than ten "inappropriate words or phrases" in the Eliot excerpt, noting that "by the standards of ordinary intelligible English, his failures to choose the appropriate word and to connect his argument lucidly are more frequent here than in any passage we have examined—even from the works of his fellow-critics" (163). This coincides with Graves's comment to military historian Basil Liddell Hart, in a letter of 16 July 1941: "It is fantastic: he [Eliot] has twice as many errors or shortcomings as anyone yet examined" (*Images* 302). As we shall see, however, this harsh assessment did not prevent Graves from turning to Eliot a few years later when seeking a publisher for his most controversial work, *The White Goddess*.

Notes

- 1 See Ricks (34-38, 70-71) and especially Julius (98-108). The latter considers the poem "a match to any Jew-hating treatise in the pregnant fullness of its anti-Semitism" (98).
- 2 Riding repeats this almost verbatim in *Contemporaries and Snobs* (1928), 133-34. For other disparaging remarks on Eliot, see 26-27, 37, 64-65, 69, 84, 109, 187, 254.
- 3 Both Humbert Wolfe (1885-1940), essayist, anthologist, and popular poet, and F. S. Flint (1885-1960), translator and prominent Imagist, were senior civil servants.
- 4 See *Criterion* 6.4 (October 1927: 357-9). See *Criterion* 6.6 (December 1927: 546-7) for Fletcher's rejoinder (to Graves's "absurdly childish" defence of Riding).

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