

Critiquing the Churchwarden: Robert Graves and T.S. Eliot (part II)

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• Part II •

That he had always been highly critical of Eliot's work did not stop Graves from seeking him out after learning that A.S. Watt, his literary agent, had sent Graves's latest work, *The Roebuck in the Thicket*, to Faber and Faber. Eliot was now one of the directors at Faber, and so Graves decided to contact him, even though the two had not been in touch since their awkward break eighteen years earlier. Graves realized that in this new role, Eliot might prove a valuable ally, especially since Jonathan Cape and Oxford University Press had declined *Roebuck*. Thus it was not to Eliot the poet but to Eliot the scholar (and possible editor) that Graves wrote on 12 January 1945, naming him as one of the few people qualified to verify the book's classical and Biblical references, and explaining at length that he had just added two new chapters. When Eliot replied on the 19th expressing enthusiasm, Graves immediately sent him the two chapters as well as two further insertions, pointing out that continual new discoveries meant that he would keep adding to the manuscript (*Images* 327-29).

On 28 January 1946, just over a year since their renewed contact, Graves sent Eliot a revised version of *Roebuck* under its new title, *The White Goddess*, cautioning him that although it was much longer, the book "could not be cut without damage" (*Images* 336). The fact that Eliot voiced no objections to Graves's considerable additions during a period when paper was in short supply is astonishing. Two months later, Eliot wrote to Graves that the Fabers had accepted the book for publication; according to O'Prey, Eliot was "extremely impressed" with the new version, whose learning and labour were beyond his understanding (*Images* 341). Eliot went so far as to describe *The White Goddess*, in the publisher's catalogue, as a "prodi-

gious, monstrous, stupefying, indescribable book" (qtd in Seymour 312). His enthusiasm was no doubt genuine, yet one should nonetheless note the ambiguity of those four adjectives.

Graves continued to correspond sporadically with Eliot about *The White Goddess*: to discuss Karl Gay's cover illustration (Eliot had wanted a plain cover); to say he had added more information to the proofs (about the assumed name Achilles took among the women and what song the Sirens sang); on 23 March to tell him that the book had grown by another 15,000 words, explaining that he sympathized with Eliot for the "unexpected and awkward" problem this might pose. "So there's no question of any quarrel or lack of confidence between us" (*Moon* 43), he emphasized, perhaps anxious to avoid another break in their renewed relationship.

In America, meanwhile, Ezra Pound was about to be tried for treason for his pro-Fascist wartime radio broadcasts. Eliot was organizing a plea for clemency that would affirm Pound's importance as a writer without referring to his guilt or innocence, and assert that his position as a poet was of the "highest worth and dignity" (qtd in *Images* 341). When Eliot sent Graves a copy of the plea with a request to sign it, Graves replied (on 5 April) that although he agreed that "poets should stick together in the most masonic way," he never regarded Pound as a poet "and have consistently denied him the title. Now if it had been you, . . . I would have appealed in person to the Supreme Court, because after all though naturally I prefer some of your poems to others, you are obviously and ungainsayably a poet." Graves admitted being "shocked but not surprised" at the way the guards were treating Pound, yet he was unwavering: "But the real poets have supported worse sufferings with dignity and courage. If there were a single line or stanza of Pound's that recurred to my mind as true and beautiful, or merely as true, I should join in your plea—but to do so just because he is a 'name' would be unprincipled" (*Images* 342).

Eliot replied that he admitted Graves's signature would imply an opinion of the value of Pound's poetry. Graves liked neither the

poetry nor the man: he was put off by what Seymour-Smith termed Pound's "yankee manner and his jocosic slang" (86). Some years later, Graves attacked Pound in "Dr. Syntax and Mr. Pound" (1953) and in "These Be Your Gods, O Israel!" (1955), giving in the latter essay a different version of his refusal to help "U.S. Traitor Pound": "Eliot asked me to sign, but I make it a rule not to interfere with the domestic affairs of another nation" (CWOP 233).



No doubt encouraged by Eliot's role in publishing *The White Goddess*, Graves turned to him again after he and the Talmudic scholar Joshua Podro completed the first draft of what would become *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953). Writing on 14 May 1950, Graves told Eliot that he and Podro had been working nearly eight hours a day on the book, and explained at length a few of the specific problems they had addressed, discrepancies that were elucidated "in close argument" (*Moon* 73). He then suggested a mid-July meeting in London of himself, Podro, Eliot, and "a bishop, canon, archdeacon or other dignitary who has sound knowledge of the latest developments of NT [New Testament] criticism"; in short, Graves wanted a simple "two hours' test" to determine if the book was or was not Faber material. The "dignitary" would arrive "armed with certain knotty questions," whose solutions would either be proven "erroneous, inadequate or historically unsound," or would "stand up to scrutiny" (*Moon* 74).¹

Eliot replied that he was very interested, but when Graves met him in London in August there were no church dignitaries. Instead, Eliot praised *The White Goddess* and the poem entitled "In Dedication," and was so impressed with the poem used by Graves to demonstrate the workings of poetic thought—"Circling the circlings of their fish, / Nuns walk in white and pray" etc.—that he rose from his chair and exclaimed, "That's certainly real poetry, the real thing! But what does it mean, and how on earth did you do it?" Graves muttered a modest reply: "Don't know, don't know. It's there. I saw it" (qtd in Seymour-Smith 432). Eliot "seemed anxious to turn aside any discussion" of *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, "commenting sardonically that he would

of course be interested to read it—and that he hoped it might be rather ‘dry’ ‘if the Faith were to survive’” (Seymour-Smith 431). According to Seymour-Smith, it was “a moving meeting between two very different sorts of poet, puzzled by each other—but trying hard to understand each other” (432).

But if Graves was disappointed by Eliot’s attitude to *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, he did not show it. When Eliot wrote to him after that meeting, Graves replied from Deyá on 15 August: “My dear Tom — I used to call you this once, and propose with your consent to revive the custom” (*Moon* 76). Eager to smooth the publication path, he wrote that he understood the technical problems involved, and that Creative Age Press would do the first printing, so that Faber could reprint from the completed book and avoid errors and delays. He added in a post-scriptum that his admiration for Jesus had been “enormously enhanced” by his research, and his “respect for many of the Church Fathers, especially Paul, correspondingly reduced” (*Moon* 77). On 10 September, in a reply to another letter by Eliot, Graves discussed the book’s “scholarly value”—which Eliot had said would have to be judged by experts before a decision about publication could be made—and assured him that “no single sentence is undocumented.” He emphasized that he and Podro had found “shocking cases of misquotation and misinformation in all the leading authorities” (*Moon* 77-78).

When Graves finally finished the book in May 1951, he sent Eliot a copy, but without the relevant texts sent to Farrar, Straus (who had bought Creative Age). Graves boasted that he and Podro “had solved the main historical cruces and that our point of view will hold the field within a few years,” and that Part III would be “translated into one hundred-and-fifty-three languages.” They were grateful to Eliot for his “willingness to publish if the view has *prima facie* plausibility at least; knowing that your motive is one of conscience and not of commerce” (*Moon* 95). But Eliot was cautious: in his letter acknowledging receipt of the manuscript, he pointed out that he and his fellow editors would have to “think twice about” publishing the book (qtd in *Moon* 97). Graves replied on 26 June, stressing that his argument was

thoroughly documented, and that Podro, "who has the largest private library of Hebraica in England," would answer any questions from Eliot's expert reader. He closed with the hope that Eliot would come to a decision by July 24, "exactly a year after our last meeting, at which your experts failed to materialize" (*Moon* 97).

Graves's assurances and requests proved futile: Faber turned down *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. Eight months later, in a letter of 10 March 1952, Graves recounted the circumstances to his friend, the mycologist Gordon Wasson. He recalled that the book had "led T.S. Eliot (impelled perhaps by his crippled *malus angelus* John Hayward)² to write me a strange letter turning it down: 'if it had been duller and dryer, I should have published it'. Poor Eliot: he made a brave effort to do right, but could not" (qtd in *Moon* 98). In "These Be Your Gods, O Israel!" (1955), Graves called Eliot's rejection "charming: he explained that he 'would have published it if it had been more drily written'" (CWOP 233). In any event, when *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* was finally published in 1953 by Cassell and by Doubleday the following year—Farrar, Straus had turned it down—most of the reviews were hostile and the book was vehemently denounced by members of the clergy. It was never reprinted, even though, as O'Prey points out, many of its ideas "have since gained currency, even in established theological circles" (*Moon* 98).



A few years following the *Nazarene Gospel* disappointment, Graves published as *The Crowning Privilege* (1955) revised versions of the six Clark Lectures he had delivered at Trinity College, Cambridge, during the 1954-55 academic year. In these idiosyncratic essays, Eliot and *The Waste Land* do not fare very well. In "The Age of Obsequiousness," Graves writes: "Mr T.S. Eliot has recently published his *Homage to Dryden*. 'Homage to Dryden' indeed!" (CWOP 152). In fact "Homage to John Dryden: Three Essays on Poetry of the Seventeenth Century" had appeared in late 1924, thirty years previously. In "Harp, Anvil, Oar," Graves takes issue with Eliot's idea that the most interesting verse has been composed by taking the iambic

pentameter "and constantly withdrawing from it, or taking no form at all, and continually approximating to a very simple one. It is this contrast between fixity and flux, this unperceived evasion of monotony, which is the very life of verse" (qtd in CWOP 199, n. 2). Graves comments: "Interesting to some, embarrassing to others, like a jaunt in a car after mixing a little water with the petrol to make it go by fits and starts" (CWOP 199, n. 2). Graves quoted the passage again three years later in "Legitimate Criticism of Poetry" (1958), in a discussion of how "modern poetical experiment" has abandoned metre and broken verse forms to produce "free verse." His conclusion: "I can make nothing of Eliot's cautiously negative remark" (CWOP 263).

But Eliot makes his major appearance in the last lecture, "These Be Your Gods, O Israel!" Here Graves exposes what he feels is the undeserved adulation of five "idols" — Yeats, Pound, Auden, Dylan Thomas, and Eliot — "credited with having delivered English poetry from the shackles of the past" (CWOP 239). With admitted "iconoclastic zeal" (223), Graves proceeds to expose Yeats as a derivative poet with "nothing to say," Pound as a "barbaric" sham, Auden as a plagiarist of worthier poets (Riding in particular), and Thomas as almost incomprehensible. Eliot is described, with some resentment perhaps, as a young man who "began to feel bald and old and useless" as soon as he arrived in London, "had no war-neurosis to slough off, and stepped forward as a prophet of the uninhibited, anti-Romantic early 'twenties" (231).

Some thirty years previously, Graves had disparaged *The Waste Land* in *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry: A Political Analogy* (1925), condensed into "observations" for *The Common Asphodel* (1949): "by judicious manipulation of vowels and consonants a line can be made to limp, crawl, scream, bellow and make other ugly or sickening noises." Eliot lets "a line snuffle and clear its throat realistically: 'Madame Sososttris, famous clairvoyante, / Had a bad cold, nevertheless / Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe'" (CWOP 15, Graves's emphases). A year later, in "The Future of Poetry" (1926), Graves had pointed out that the poem's diction "varies from the archaic literary to the commercial and the squalidly obscene" (CWOP 31). His views on

The Waste Land were unchanged in 1955: in his Clark Lecture, Graves makes fun of Eliot for being “the first to apply the current art-fashion of *collage* to English verse—*collage* being the technique of pasting, say, autumn leaves, bus-tickets, metal shavings, cigar bands, fur, playing cards, and artificial flowers on a sheet of paper, in order to create a ‘significant’ composition. What the composition is ‘significant’ of, is never explained.” Graves adds that Eliot did it by pasting “fragments of the Elizabethan ornate against skilfully chosen examples of modern nasty (though never using words which would have barred him from the drawing-room).” Moreover, in his notes to the poem, Eliot (Graves seems to imply “with some nerve!”) “asked the reader to find, despite the continual change of subject and metre, a connecting thread of sense” (CWOP 232).

One finds in this essay a sense of Eliot’s lost potential, as if Graves were lamenting a talent diverted to lesser pursuits—“He became a churchwarden, edited Kipling, and recanted his former aspersions on Milton. . . . “an ex-banker . . . matured into a rugged, if retiring, businessman” – or a talent past its prime – the “Four Quartets” written merely “to reassure Eliot’s public that he still had a pen in his hand” (233). After quoting from that poem lines about having wasted twenty years “with shabby equipment always deteriorating,” Graves asks: “But why is he [Eliot] complaining? Who forced him, during the Battle of the Somme, to attend London tea-parties presided over by boring hostesses? Or, in after years, to become chairman of many committees, and figure in *The Directory of Directors*, instead of serving the Muse? Does he require our commiseration because his shabby equipment is always deteriorating and because he wasted twenty years in publishing the books of others instead of writing his own?” (234). “For my part, he concludes,” I wish that he had stopped at ‘The Hollow Men’ [1925], his honest and (indeed) heart-breaking declaration of poetic bankruptcy” (234). “At any rate, what I like most about Eliot is that though one of his two hearts, the poetic one, has died and been given a separate funeral, . . . he continues to visit the grave wistfully, and lay flowers on it” (234). This is almost malicious, and yet Graves admits: “I shall always be grateful to Eliot for having been the only publisher in London with the courage to

print my long *White Goddess*" (233).

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Three years later, when Graves examined Eliot's poetry again, it was for an American audience at the University of Texas in 1958, in a lecture entitled "Sweeney Among the Blackbirds." In discussing the long poem, he remarked that "the Cultural Establishments both of the United States and the United Kingdom" have found in Eliot a major poet for "the present era of rapid material and scientific progress": "*The Waste Land* has been their beacon for the last thirty years, and Eliot's record is academically clean: he unsaid his harsh judgement of Milton, and cannot be accused of writing any love poems since his school days." And yet the poem is "but a *collage* of lyrical and dramatic pieces connected by a thread as tenuous as that which links the mystificatory scenes of *The Cocktail Party*." So much for that beacon. "However," Graves continues, "Eliot's *Four Quartets*, taken in a lump, are lengthy enough and adult enough and religious enough and philosophical enough to pass as a masterpiece." As if "passing" were not enough, Graves adds a definition of "masterpiece" that undermines one's admiration for the poem: Graves is using the word in its original technical sense as a piece of work that satisfies the authorities, so that its maker "is henceforth entitled to rank as a master, or full member of the Establishment." Missing only is a jab at the poet, which follows hard upon: "Eliot's trade is well set up now. The British Establishment awarded him the Order of Merit, the highest cultural award in its gift—reserved for major operators in the arts and sciences" (CWOP 272).

The essay contains a second stab at the American expatriate, this time via Suibne Geilt, "the real Sweeney," hero of the ninth-century Irish poem *The Madness of Suibne*, not to be confused with Apeneck Sweeney, "the character celebrated by T.S. Eliot in two sordid poems" (CWOP 276), "Sweeney Erect" and "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." The latter, writes Graves, contains six lines "of Classic felicity," which he quotes. But Eliot got it all wrong: the nightingales could not possibly have sung "within the bloody wood / When

Agamemnon cried aloud" (when he was stabbed) because, argues Graves, "the wood at Mycenae was not 'bloody'. Agamemnon was murdered on the City acropolis in the Palace bath house, not in the wood." Moreover, according to classical authorities, the murder took place near the end of January, "a time when nightingales are silent, even for poets" (CWOP 276).

Douglas Day calls this kind of analysis "ideal weapons for destruction, but useful for little else: *any* poem, when its every detail is scrutinized sardonically and negatively, is likely to appear ludicrous and sloppily contrived." Furthermore, using this technique frequently leaves Graves "open to charges of malice and narrowness" (Day 198-99, his emphasis). Indeed, Graves is rather harsh on Eliot. However, in August the next year, when they were the subject of "Robert Graves and T.S. Eliot," two letters by Edward Dahlberg and Herbert Read in *The Twentieth Century*, it was Graves who was harshly attacked. Dahlberg castigated him for lack of "intellectual passion" and "listless and undisciplined" diction, dismissing the *The White Goddess* as a "loose farrago of blowsy polysyllables which neither quenches the soul nor delights a learned palate" (56). He accused Graves of acknowledging everybody "with the exception of those books he has cut as a pickpocket does a purse" (57), such as Gerald Massey's *Natural Genesis* (1883), whose ideas, claimed Dahlberg, Graves stole or refuted. Comparing Graves's misuse of dictionaries to Eliot's use of Marlow, Jonson, and Mallarmé in *The Waste Land*, Dahlberg concludes that "Graves does his part as the plagiarist in comic socks whereas T.S. Eliot wears the tragic buskin" (56). Graves is also called "choleric, vain and covetous," a man of "spite, rancour and envy" (58).

In his reply, Read declined what he called "the Graves gambit," in part because Graves had been attacking him "in a recent book—for what cause I know not" (58).³ "The man has a nose for oddities, idiosyncrasies, for doxies of every kind. A coney-catcher, as you say, self-exiled to a rocky island. I wish him good hunting. He has some honourable scars" (58). He lamented that the enormous amount of critical exegesis on *The Waste Land* was "unprofitable—no better than Graves's mythologizing" (59).



Graves's last critique of Eliot is found in one of his *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (1961) entitled "The Anti-Poet", a vehement indictment of Virgil as cowardly, unoriginal, unpoetical, humourless, misogynistic, and homosexual—among other things.⁴ Early in lecture, Graves quotes from "one of our senior literary church-wardens" the passage in *The Aeneid* where Aeneas meets the aloof Dido in Hades and explains his desertion of her on the grounds that he was under divine orders. "I have no doubt," writes the church-warden, "that Virgil when he wrote these lines, was assuming the role of Aeneas and feeling decidedly a worm'." Graves's dissenting opinion is that "Aeneas, so far from feeling a worm, was spitefully getting his own back on Dido. . . . Aeneas, a cad to the last, insults them both [Dido and nearby ex-husband Sychaeus] by bringing up the shameful adventure [which Sychaeus ignores] under cover of an apology" (CWOP 330).

The church-warden is Eliot, of course, member of The Virgil Society and author of "Virgil and the Christian World," a radio broadcast aired on 9 September 1951 and published in the *Listener* that month, and in 1953 reprinted with revisions in the *Sewanee Review*. Eliot's essay is a qualified apotheosis of Aeneas as "the prototype of a Christian hero" (10), and the Dido episode (quoted by Graves) exemplifies for Eliot the idea that destiny (*fatum*) does not "relieve mankind of moral responsibility" (11). There could not be two more antithetical views of Virgil than these, with Eliot claiming that among all the authors of classical antiquity, Virgil was "one for whom the world made sense, for whom it had order and dignity" (14), and Graves lamenting that "timorous, inoffensive Virgil . . . bartered his talent for social security" (CWOP 323).



Seymour-Smith believes that Eliot found Graves "extremely odd—but also extremely gifted. It is as obvious, for all that Graves

has said and written about Eliot, that he respected him" (432). Yet as we have seen, Graves was very ambivalent about Eliot. In his essay "Genius" (1969), Graves wrote that although Joyce, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Pound and Eliot became famous, "too many of them developed defects of character—ambition, meanness, boastfulness, cowardice or inhumanity—that defrauded their early genius" (*Difficult* 16). And while Graves congratulated Eliot upon receiving the Order of Merit, he secretly attributed Eliot's success to his having accepted *The White Goddess* for publication (see *Moon* 51-2). Eliot, Graves wrote in his 1957 "White Goddess" lecture, "not only got his money back, but pretty soon was rewarded with the Order of Merit, the Nobel Prize for Literature, and a smash hit on Broadway" (504).

So difficult was it for Graves to grant Eliot a laurel that in 1949, when M.J. Tambimuttu, editor of *Poetry London*, asked for a contribution to an homage on Eliot's sixtieth birthday, Graves seemed astonished at the idea. He wrote to James Reeves: "Why 60th? Why Eliot? Why homage? *The White Goddess*, true, is to come this month they say (25/-) from his publishing firm; but he'll have his reward for that in Heaven without any homage" (13 May 1949, *Moon* 58). Forty-seven writers contributed to the volume, including Reeves, Edith Sitwell, Auden, Spender, MacNeice, Marianne Moore, and Lawrence Durrell.⁵ But as he had done with Pound, Graves refused to participate; clearly he believed Eliot unworthy of the accolade. Although Graves would write in 1955 that Eliot "had once been, however briefly, a poet—I refer to the haunting blank verse passages in *The Waste Land*" (CWOP 233), a dozen years later he told Douglas Day that Eliot "died as a poet about 1927, as far as I was concerned" (qtd in Day 194, n.5).

Perhaps Graves's uneasiness with Eliot stemmed in part from Eliot's "Apollonian" temperament. In one of his Oxford Addresses entitled "The Dedicated Poet" (1961), Graves remarked that "Apollonian poetry is composed in the forepart of the mind: wittily, should the occasion serve, always reasonably, always on a preconceived plan, and derived from a close knowledge of rhetoric, prosody, Classical example, and contemporary fashion. . . . The Apollonian

allows no personal emotions to obtrude, and no unexpected incident to break the smooth musical flow of his verse. The pleasure he offers is consciously aesthetic." In contradistinction, "Muse poetry is . . . an unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged, though at the same time powerfully disciplined" (CWOP 308). It was impossible for Graves to rank Eliot as a Muse-poet. Moreover, according to Seymour-Smith, Graves thought Eliot "a marvellous satirist with a true poetic sense who had sold out to institutionalized religion" (373). He contrasts "Eliot's ideal poet (himself)," someone who withdraws into objectivity when faced with a problem, to "Graves's ideal poet (himself)," who is "more empirical, more pragmatic, classical only in his craftsmanship—but otherwise a member of the romantic, individualistic tradition to which Eliot was opposed" (98). Poetry for Eliot was essentially public, "at the service of a political and religious conservatism"; for Graves, its realm was private, "its origin in painful personal conflict" (98).

It is not surprizing that these differences in personality and worldview made for radically different kinds of poetry: "If Eliot had taken the path Graves took," writes Seymour Smith, "he would have written about his unhappy (first) marriage" (114). Unfortunately, although T.S. Eliot, O.M., conservative ex-banker, anti-romantic churchwarden, and member of the Establishment, had once proved useful to Graves as an editor and publisher, he never managed to impress Graves as a poet because, quite simply, he had not served his Muse.

Notes

1. For a synopsis of the book's thesis, see "'Summary of Critical Principles' from *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*," reprinted in *Moon* 291-94.

Eliot lived with editor and anthologist Hayward (1905-65) from 1946 to 1957. The arrangement came to an abrupt end when Eliot (68) secretly married his secretary (29), causing a permanent rupture in the friendship. Hayward, confined to a wheelchair by muscular dystrophy, was known for his sharp tongue and caustic wit.

The allusion is to the antagonistic review of Read's *The Nature of Literature* (1956) in *New Republic* 135 (24 December 1956): 17-19—reprinted in 1958 in *Steps* (Cassell) and *5 Pens in Hand* (Doubleday) as "An Eminent Collaborationist"—in which Graves attacks Read's psychological approach to the study of literature (see *Moon* 209-10).

For a convincing rebuttal of Graves's charges, see Hijmans.

See *T.S. Eliot: A Symposium* (1948).

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