

Good-Bye To All That and The White Goddess

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Approaching the study of *Good-Bye To All That* in 1988, I was surprised to learn that Robert Graves was only 33 when he wrote it. That someone should feel compelled to write an autobiography when only in his thirties fascinated me. My research suggested that *Good-Bye To All That* was written not only to help the author and his readers come to terms with the war, but also to criticise the shortcomings of a society which had allowed such a war to take place. I began to understand *Good-Bye To All That* as one of the keys to Graves's entire literary output. This essay outlines the themes contained in *Good-Bye To All That* which Graves goes on to develop in *The White Goddess*.

As a critical evaluation of its age, *Good-Bye To All That* is a remarkable document. It is never too obvious or too aggressive. Graves's criticism is aimed at a system to which he feels the need to say "good-bye". His targets include English schools, specifically public schools, which he defines as centres of blind, meaningless, discipline, which have an atmosphere that destroys human values and an environment that encourages homosexuality:

In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homosexual. The opposite sex is despised and hated, treated as something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion. I only recovered by a shock at the age of twenty-one. For every one born homosexual there are at least ten permanent pseudo-homosexuals made by the public school system. (*Good-Bye* (1929), 41)

Graves also lambastes those social structures which remained a legacy from the Victorian age. In particular, he was opposed to the

rigid class system and the discrimination that a class-ridden society bred. He felt that this outmoded attitude made equal social communication impossible. For example, Graves describes how he and his first wife Nancy Nicholson, behaved towards their hired help. This serves as a good example of how they rejected conventional attitudes. In the Graves household, all the domestic help was treated equally and as members of the family. Such a level of equality and congeniality could not be understood by many of Graves's friends and family:

[they could not] ... understand then the intimacy of our relations with the nurse and the maid. They were both women to whom we had given a job because they were in bad luck. ... Generosity to a woman like this was Christian, but intimacy seemed merely eccentric. (*Good-Bye* (1929), 358 [this passage was omitted in the 1957 edition])

Elsewhere in *Good-Bye To All That*, Graves shows his dissatisfaction with societal hypocrisies that, to him, further typified Victorianism. His outbursts were directed against formal institutions, rigid family structures, and the Anglican Church. He believed that living in a society such as this, stifled an individual's ability for free expression and the potential for the fulfilment of his or her individual being.

Two further points against which he remonstrates are the "logic" of the military establishment who traded the blood of soldiers for industrial wealth, and the acceptance of the superiority of physical strength over intellectual and spiritual values. After patriotically and enthusiastically enlisting for active service, Graves, together with Siegfried Sassoon, began "... to wonder whether it was right for the war to be continued. ... The view we had of the war was now non-political. We no longer saw it as a war between trade-rivals; its continuance seemed merely a sacrifice of the idealistic younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder" (*Good-Bye* (1929), 288).

Graves was equally critical of English life at Oxford. He rejected Oxford's dull atmosphere, where academics had recovered their privi-

leges and “pre-war self-possession”. It became clear to him that the sacrifice made by himself and his fellow soldiers in the Great War had been a failure. It had not succeeded in sweeping away the academics’ pretentiousness and pomposity. On the contrary, it had encouraged them. Quite evidently, the autobiography was not only an attack against war and militarism, but largely a critical refusal to partake of the stuffy mentality of Graves’s own age. His attitude implied a clear, radical and painful departure from Victorian mores, which compelled him to say farewell to everything including places particularly dear to him such as the hills of Harlech.

Having broken his ties with England, definitively and with few regrets, Graves was able to rid himself of “a great deal of intellectual encumbrance” and so “to think with perfect clarity in a poetic sense” (*White Goddess*, 409). Emblematically the place he chose to initiate a new life was the remote, uncontaminated and wild Deyà. Deyà was completely unlike England, which Graves felt was dominated by something he termed ‘the mechanarchy’. It was a place where he could develop his voice “spiritually as well as geographically outside the cliques, movements and politics of literature”. He added: “I am nobody’s servant and have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle” (*White Goddess*, 14). Thus, as he exclaimed in *Good-Bye To All That*, exile was shown to be the only solution to safeguard his integrity. Voluntary exile was the only possible route towards regeneration and rebirth. The autobiography underlined this stance: “This is a story of what I was, not what I am” (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 442). Consequently, having paid his debts to the English world and abandoning the security of English society, he was free to search for a personal aesthetic. When Stephen Daedalus, declares:

I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defence the only arms I allow myself to

use - silence, exile, and cunning. (*A Portrait*, 247)

one can be excused of thinking of Graves and his own quest.

His first foray into the world of poetry is described in *Good-Bye To All That*. Early on, he identifies poetry as the Goddess to whom everything is due. Referring to his years at Charterhouse, Graves points out that: "Being thrown entirely on myself I began to write poetry. This was considered stronger proof of insanity than the formal straws I wore in my hair" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 68). But the poetry he wrote in that particular moment was "poetry that was dissatisfied with itself" (68). Indeed, it was a constantly self-generating process, never satisfied with its birth and always asking for a new conception. In *The White Goddess*, he affirmed the commitment that he had held to poetry since his youth: "Since the age of fifteen poetry has been my ruling passion and I have never intentionally undertaken any task or formed any relationship that seemed inconsistent with poetic principles" (17). Poetry was a passion which would become more and more exclusively demanding while leaving him with a sense of "persistent dissatisfaction" (17).

In *Good-Bye To All That*, Graves describes how poetry and myth acquired importance as self-therapy of which, in the course of his life, Graves would frequently try to resort. As a matter of fact, poetry and myth would be established by a religious essence. Indeed, his religious belief, in the traditional sense, went through distinct phases. First, he was an ardent believer until the age of sixteen. His faith somehow also lasted through the early part of the war until the Battle of Loos. His faith then became weak and doubtful when faced with the death of his friend David Thomas. Later, he became deprived of any religious creed whatsoever, especially because of the influence of Nancy's determined atheism. Graves eventually refused all formal aspects of religion himself, though certainly not the idea of faith and religion in itself. Without faith, how was he to have written *The White Goddess*? How could he have affirmed: "The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse"? (*White Goddess*, 14). Only a religious man could have written a work so permeated with religious afflatus.

Ballads and nursery rhymes in *Country Sentiment* in particular embody Graves's first attempts at exploring the therapeutic power of poetry. During the war, self-therapy through poetry saved him from clinical psychiatric treatment. Poetry has in itself a cathartic strength, first of all for the poet who suffers from an "inner conflict", and for the reader made to suffer the same conflict: "[I] emphasized the impossibility of writing poetry of 'universal appeal.' I regarded poetry as, first, a personal cathartic for the poet suffering from some inner conflict, and then as a cathartic for readers in a similar conflict" (*Good-Bye To All That*, (1929): 402). "I made no attempt to write for the ordinary reading public, and no longer regarded my work as being of public utility" (*Good-Bye To All That*, (1929): 403).

Abandoning the possibility of writing for a "universal appeal", Robert Graves wrote only "when and because there was a poem pressing to be written" (403), and his appeal goes straight to the reader, whom he imagines as ideal: "Though I assumed a reader of intelligence and sensibility and considered his possible reactions to what I wrote, I no longer identified him with contemporary readers or critics of poetry" (403). From this point, the way to an absolute faith in poetry as the means to salvation and happiness is manifestly clear.

Another important connection between *Good-Bye To All That* and *The White Goddess* is demonstrated by Graves's nascent interest in anthropology, a science which he considered fundamental for the interpretation of myth. It was probably W.H.R. Rivers, "a neurologist, ethnologist, psychologist and anthropologist", who initiated Graves into this science. Graves goes on to describe how his fascination with philosophy and metaphysics grew such that they "threatened almost to displace poetry" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 405). These two disciplines acquired relevance in Graves's post-war writing – especially in the elaboration of the myth of the White Goddess.

Another connective between *Good-Bye To All That* and *The White Goddess* is the concept of the "poetical trance" which suggests the irrational and inspirational nature of poetry. As he affirmed in *The*

White Goddess: "True poets will agree that poetry is spiritual illumination delivered by a poet to his equals, not an ingenious technique ..." (392). He goes on to add, "... the source of poetry's creative power is not scientific intelligence, but inspiration" (490).

When Graves met Thomas Hardy in Oxford in 1919, Graves's own notion of poetic inspiration began to take form. After this meeting Graves came to the conclusion that his own prose - which he later defined as being nothing more than "pot-boilers" - was not to interfere with the writing of poetry. For Graves, prose could be the source of his livelihood (*The White Goddess*, 17) because it could be treated like a job, the outcome of a programme. Poetry on the other hand, was always accidental, the daughter of inspiration. Graves writes, "He [Hardy] said that he had been able to sit down and write novels by time-table, but that poetry was always accidental ..." (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 376-7). Prose has "relevance in a limited context", whereas poetry is of "constant value" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 409). Poetry was a subject Graves would never neglect: "... nothing has ever stopped me writing when I have something to write." He adds, "When I was working at a poem, nothing else mattered. I went on doing my mechanical tasks in a trance until I had time to sit down to write it out. ... My poetry-writing has always been a painful process of continual corrections and corrections on top of corrections and persistent dissatisfaction" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 390-1).

Graves's dedication to poetry is affirmed throughout *The White Goddess*. In fact, here, he pointed out that the poetic and the prosaic method of thought were quite distinct from one another:

The prosaic method was invented by the Greeks of the Classical age as an insurance against swamping of reason by mythographic fancy. It has now become the only legitimate means of transmitting useful knowledge. ... from the inability to think poetically ... derives the failure to think clearly in prose (223)

He believed that poetic language was something distinct and appropriate for certain subjects, while prose could be used for others: "Myth

and religion are clothed in poetic language; science, ethics, philosophy and statistics in prose" (*The White Goddess*, 480).

Graves's attitude toward a "hero figure" was something with which he had been familiar even before discovering the importance of matriarchy to poetry. This was especially true when he was at school where he worshipped a male triad of men: Ronny, defined as "the greatest thing that I had ever met" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 39); Raymond "the first person I had been able to talk to humanly" and "loved for that" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 69) and Dick: "Poetry and Dick were 'the only two things that really mattered'" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 85). As Richard Perceval Graves points out in *The Assault Heroic*: "this kind of attachment to someone whom he admired without reserve was to become a central feature of Robert's behaviour for much of the rest of his life" (1986: 52). Given such hero worship and devotion, it is possible to perceive what, some years later, would develop into a spiritual attitude which made his devotion to the White Goddess possible.

But what was perhaps of utmost importance was the relationship between creativity and the authority of matriarchy. His attitude towards the feminine was undoubtedly connected to his relationship with women. The development of his sexual relations and the triad of his mother, Nancy and Laura also played an important part in the creation of the myth of the White Goddess. As with the boys from Graves's youth, the three women can be regarded as hero figures – individuals whom Graves was determined to celebrate through his dedication to their principles and ideals. What Nancy affirmed, concerning male and female domination for example, contained in *nuce* the essence of the myth of the White Goddess: "The most important thing to her was judicial equality of the sexes. She held that all the wrong in the world was caused by male domination and narrowness" (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 357). The idea that evil entered the world together with a patriarchal god who usurped power from the matriarchal goddess can be regarded as a derivation by Graves of Nancy's theories. Certainly, Nancy contributed profoundly to Graves focus on the dichotomy between patriarchy and matriarchy: "... she began to regret her marriage, as a breach of faith with herself – a concession to

patriarchy... (*Good-Bye To All That* 57, 242). The leap then from Nancy's conception to what we read in *The White Goddess* is not difficult to follow: "About the year 1250 B.C a distinction arose between the Achaean Danaans and other less civilised Achaeans from North-western Greece who invaded the Peloponnese, founded a new patriarchal dynasty, repudiated the sovereignty of the Great Goddess, and instituted the familiar Olympian pantheon, ruled over by Zeus, in which gods and goddesses were equally represented" (64).

Although in the 1929 edition of *Good-Bye To All That* the Prologue consisted of Riding's poem *World's End* and the Epilogue was dedicated to her, her non-appearance in the text. Riding's absence might appear illogical, given that, from 1926 she was, undoubtedly, the female figure of predominant importance in his life. But the treatment Graves reserved to her is far more sacred than that of the most mentioned figures in the text. Graves explains in the *Dedicatory Epilogue*:

Because of you (Laura) the last chapters have a ghostly look.

The reason of all this is, of course, that mentioning you as a character in my autobiography I would seem to be denying you in your true quality of one living invisibly, against kind, as dead, beyond event. (*Good-Bye To All That* (1929), 445)

His silence was the most devout and eloquent tribute to his Muse; it was also an unequivocal sign of how precious and sacred he considered her.

Good-Bye To All That is an illuminating work. It foreshadows much of Graves's intellectual and spiritual growth. How could he possibly have written *The White Goddess*, without first passing through that painful farewell, through his first approach to the world of poetry, through poetry as self-therapy, through the idea of the poetical trance, through an intellectual, political and spiritual engagement with matriarchy? All these steps are contained and painfully examined in *Good-Bye To All That* and clearly trace the development of the ideas which would, eventually, become *The White Goddess*.

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