

Robert Graves In America

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Perhaps no North American venue could be more perfect for a conference on Robert Graves in America than the Poetry/Rare Books Collection of the State University of New York at Buffalo. Here in the Capen Hall Library on June 22-24, 2000, almost fifty Robert Graves scholars met to discuss the reputation of Graves in America, the influence of America on Robert Graves's thoughts and work, and the place of America in Robert Graves's imagination. John Rigney presented a paper to this group entitled, "Robert Graves's Reputation in America," in which Rigney pointed out that Graves and Laura Riding's attacks on anthologies in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry* and in their *Pamphlet Against Anthologies* showed that Graves was very aware of the importance of the poem or poet's context in creating reputation. In his paper, Rigney focused closely on Louis Untermeyer's anthology, a commercial undertaking and not a project ruled by aesthetic objectives or by an artistic program. In fact, Untermeyer's *Modern British Poetry* is a perfect example of all that Graves found objectionable about anthologies. This led to an ongoing hostility between Robert Graves and Untermeyer, one which cost Graves's reputation in America dearly. Combine this tension with the sparse reviews of Graves's work in Harriet Munro's *Poetry*, where there was a sixteen year silence, and with the fact that Harriet Munro, perhaps the most powerful editor of poetry in America, also compiled anthologies of her own, and one realizes how Untermeyer's summation of Robert Graves as "primarily a writer of prose fiction" stood unchallenged for so long in the United States.

Frank Kersnowski reported on "Robert Graves and Ken McCormick: A Literary Friendship." Apparently Robert Graves's relationship with Ken McCormick, and therefore with Doubleday, began with a chance meeting: Kersnowski's summations of the corre-

spondence show it to be a collection of intimate, friendly, and chatty letters, very revealing of Graves's personality and his concern for his reputation in America. For example, *Food for Centaurs* was originally called, in draft at least, "Buffalo Round-Up", and the McCormick collection contains several charming letters about Robert Graves's request that the title be changed, since Beryl Graves hated "Buffalo Round-Up", and Graves himself feared that people would think he had taken to writing Westerns.

Devindra Kohli's paper, "Robert Graves and Robert Frost: Poets of Terror and Trees", drew interesting parallels between Graves and Frost, thought probably the most American of poets. Each of these men, however, had great respect for the other writer's technique, images, and respect for form. Both men demonstrate a sense of the spoken language's irregularity as it struggles with meter, and finally the most striking similarity is between the ideas of these two men: trees, winter, and terror, Devindra argued, are frequently used to evoke the same emotions by both the British and the American poet.

Of course, no American writer influenced Robert Graves as did Laura Riding, and two of the papers at the conference dealt directly with the continuing enigma of this relationship. Carla Billitteri's wonderful paper, "Riding/Graves: The Meaning of Collaboration", presents Riding's collaboration as a turning point in Graves's thinking about poetry. When he began to work with Riding, all Graves's previous theories about the role of the unconscious in the poet, Billitteri believed, are entirely repressed, possibly simply for consistency's sake. Since Riding believed "sincerity must be artificial to appear sincere" and that "appearances do not deceive if there are enough of them", this is a radical change from Graves's early ideas about trance and nightmare in poetry. This repression continued until in Laura Riding's "Obsession" she overtly declared her intent to assimilate Robert Graves into what she called "monological monarchy" in *Deya*. With Graves in what Billitteri called "intellectual vassalage" to Riding, he would thus be a subordinate, and Riding's "collaboration" with Graves would be, in Billitteri's fine phrase, a "rehearsal of intellectual ventriloquism". Robert Graves helped construct an intellectual edifice

in which he did not believe, in order to justify Laura Riding's footnotes in which she corrected Robert Graves. Billitteri reads "This What I Mean" as Graves's calculated slap at Laura Riding the beginning of the end of their collaboration. In the end, Laura Riding felt—and this is important to remember—that she did not influence Graves all that much.

On the other hand, Dunstan Ward in "Laura Riding's Presence in Graves's Poetry" argued that Laura Riding pervades and permeates Robert Graves's work: as collaborator at first and finally as a nemesis—with the polemics all coming from Riding. Graves himself wrote to the critic Michael Kirkham denying Laura Riding's *extreme* influence on his work, saying that it was only "feedback", that Laura Riding was one of seven women whose influence on his work each lasted roughly about seven years. But in the drafts of Graves's poetry, Dunstan finds evidence that Riding's influence was, in fact, much more than feedback: for example, evidence surrounding the creation and revision of the poem "Against Kind" shows that Riding declared the poem "untrue" and "rejected" it. Her final assessment of the poem "Single Fare" was that the poem was a "muddle". In a very interesting talk, Dunstan presented five drafts of the poem "To Evoke Posterity" and analysed the interplay between Riding's "suggestions" and Graves's revisions. The last draft of "To Evoke Posterity" was "passed" by Laura Riding. Apparently, in the poems that successfully survived the collaboration, Laura Riding might be considered a mere helpful reader, however arrogant her suggestions.

Of course, America is also an imagined setting for at least two of Graves's novels. In "Robert Graves's Lamb Novels and the Influence of William Corbett on the English History of the American Revolution," Ian Firla presented an omnibus perspective on Graves's view of history. Robert Graves would be the last to say that his novels are based on fact. He would argue that they are convincing because of his use of, say, the analeptic method or his own constant working (by "indirect flight") to make the story *seem* to be true. Even when Graves is presenting Sergeant Lamb's perspective on the American Revolution, showing the bumbleings and mistakes of the British mili-

tary, Robert Graves still uses a very postmodern approach to history, making it his own by following his singular ideas about history, making it real for the reader.

Peter Christensen, in his "Robert Graves, Kenneth Roberts, Howard Fast and the American Revolution", set Graves's Lamb novel in the context of the huge American appetite for historical fiction, which Kenneth Roberts and his novels had helped create. Though approaching the subject from three very different political points of view, all three authors—Graves the liberal, Roberts the conservative, Fast the radical—presented the American Revolution in remarkably similar terms. All three authors realized that first, the American forces were in fact a democratic "rabble in arms" and, secondly, that the Revolutionary War was in fact an American *civil* war (and each author shows a great deal of sympathy, surprisingly, for the Tories or Loyalists). Finally, each of the three writers realizes that the public opinions of the day (and, maybe, thus our subsequent view of "history") were fashioned largely by demagogues and demagoguery.

And what of America as an "idea" in Robert Graves's work and life? Kevin Tierney, who in 2000 was working on his unpublished biography of Graves, presented what he called the "maiden" voyage of his thesis to the conference: America (and its sales) allowed Robert Graves to concentrate on writing his poetry, because America and its sales maximized Graves's income. Tierney argued that America exerted a "siren call" on Robert Graves's generation, and that "transatlantic recognition" was Graves's goal even early in his career. Though his early attempts to secure a place on the United States lecture circuit failed—perhaps simply because he attempted this too early in his career—Robert Graves eventually became a player, Tierney insisted, in the "star" system. America became an Eldorado to Graves, the solver of financial and other problems as his life went forward; therefore, Graves relied less and less on Britain's psychic income, and more on America and the international star system. (It should be noted that there was lively discussion of Tierney's thesis, including unscheduled remarks by Graves's daughter Catherine Dalton, who insistently disputed Tierney's point of view).

Other papers and presentations successfully elaborated the theme of Graves in America. John Smeds in "Graves and Modernism" presented his thesis that Graves might most profitably be viewed not as a poet in the British and American tradition, but rather as a European modernist: most interestingly, Smeds insists that Graves's progression of artistry and of ideas about art might be most successfully integrated by considering his similarities, and even his sources, in common with Surrealists like Miro, Bunuel, Dali, Lorca and of course Picasso, who were his contemporaries and who were, after all, living on the Catalan mainland. Alone, among 20th century literary movements, Lorca and other surrealists speak of the Muse as a reality.

Conference-goers were (as mentioned earlier) treated to unscheduled remarks from Catherine Dalton, presenting and exploring her perspective on the themes of the conference, such as the meaning of America in Graves's thinking and the puzzle of the relationship between Graves and Riding. Other memoirs of Graves included that of the American poet Robert Creeley, now on the faculty at Buffalo. Before joining the Black Mountain Movement in 1954, Creeley was among that group of younger poets who spent considerable time with Graves in Mallorca. (Creeley's *The Island* is a roman a clef about Robert Graves and his life in Deya, about the time when Martin Seymour-Smith was serving as William Graves's tutor.) Though a great admirer of Graves, Creeley was then scandalized by Graves's remarks "I am halfway through a poem for the *New Yorker*," and by Graves's odd enthusiasm for the work of W. H. Davies.

Norman Austin, in a fascinating and detailed presentation, placed Graves's anthropological and classical scholarship in context with "Robert Graves and American Classical Scholarship." Julia Simone spoke on "Robert Graves: The American Connection, Anno 1966." (Her remarks tended to substantiate and illustrate the Tierney thesis, that with his friendships with the likes of Ava Gardner and Jerome Robbins, and with his *Playboy* interview, Robert Graves had achieved "near pop-star status" in America by 1966.)

William Nunez, an American director, presented "Comments on the Robert Graves Film: *Poetic Unreason*". The film was then in development, and will use Graves's poetry as a bridge from scene to scene. Graves's novel *Watch the North Wind Rise* was a popular seller in America, and Joseph Cohen's paper "The Impossibility of a Poetic Utopia" placed Graves's work in the tradition of dystopian thinking and illustrated for the conference that this dystopian thought might also be an implicit critique of America. According to Cohen, Robert Graves argued that the best scientific thinking should be informed by poetic thinking—that death and trauma and violence are associated with a naive and idealistic faith in progress, especially technological progress.

The final paper of the conference was John Presley's "*Antigua, Penny, Puce: American Evidence of its Writing and Revision*," in which Presley illustrated the value of American Robert Graves collections. The Graves collection in Morris Library at Southern Illinois University, for example, contains drafts and correspondence relating to the novel *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, and Presley showed that these letters and drafts indicate that Graves relied very heavily on friends in England for the novel's information about stamp collecting and other subjects. This "research" by Graves's friends is one pole of his collaborative style. The other pole is represented by his reliance on William Fuller, a London barrister, whom Graves engaged to provide legal advice for the plot line of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. The Southern Illinois University collection shows that by the time the novel was finished, Fuller had become an editor, a full fledged collaborator, and possibly even the primary author of many of the court scenes in the novel.

The Buffalo conference was a well-organized success. We were treated to cocktails and dinner in the Poetry Collection, surrounded by a fascinating exhibit of manuscripts, letters, and editions from the Graves collection at Buffalo. We were treated to a tour of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, followed by cocktails and dinner at the Saturn Club in Buffalo. And the Buffalo conference set new standards for conference momentos. Each participant received two books specially created for the conference by Robert Bertholf and the staff of the

poetry collection: the first was a facsimile edition of *Over the Brazier*, Graves's 1916 volume originally produced by the Poetry Bookshop. The cover for the facsimile edition was a photograph of the original cover (including the inside cover, which in the specimen from the Buffalo collection has a Robert Graves's signature top right). Even more beautifully produced was the second facsimile edition, *Over the Brazier: the Manuscript*, with a mix of reproduced autograph manuscripts, typescripts with autograph revisions, and fair copies in Graves's hand. There are, in this collection, even photographic reproduction of the first drafts of poems in *Over the Brazier* that were written in the Graves's copy of the *Every Man's Library Poems of Keates*, presented to Graves by his father—that presentation page is photographically reproduced, too—and carried by Graves in the trenches. We are all grateful for these wonderful additions to any scholar's library, and these books certainly illustrate the riches of the Buffalo Robert Graves collection.

Our sincere thanks to the organizers of this conference, Robert Bertholf and the conscientious staff at the Poetry Collection, the University at Buffalo.