Remembering Robert Graves

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In September 1969 I became a 'visiting professor' at the Mediterranean Institute in the village of Deya, Majorca. It was part of the C.W.Post University, of Long Island, NY, but had been set up as an extra-mural department that was designed to allow students to meet writers. In charge of the project was the American novelist Robert DeMaria, a powerfully-built man who radiated immense energy; his novel *Clodia*, about the mistress of the poet Catullus, had been praised by Robert Graves, and was obviously deeply influenced by the Claudius novels.

Among my fellow 'visiting professors' were Anthony Burgess and the poet Diane Wakowski. Also on the staff was a teacher named George Cockcroft, who was writing a novel. One day, as we were walking to the post office, he told me the plot - about a man who is so indecisive that in order to make up his mind he has to throw dice; years later, when a publisher sent me a novel called *The Dice Man*, I realised that George had actually completed the book, and was now masquerading under the name Luke Rhinehart.

The most distinguished resident of Deya was, of course, Robert Graves, who lived half a mile outside the village in a white villa. Graves had moved from England in 1929, together with the neurotic American poetess Laura Riding, with whom he had a curious, masochostic relationship, which had become even more intense when Riding had tried to commit suicide by jumping out of a fourth floor window in St Peter's Square, Chiswick.

Graves left England partly out of a dislike of the English liter-

ary scene, partly out of the need to economise. He had been struggling to make ends meet throughout the 20s, although the success of his war memoirs *Goodbye to All That* improved the situation just as he was becoming a lifelong exile.

My own attitude towards Graves had always been ambivalent. I had read the Claudius novels in my teens and found them fascinating - as most readers did - because of their uninhibited descriptions of the sex lives of the Romans. But I did not regard them as 'important' novels. (Neither did Graves; he told Liddell Hart that he had written them as potboilers, to try to clear debts of £6,000, which in modern cash would be getting on for £100,000). I had been impressed by a novel called *King Jesus*, but less so by his book on Palmer the poisoner, *They Hanged My Saintly Billy*, which took the outrageously implausible view that Palmer was innocent.

I had also wrestled determinedly but unsuccessfully with *The White Goddess*, which I finally succeeded in understanding only when I found a lecture by Graves (in a book called *Five Pens in Hand*) which simplified it, and made me wonder why he had not written the whole book in the same style to begin with. And I had read his Oxford lectures on poetry, which had enraged me with their attack on Yeats. I had bought a volume of Graves's poems to try to understand what right he had to feel so superior, and been more baffled than ever, since I found his poetry oddly unappealing. In an essay I had written in the late 1950s, I had compared it to a well-crafted piece of kitchen furniture: solid, practical, yet somehow lacking in the kind of lyrical intensity that seemed to me the essence of poetry.

So when I went to Majorca, I had no particular desire to meet Graves; he struck me as a far less interesting person than his friend T.E.Lawrence. But Bob DeMaria spoke warmly about him, and it seemed to me a pity to live in the same village as one of my most distinguished contemporaries, and never to meet him. So one day, when a parcel of some book of mine had arrived from my publisher (I can no longer recall what it was) I walked over to Graves's house, Canellun, with a signed copy.

As I arrived at the gate, I met his wife Beryl, just driving away in a car - an attractive woman, some years his junior. She stopped the car, and when I introduced myself, explained that her husband was taking his afternoon walk; she thanked me for the book and said she would be in touch. The following day I received a note from her inviting me over for a drink.

When I arrived the following afternoon, it was Graves himself who came to the door. He was a tall man, with a craggy face, a broken nose, a mass of untidy grey hair, and an upper-class English accent that seemed oddly out of tune with his appearance - with that powerful face, you expected him to speak with a low growl. After a while, he proposed that we should go for a walk to the beach - which was about a mile away down a long valley. He wore a vast, sombrero-like hat which made him recognisable miles away.

Conversation - as always between two writers who are meeting for the first time - was cautious, like two boxers sizing one another up. I asked him about T.E. Lawrence, about whom I had written in *The Outsider*, and he was distinctly unforthcoming, as if implying: Do you expect me to talk about an old friend to a total stranger? So I let him do most of the talking - he was explaining that Mediterranean villages are usually built inland because of fear of pirates, and that Deya had been raided many times.

On the beach we changed into swimming trunks - I think Beryl had suggested I bring mine with me - then Graves pointed at the cliff and asked me if I would like to try 'the traverse'? It was impossible to see what he meant - there was no obvious path along the cliff face. But I said I would be happy to try it.

He led me over some sharp rocks, then showed me a handhold and foothold on the face of the cliff. He climbed up himself and told me to follow - it was important, he said, to put my hands and feet just where he put his, otherwise I would find the next step impossible, and might land on the rocks below.

So we moved cautiously over the cliff-face, perhaps ten feet

above the rocks. It quickly dawned on me that this was a test. But he was also kind about it, explaining very precisely just how to place my feet, and how to reach out for the next hand-hold in the rock. And when finally we stood on a rock above the sea, he dived in gracefully, and I followed suit rather less gracefully - I have never been a good diver. But as we clambered up the beach, he turned round and slapped me on the shoulder. 'You'll do'. I knew I had passed.

From then on, the sense of constraint disappeared; he treated me like someone he knew and liked.

Back at Canellun, he poured me a glass of wine. There was a photograph of him on the shelf, with the hair looking as if it had been in a tornado, and he mentioned a distinguished photographer and asked me what I thought of it. I said: 'It makes you look like the Great Grey Poet.' He laughed and pretended to punch me in the stomach with his clenched fist. It was clear that I had been accepted.

In a book of his *Poems About Love* that he gave me that day, he wrote: 'Colin Wilson from Robert Graves. Glad to meet you at last and find you wholly misrepresented.'

I understood what he meant. In 1956, my first book *The Outsider*, and John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, had started an unprecedented furore in the British press. We had been labelled 'Angry Young Men', and the publicity - much of it silly or malicious - had been unrelenting. But many writers of Graves's generation felt that publicity was not the best way to achieve literary recognition, and were understandably dismissive or hostile. Moreover, if Graves had read my essay about him - which I think he said he had - then he had additional reason for feeling hostile; for although I discussed his novels appreciatively, I had been critical of his comments on Yeats.

It may have been that afternoon that I told him that I had been asked to write a book on 'the occult', and asked his advice. He gave it in one word: 'Don't'. Fortunately I ignored it, for when *The Occult* appeared (dedicated to Graves) some two year later, it became something of a bestseller - my first since *The Outsider*. It certainly improved

our finances.

The following afternoon, I went down to the beach with my wife Joy, and I climbed across 'the traverse' on my own. Provided you followed Graves's instructions, it was less dangerous than it looked. And at the end, the only way back to the beach was to dive into the sea - it would have been impossible to return the same way.

As we were leaving the beach, we met Robert walking down in his vast cowboy hat. He asked: 'Did you do the traverse?', and when I said yes, looked pleased. I was glad I had ignored Joy's advice not to risk breaking my neck.

A couple of days later, I came in from teaching a class and found Robert in our kitchen. He was teaching my son Damon how to split a banana into three with his thumbnail. I had no idea that a banana could be split lengthwise in such a manner, and totally forgot it until Damon reminded me of it long after Graves's death.

Later, Robert gave Damon his children's book *The Poor Boy Who Followed His Star*. And when, a few years later, Damon realised that the *I, Claudius* series on television, which he recorded and watched again and again, was by the tall man he had met in Deya, he was suitably impressed.

I walked back with Robert to the edge of the village, and we talked about Nostradamus. He asked me whether I thought the 'Hister' quatrains referred Hitler, or to the River Danube (the Ister), and I said that my own reading of Nostradamus suggested that it was Hitler who was being referred to.

On another of these walks - or perhaps it was when we were talking in his tiny study - he made a comment that intrigued me: that true poetry was written in 'the fifth dimension.' As with so many of his pronouncements, he refused to explain what he meant.

And it was years later, when I was thinking about the whole question of dimensions, that I realised that the fifth dimension is free-

dom. You can define an object with two dimensions, its latitude and longitude (although if it is above the ground, you need to add the third coordinate of height. But an animal has an extra dimension of freedom - the fourth dimension that Einstein called time. And most of us spend our lives trapped in time, like any other animal. But when a poet or artist is inspired, he achieves a sense of being 'above' time. He is, in fact, in the fifth dimension...

Graves also made an interesting comment when we were speaking of 'the occult' - that many young men use a form of sorcery to seduce young women. I am convinced this is true. When a man's sexual desire becomes fixated on a woman, he seems to be able to exert a kind of telepathic influence that is a form of hypnosis.

This was obviously a matter that fascinated Graves. I have always found women delightful and charming, but for the past forty five years have been quite happily married to Joy, (whom I met when she was 21 and I 22) with no inclination to seek additional embodiments of the eternal feminine. But then, I am a typical Cancer, and attach great importance to family and domestic background. Graves was a Leo, with all their drive and dramatic flair, and I suspect that Venus played some important part in his birth chart. He needed women as 'muses', and I was told that his enthusiasms caused Beryl a few moments of anxiety.

There was in the village a beautiful, dark-haired girl, the daughter of a rich American (Deya was full of rich Americans), who was Robert's current muse. She also came to some of my classes and lectures, and seemed to me a sweet, good-natured girl who was slightly bewildered by the admiration of this elderly poet, and had no desire to be anyone's muse. (In 1969, Robert was 74, and was convinced that he would die at any moment - he told Bob DeMaria that when he fell asleep at night, he was never sure whether he would wake up in the morning; in fact, he lived to be 90).

I do not know whether Robert ever had sexual relations with his muses, although I gather that he used to walk over the mountain to the next village, Soller, to see yet another of them. (This is commem-

orated in a poem called 'Around the Mountain'). But the tales of Laura Riding that I heard around the village made me suspect that he had an element of masochism, and rather enjoyed being made unhappy by women. I did not disapprove, but it seemed to me a waste of time and emotional energy to be in love with more than one woman at a time.

While writing this piece, I asked Joy what she recalled about Robert, and she reminded me of something I had forgotten: that he invited the students over to the olive orchard below his house, and gave a talk on Deya and its history. He was obviously very strongly attached to it. And one evening when Joy and I were having dinner at Canellun, he told us that be believed that the Teix (pronounced Teesh), the mountain range that ran around Deya, had some magnetic property that influenced those who lived there, and sometimes unsettled people who were not used to it. (One student from the college had had a psychotic episode, and had gone and thrown stones through the windows of Canellun). At that time, neither Joy nor I had ever heard of ley lines or earth forces, and Joy was to comment that she simply regarded this as another of Robert's intellectual eccentricities. It was only later that she realised he was almost certainly right.

Looking back, I realise that Graves and I got on so well because we were both, in a sense, scholars (I apologise for using this old fashioned word). I had been an obsessive reader since I was a child, and I think *The Outsider* made its first impact because it was full of such an odd assortment of writers, artists and thinkers: T.E. Hulme, Hesse, Granville Barker, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Wells, Hemingway, T.E. Lawrence, Van Gogh, Blake, George Fox, Gurdjieff, Ramakrishna... I had at first been indifferent to the prospect of meeting Graves because nothing in his work suggested that he was interested in ideas. But it was only necessary to look at the books in his study - many in piles on the floor - to realise that reading had always been as important a part of his life as of mine. I have no reason to think he had the slightest interest in philosophy, or had ever read Dostoevsky or Nietzsche. Yet before I left Deya, I had an impression of a powerful mind that had almost wilfully chosen to be misunderstood by his contemporaries.

On two occasions he showed me poems he had just written, complete with crossings-out, and I began to appreciate his poetry - particularly since he gave me the volume of his love poems. I realised that he was not a poet - or a human being - who wore his heart on his sleeve. He was highly disciplined, with a respect for the military virtues, like Ulrich, the hero of Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*. He enjoyed early English poetry, particularly Skelton, and poetry provided him with some of the disciplines he needed to escape the traumas as of the war. His poetry can only be understood as the work of a highly disciplined man. I can now see that his best poems - and there are a remarkable number - are among the finest of the century.

But it was for another reason that I came to feel that Graves is a writer of the first importance. When I asked him if he had ever had any kind of mystical experience, he recommended me to read a story called 'The Abominable Mr Gunn'. It is obviously a fragment of autobiography, and describes how, as a schoolboy, sitting on the roller outside the cricket pavilion, he suddenly 'knew everything.' 'I remember letting my mind range rapidly over all its familiar subjects of knowledge, only to find that this was no foolish fancy. I did know everything.' He explains that it was not a religious or philosophical theory, but a 'key' that could open the lock of any door. It was still there when he woke the next day, but as soon as he tried to write it down, it began to fade away.

The title of the story refers to the maths master, Mr Gunn. A fellow pupil, F.F. Smilley, had apparently developed the powers of a calculating prodigy. Faced with a complicated mathematical problem, Smilley simply wrote down the answer. He explained that 'it just came to him.' And Gunn, instead of investigating this amazing phenomenon, simply caned Smilley until he lost the ability.

Yet this intuitive power to by-pass logic and go straight to the answer is the essence of poetry, In *The White Goddess*, Graves distinguishes between what he calls 'solar' and 'lunar' knowledge. Solar knowledge is our normal, rational way of thinking, and what scientists believe to be 'the scientific method'. Lunar knowledge is intuitive, and

seems to contradict the laws of rationality. Graves's central belief was that poetry is a 'lunar' faculty, and that we ignore this at our peril.

This lunar intuition can actually contradict everything we know as science. There are certain problems concerning prime numbers (numbers than cannot be divided by any other number without a remainder of one) that cannot be solved even by computer; yet mathematical prodigies solve them after a few moment's thought. It is as if they hover like bird's above the whole number field and see the answer. Graves's recognition of the central importance of 'lunar knowledge' seems to me comparable in importance to the profoundest insights of Nietzsche or Dostoevsky. He would have grasped in an instant, for example, the fundamental error behind Derrida's Deconstruction, with its denial of 'presence', an ultimate source of meaning.

My book *The Occult* came out in early September, 1971, and I sent Robert one of the first copies. His acknowledgement, dated September 21, reads: 'Dear Colin, Thanks for the dedication, but I was never an occultist: occultists hide the source of their knowledge. I am quite plain about it as a simple use of the fifth dimension, which at least one person in twenty relies upon. You write very well at any rate, yours ever, Robert.'

His meaning could hardly be more clear: the 'fifth dimension' is that intuitive ability that enabled Smilley to see the solution to a difficult mathematical problem 'in a flash.'

The 'one in twenty' refers to my comment in the book that all animal groups contain a 'dominant 5%' - one in twenty - and that all poets (who belong to this group) seem to have some paranormal ability. I devoted a chapter in the book to *The White Goddess* and to the paranormal abilities of poets.

I never saw Graves after 1969. I undoubtedly sent him a copy of the sequel to *The Occult*, *Mysteries*, which devotes yet more space to his theory of lunar knowledge, but have no recollection of his response. What I consider my best book on the paranormal, *Beyond the*

Occult, again treats Graves as a central figure; unfortunately, it came out three years after his death, in 1988.

He was often ill in his later years, and apparently suffered some effects of senility. I prefer to remember him as I last saw him - tall, commanding, laconic, yet quite obviously generous and affectionate.