

Autobiographical Cyclicity in Robert Graves's "The Lost Chinese"

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Reading Robert Graves's short story "The Lost Chinese" for the first time, one finishes the story with a knowing with a smile. In the surprise ending, the young protagonist, a Majorcan peasant, has succeeded in duping everybody, including the narrator/author. Although this short story is among the most reprinted of his works, included as it is in the *Penguin Book of English Short Stories*, none of the major literary periodicals has ever included an assessment or interpretation of this puzzling modern fairy tale.

Robert Graves is mainly known as a poet, but he is also famous for his historical novels, his essays and his prose works. Between the years 1924 and 1965 he wrote a number of short stories for magazines including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The New Yorker*, *Punch* and *Playboy*. Thirty of these were collected and published in a paperback edition. All of them make use of a "dramatized narrator" – a kind of narrator whom Wayne Booth describes as having "some measurable effect on the course of events" (Booth, 153).

In his introduction to the paperback edition, Graves declares that most of the stories in the collection are based on real events. He adds, surely in a facetious mood, that "pure fiction is beyond [his] imaginative range" (Graves, 7). This claim suggests that the stories have an autobiographical dimension. In the case of "The Lost Chinese", there is, apart from a young protagonist, one who is older and who suffers from war-induced neurosis. Additionally, there is the narrator/author who takes an active part in each of the recurring cycles from which the story is composed. The narrator represents the centre, as it were, of these overlapping cycles. As a number of theorists

have pointed out, narrative can be interpreted as a series of recurring cycles (Propp, 1970; Lotman, 1972; Brémond, 1970). The protagonist might lack status, a bride, recognition or something else of the sort. He searches for a resolution to this lack and, in the process, has to overcome a number of obstacles and complications. Ultimately he or she succeeds in satisfying whatever it was that was missing. This theory is, as Bonheim points out, also applicable to any number of short stories without making the analysis restrictive or reductive (Bonheim, 380). Bonheim's theory is readily applicable to "The Lost Chinese". The theory gives the story a narratological framework upon which the story can be spread out and analysed.

In "The Lost Chinese" each of the three protagonists tries to move from "one semantic field, the field of lack, into the field of removal of lack" (Lotman, 342). Each of the three cycles consists in turn of three acts and each of these acts displays a set of "recurring partials" (Bonheim, 380) or repeated elements, all of which are linked to one another by common leitmotifs. Among these leitmotifs and recurring partials one must in fact include the narrator's insistence on the number three, which points to his three different life-cycles.

Cycle A: The story begins with a description of the young protagonist, Jaume Gelabert. Jaume cultivates terraces of olive trees and a lemon grove, but is nevertheless portrayed as a failure. He has no family, having been orphaned in childhood, and lacks status, his father having died as a Red at the siege of Madrid. His father having fought for the left and the ruling party being fascist is also one of the reasons why Jaume cannot expect any support from the state. Indeed, all the adjectives with which he and his circumstances are associated have a negative ring: he lives in a "dilapidated cottage", he is "heavily-built, unkempt and morose" (194).¹ He is strong but awkward, too sullen to win friends.

Seymour-Smith's description of the young Robert Graves incidentally, is strikingly similar to that of Jaume:

[Graves] was strong, but clumsy and awkward, and not a

good mixer; by learning boxing, he made himself a certain position at school, but he was never popular. The sense of a certain awkwardness and clumsiness in his relationship to his own body remained with him all his life, and also the inaptitude for facile gregariousness (Seymour-Smith, 7).

Jaume tries to win acceptance and social status in the village by using his strength. He beats up a whole group of young villagers who mock him, only to find out that "no decent man ever uses force: all fighting is done either with the tongue or with money" (197).

In the next section, Jaume joins forces with the other social outcast of the village, Willie Fedora. Willie Fedora emerges as the protagonist of cycle C. His role to the story as a whole is integral and his eventual social integration and acceptance fits with the sociologist Uriel Foa's theory that "human needs are seldom satisfied in solitude."² Jaume and Willie lack the symbolic values of love and status and therefore enter into a close relationship to compensate for this lack. Thus it is not surprising that "the two social outcasts became such good friends" (197). Jaume's compassion and understanding for Willie, who suffers from haunting war memories and guilt, is met with equally felt affection on Willie's part. Willie in turn learns Majorcan, the native language. This creates for Jaume an intimate space where he can converse in his mother tongue. Moreover Jaume gains self-esteem and status by teaching this language to his companion. Willie on his part, sobered up and on his way to health, regains status by teaching Jaume how to wield language for the purposes of playwriting.

Such gains in status are not merely imagined: they are acknowledged by the village. Jaume's play is accepted for performance on San Pedro's Day and Willie is invited to direct it. Moreover, the receipts to be gained from the production are meant for the whole village and will pay for a new church roof.

After their first success both Willie and Jaume suffer a relapse. Willie gets drunk again and Jaume resorts to violence when he finds

out what the young people, and especially the mayor's son, did to Willie in his drunken helplessness.

In the third "act" we find Jaume overcoming all obstacles. He becomes a winner on all fronts. Although his second play has not been accepted by the village and he has to do his military service far from home (due to some backstage interference of the mayor's), he makes arrangements for his friend and property. His status is now on firm ground, since the neighbour whom he asks to tend his fields in his absence would lose face in the village if he were to neglect Jaume's terraces (202). At the end, the village has to acknowledge his superiority. "Jaume can now laugh at us all" (208). He has fought with his tongue, i.e. used language, wit and intellect to write the play, to be ambiguous about it: "It was a gift" (203). When he finds out how enthusiastically the play has been accepted by Broadway's biggest tycoon he "shrewdly sticks to his guns" (210) and does not sign the contract he does not understand. Instead, **he** now dictates the contract and asks for and receives 300,000 Pts., which enables him to buy the La Coma estate.

Jaume's purchase of the La Coma estate is also the third time it is mentioned. The first comes at the beginning of the story when the village youth mock Jaume with the song: "The Lord of La Coma he lives in disgrace ..." (196). Their song is intended as an insult, since the mayor's brother has cheated his mother out of her share of the estate. The second time that "La Coma" is mentioned is when the church is revealed to have inherited a small fortune from the deceased widow of La Coma; this money is used to hire the Palma Repertory group. This coincides with Jaume's second play being rejected. The cycle is closed when Jaume, now having the means to buy the estate, becomes the Lord of La Coma.

In *Cycle C*, Willie Fedora, the protagonist of this cycle, is described in terms of "disability" and his "anxiety neurosis". Willie's disabilities include alcoholism – a fact the reader is informed of when told that "brandy was his main expense" (194). Haunted by his traumatic war experiences, Willie desperately tries to find friends other than alcohol amongst the island's foreign colony. He also attempts, in

vain, to make his "fearful load of guilt" (of an alleged war-time crime) bearable by sublimating it with a play about Vercingetorix and the Gallic revolt (195).

In the character of Willie, the reader is again confronted with striking details of Graves' own life. The Great War had left Graves with a trauma which he tried to overcome by writing. "He was [...] convinced that poetry could be therapeutic; one only had to go about writing it in the right way" (Stade, 16). Graves' autobiography *Goodbye To All That*, written nearly ten years after the Armistice, also tries to "exorcise the ghost of the First World War" (Seymour-Smith, 7). While Graves succeeds in sublimating depressions and inner conflict into art (Wilson, 1969), Willie fails by "talking about it endlessly but making no progress" (195). His yearning for compassion and friendship is met with the disapproval and the unresponsive behaviour of the foreign colony, ("we keep ourselves to ourselves," 195), partly because of Willie's drunken irresponsibility. He had lost innocence, honour and self-respect during the last stages of the Korean War by not being able to account for 200 out of 500 Chinese prisoners who had been in his charge and who somehow had disappeared into thin air (195). These lost Chinese haunt him day and night. "Act" one ends for him in a cathartic scene where parish children dressed up as Chinese scare him out of his wits, and he is subjected to the mockery of his fellow countrymen, who tell him to see a Palma doctor about his problems (196).

In the second set of events, Willie sets up an outcast colony with Jaume, the result of which has already been described. In "act" three we find him without Jaume who is fighting the Moors in Morocco, whereas Willie left at home, fighting his loneliness and haunting dreams. He works hard translating Jaume's second play from Majorcan into English and sends it off to an agent in New York. That done and with no more purpose left to his life, without the loving care of his friend Jaume, neglected by his fellow foreigners and weakened by too much drink, the ultimate failure, death, seems inevitable.

Willie's "reappearance" as the addressee of a telegram, after he has been dead for some time, seems to be a reversal of a haunting

image. Addressed to a dead person, the telegram not only has tangible results for his friend Jaume but also opens up new communicative life-lines for the protagonist of cycle B – the narrator/author.³

Cycle B: The narrator introduces himself after he has given a short characterization of Jaume and before he describes the personality of the third protagonist, Willie Fedora. Thus he positions himself right from the beginning in the middle. The narrative voice is the overlapping center of the other two cycles. We find him on his way down to swim, “cutting” through Jaume’s land. In his communication with Jaume, a very revealing speech register is used. When asked whether he is going to swim, his invariable answer, in direct speech, is: “You have divined my motive correctly” (194). This formal register⁴ seems rather out of place, addressed as it is to a seventeen-year old peasant working on the field. The verbatim translation of the Spanish *divinar* into “divine” instead of “guess” as well as using “motive” instead of “intention” or simply “you’re right” signals the social distance between Jaume and the narrator. Neither is properly at ease, in that neither is using his native tongue. If the reply was meant to be ironic, this is certainly lost on a working-class boy. An unnatural dishonesty on the narrator’s part is even more apparent in his other set answer: “Yes, doctors say it benefits the health” (194). He has to justify his seemingly leisurely idleness not only to Jaume but also to himself, because a little while later he insists that: “foreigners *work*” (195, italics original).

The narrator’s superficial social interactions with Jaume, termed as “good-neighbourly”, are almost nonexistent in comparison to those he has with the other village people and to the foreign colony. “We keep ourselves to ourselves” (195) fully characterizes his lack of concern and interest in other human beings; he literally shuts his door in the face of the needy. In the first set of events the narrator’s lack of social integrity and responsibility is not even felt as a lack. “None of us felt responsible for [Willie’s] lost Chinese” (195); here the narrator openly admits his lack of willingness to help and relieve Willie of his traumatic anxiety.

At the second stage, concern for other human beings, namely for Willie, is partially expressed through a feeling of relief that Willie is taken care of by Jaume: "The two social outcasts became such close friends that it spared us further responsibility for Willie's health" (197). The same shaking-off of responsibility is obvious when he wants the mayor to intervene on Willie's behalf: "[Willie] looked so thin and lost that, on meeting the Mayor, I suggested he should take some action" (200). It is only when he hears how Willie died, jumping out of the window, fleeing his Chinese, that he experiences pangs of remorse and guilt: "I really felt bad about him" (200). This marks a turning point in his behaviour and the beginning of his social commitment.

In the third "act", the narrator takes up an active relationship with the villagers and especially to Jaume. He gets involved, he feels responsible: "the job of protecting Jaume fell to me" (201). He acts and reacts on behalf of Jaume: he visits Jaume's cottage three times and engages Jaume in three long and lively dialogues. A formal language register ("Willie always wanted to enjoy the success that his frailties prevented him from attaining ", 203) slowly gives way to a more consultative and casual one: "My mind is made up. The devil take this contract" (213). The narrator is no longer playacting as he was at the beginning. He wants to go beyond being his good neighbour and employs all his faculties to gain Jaume's friendship: "Many thanks, Jaume, but I want nothing but your friendship" (213).

Whereas the protagonists of cycle A and cycle C have either succeeded in their quest for the removal of lack (Jaume) or having failed in attempting it (Willie) and thereby become static (Lotman, 342), the narrator/author's cycle has not, by the story's end, yet been completed. The most telling sign is the closing question addressed to the author, Robert Graves:

"La Vida con Papa." How does one say that in English, Don Roberto?" (214).

Life goes on with a lot of unanswered questions; it is an unending process, demanding assessment, involvement, responsibility, and after

failure and deception, the will to go on.

If we look at the story as a thinly disguised autobiography,⁵ it seems plausible that the narrator/author has come to terms not only with his youthful beginnings and his bodily handicaps, but also with his traumatic war experiences, metaphorically shown in the telegram scene. The haunting war images have not only been allayed, but their positive effect on the narrator/author is also apparent in his change of attitude towards life and his fellow human beings.

The hypothesis that the story presents three different aspects of the narrator's/author's psyche is corroborated by the handling of narrative perspective. The narrator acts throughout the story as a dramatic character with limited knowledge of the other characters' motives and actions. This is most apparent at the end of the story: the narrator (like everybody else) has been duped about Jaume's plagiarized play. "La Vida con Papa" is obviously the old Broadway hit, "Life with Father".⁶ But other elements suggest authorial omniscience, for instance when the narrator cites verbatim the dialogues between Jaume and Willie.

Jaume did not question Willie's account of those lost Chinese, but argued that the command of five hundred Chinese must have been too great a burden for so young a soldier as Willie; "Suppose someone were to give me five hundred sheep!" he said. "How would I manage them all singlehanded? One hundred, yes; two hundred, yes; three hundred, perhaps; five hundred would be excessive." "But if so, why do these yellow devils continue to haunt me?" "Because they are heathen and blaspheme God! Pay no attention! And if they ever plague you, eat rather than drink!" (197).

A bit later we see Willie through Jaume's eyes as the latter is leaving for his military service. "Willie, with streaming eyes, promised to irrigate the lemon grove, plough around the olive trees, plant the beans when the weather broke, and wait patiently for Jaume's return"

(199). This is followed by the omniscient narrator's point of view: "But two hundred phantom Chinese took advantage of his loneliness to prowl among the trees and tap at the kitchen window. Willie's samovar filled and emptied, [...] [he] seldom bothered with meals, and locked the cottage door against all callers" (200). The perspective then shifts back to the narrator, who is again acting as a dramatic character, describing only his own limited radius of actions and impressions. "I met him one morning in the postman's house, where he was mailing a package to the States." (200)

Although it might seem to be trivial, it is nevertheless striking how often the number three is either implied or cited explicitly throughout the story, thereby underlining the recurring theme of three-in-one. Apart from the three protagonists who can be interpreted as component parts of one entity, we have, as already mentioned, three communities living on the island, the Majorcan village people, the foreign colony and the outcast community. Three languages are spoken, English, Majorcan and Spanish, which is used as *lingua franca*. There are three versions of the play: the film version, Jaume's adaptation into a theatre play and Willie's translation. The narrator is "on [his] way down for a swim from the rocks *three* hundred feet below" (194). It only takes Willie *three* months to speak Majorcan fluently (197). The telegram arrives after *three* days (200), and contains a *triple* "Bravo" (201). There are *three* people who have not read the play: "So you haven't read the script either? That makes three of us" (209). The film with the original script "ran for whole *three* weeks" (214). And Jaume finally sells the plagiarized script for 300,000 Pts. (213).

The thrice-mentioned La Coma estate has already been discussed, as have the three visits to Jaume's cottage by the narrator. Three different wars, or warlike events play a crucial role, including: the siege of Madrid, the Korean War, and Jaume fighting the Moors in Spanish Morocco. The time-span of the story covers three consecutive San Pedro's Days, – the day dedicated to St. Peter who is known for his denying Christ three times. And last but not least there is Willie who had to take care of three hundred Chinese prisoners of war, a number he should have verified, instead of drawing rations for five

hundred of them.

This brings us to another leitmotif of the story: fraud and the misuse of language. We find it throughout the story in all its different shades and meanings. It begins with Jaume's poor mother being cheated out of her share of the La Coma inheritance by "trusting a lawyer who threw long words at her" (207), and it ends with Jaume's fraud.

Apart from the fraud perpetrated by Willie, the church collects quite a lot of money for Chinese missions although "no foreign missions have been tolerated in China for some years" (196). Samstag, the Broadway tycoon, tries to cheat the literary agent out of his commission, and both try to cheat Jaume. In order to prevent being defrauded, "a contract of thirty (sic) pages [is sent that] covered all possible contingencies of mutual and reciprocal fraud on the part of the author and producer" (204).

Originally Jaume may not have intended to plagiarise the Broadway musical. He nevertheless gives only a vague response when asked by the narrator whether it took him long to write: "Over the second [play] I did not need to rack my brains. It was a gift" (203). He thereby deliberately breaks one of the "cooperative principles of successful communication" (Grice, 45) by speaking not an untruth but by deliberately creating a false impression.

Communication is further hampered not only by the fact that three different languages are used, but even more by a series of pretences. The narrator *pretends* that he goes swimming on grounds of health. The foreigners *pretend* not to be at home when Willie calls, the literary agent *pretends* to like Jaume's simple life just to win his confidence, and Samstag *pretends* to have read the play. Inexact, ambiguous and downright false statements characterise the misuse of language.

But at the same time, it is language that makes society possible, that soothes and softens loneliness and anxiety. As Graves writes in one of his most famous poems "The Cool Web":

But we have speech, to blunt the angry day,
 And speech, to dull the rose's cruel scent,
 We spell away the overhanging night,
 We spell away the soldiers and the fright.

There's a cool web of language winds us in.

This "web" metaphor expresses all these aspects of language: the all-encompassing bond between human beings, the yarns spun by storytellers and writers, but also the image of being entangled in a net of lies. These functional and structural strands of language are woven into an intricate texture in "The Lost Chinese". There is the communicative strand which can lead to warm intimacy as between Willie and Jaume; there is language used to ease relations with others; at the other extreme, it is also used to hurt. The cultural aspect of language becomes apparent in the annual hiring of a repertory theatre to perform for the villagers on San Pedro's Day. And finally examples occur throughout the story of misleading and fraudulent uses of language: the telling of half-truths and downright lies.

The story ends with the revelation of fraud, namely, the plagiarism by Jaume of the Broadway classic *Life with Father* and the narrator/author's unwitting involvement in this fraud. The final acknowledgement of plagiarism serves not only as a punch-line. It is probably also meant to illustrate the thin line that separates an unintentional, thoughtless act of fraud from an intended, wilful one. Jaume took up the original play and re-wrote it without really thinking of plagiarism. Since this treatment only differs in degrees from that of his other play, which was written "in a style exploited by Menander, Terence, Plautus and other ancient masters" (198). But the narrator/author is at fault in that he supports Jaume's claim to the original authorship of the play without having read it and without verifying its origins.

Plagiarism, a writer's temptation and dilemma, is shown here in a multifaceted way. Works of art of universal appeal are consciously or subconsciously taken up, reworked or recycled throughout the ages. In our story, the Commedia dell'Arte-type play with the telling

title *La Vida Con Papa* is adapted, translated and supported by all three protagonists. They are fully responsible for the way they have become entangled in the maze of half-truths and open fraud. Whereas the young protagonist succeeds in cutting the truth quite thinly when he sells "his" manuscript, the older one succumbs under the haunting truth of misconduct and fraudulent behaviour concerning "The Lost Chinese". The narrator/ author who represents the core of the overlapping cycles is left to deal with the open question.

Notes

1. The page numbers refer to *The Second Book of English Short Stories*, Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1972.
2. As the sociologist Uriel Foa in his "resource theory" pointed out, all interpersonal relationships function by an exchange of resources, which belong to six types: love, status, information, services, goods and money. These resources are characterized by different degrees of "particularism" (love having the highest degree and money the least – that is, whereas we exchange love with only a very few persons, we have no such restrictions on money). The resources also vary according to their degree of symbolism or concreteness. Status is not tangible but has a high symbolic value whereas goods are tangible, but tend to have a little symbolic value (Foa, 13).
3. One is reminded of Graves' wartime experience when he, after being seriously wounded, was pronounced dead. "After his death had been officially announced, the military confessed a mistake, but Graves demurred: But I was dead, an hour or more" (Stade, 10).
4. See Joos, Martin: *The Five Clocks*. The five different speech registers: 1) frozen, 2) formal, 3) consultative, 4) casual, 5) intimate (11).
5. As we read in Seymour-Smith's biography, Graves had told him, that in *The Shout*, another short story, "the victim-figure of the tale,

Richard, was a 'surrogate for myself'. And Seymour-Smith goes on that "all the five main male characters [...], as well as the narrator – are 'sub-personalities' of the author" (Seymour-Smith, 109).

6. As Professor Bonheim pointed out to me, this title, *Life with Father*, quite obviously refers to Clarence Day's bestseller (New York, 1920) of the same name and a similar plot, later adapted for the stage.

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