A Reminiscence

Robert Creeley

It's almost fifty years since I went with our young family to Mallorca. That family itself has much changed, dispersed, grown up, simply turned to other times, needs and places in all the years now past. For my own part it was that decisive turning in the road, changing my life forever, taking me out of our painfully confused marriage, so making wounds that never quite could heal – but also bringing me finally to Black Mountain College in 1954, where I found the enabling company of my life as well as an ability to teach, which has stood me in good stead all the many years since. So I remember those days in Mallorca very particularly – as though they were, in the old phrase, only yesterday.

How we happened to go to Mallorca in the first place was fact of absolute luck. In the early fifties John Sankey's modest 'little magazine', *The Window*, had printed some poems by a young Englishman, Martin Seymour-Smith. They were deft, quick witted, and with echoes of a poet I dearly loved, S. T. Coleridge. I recall especially one called 'All Devils Fading' and that became the title poem of Martin's early collection published by our Divers Press in Mallorca in 1953. In any case, I wrote Martin a classic fan letter, hoping for the company of an active peer in our isolated French retreat, by mail alone if nothing else might be possible, and so that story begins. The full account is to be found in the only forthright novel I've ever written, *The Island*, wherein Martin is Artie, his exceptionally brilliant and moving wife Janet becomes Marge, and Robert Graves, their various employer, the writer Duddon.

Janet really wanted to be reading Leopardi, she would tell me, but Graves's need for research and prepping for his *The Greek Myths* had her hard at work on all the necessary sources. Her Greek was excellent, albeit she seemed to find the whole business tedious. Meantime – as William will well remember – Martin was ostensibly preparing him for the examinations required for his admission to the proposed school in England. He was the schoolteacher or was supposed to be.

At that time at least he very much wanted to be a fulltime writer, particularly a poet. No wonder the Graves household, in all its disposition, was one he found so impressive as a model. But I often wondered just what my own role was in his thinking. Witness? Confidant? Patsy? I found him insistently interesting, even as he borrowed money sans let, arrived at dawn in Bañalbufar, having come in a taxi we then paid for. My wife Ann finally came to loathe him – and me as well because I was such a simple mark in her estimation.

Nonetheless we practised our art with very self-conscious integrity. We mused on the virtues of our peers. We attempted to start a small press together, The Roebuck Press, using my wife's money. But we had soon to recognize that his English habits would never feel easy with my American insistences, and so we gave it up – but not before we had published a small collection of his mother's

verse, under the nom de plume Elena Fearn.

I so emphasize Martin in these notes because it is he who is the crucial link, the guide, as it were, introducing me to Robert Graves and his family and also making an occasion that had me coming and going from their Palma apartment quite frequently despite a possibly defensive air. I was young, and not only young but very American – a last bastion of colonial hopes and dreams in the very den of the rejected culture. I remember Robert (for so we all called him) saying to the company, 'Now we can't say anything bad about Ezra Pound. Bob here likes him.' I writhed in conflicted irritation and defencelessness. I well remembered what Robert had reported of his friend T. E. Lawrence's dismissal of Pound after he had introduced the two. It seemed to him ludicrous that Pound should presume either his authority in classical reference or in such translation as the Propertius. He knew neither Greek nor Latin, and that was that. Useless too my proposal that Charles Olson had worked out a seemingly viable theory for the Sumerians having got to Central America well before any other peoples from the old world. Such a thought provoked only his competitive disposition and he proposed any number of alternative possibilities, any, in short, that would let one be rid of Olson's.

Paradoxically perhaps, Robert's response was very like any poet's might be. In that curious, self-absorbed office one cannot suffer comfortably the displacement of his or her authority to imagine, to *make* a world, *the* world, in mind. Just so the extraordinary range and particularity of *The White Goddess* – a book of wonders for us then in that it insisted upon a poetry of both art and the archaic acts underlying, a telling of the human story not as a reference or abstracting history but as a re-enactment, a ritual of the human condition as words, so human in their own fact, kept the insistent faith. Thinking of those days, I see Juan Graves, still very young, riding his new lemon yellow bike about the city of Palma – sturdy, absorbed, pedalling through puddles and over curbs, making his way intrepidly forward. He is the child addressed in the great poem 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice'. One feels the rhythms gather, the feminine endings, as one says, the backbeat that leads one forward, reflecting, continuing, detailing.

I remember Robert's saying that insofar as Mallorca seemed then to offer such a warmth and simplicity of place for persons such as ourselves, it left them paradoxically with none of the usual problems and so they turned on one another, finding nothing else to contest. Truly there seemed little indeed that might provoke the familiar dilemmas. For example, I recall our rent on the last house we had in Bañalbufar – a charming old style place at the top of the town looking down to the sea – was $3.75 a month. The other place we had in Bononova, within easy distance of the centre of Palma, was around $10 a month. Clothing, food, help with our young children and daily needs, were all of like cost. It seemed at times almost a problem of conscience that let one live so comfortably in such a world. That, together with the fact of the Franco government, which had so punished the Mallorquins for their necessarily brief

resistance, kept my Puritan sense of guilt well fuelled.

At first we stayed put in Bañalbufar, once having found a place there – and we were to move three more times in the years we spent there. Most pleasant was the apartment in what had been the old Baron's place, La Baronia, which the church used as well, giving a useful rapport with the town's locating authority. We had found the town with Robert's help. He had directed us to Mr. Short – 'F. H. Short & Sons' being the name of the agency as I recall. His office had a very useful lending library, in which I found, for example, Unamuno's lovely meditation on *Don Quixote*. Mr. Short also provided us with a means to exchange my wife's American funds. Whenever I went into Palma – using our ancient 1928 Peugeot or else the one small bus that connected our town with the outside world – inevitably I stopped in at Mr. Short's. One day, waiting in the background of his office with some book to occupy me, a classic Jamesian matron with travel brochures covering the desk in front of her, suddenly turned, brochure in hand, to gesture at me, saying, 'Now *that's* what I had expected to see!' It was one of the great moments of my life to be so mistaken as a local, call it – and I smiled, enigmatically, saying nothing that might betray me as her countryman.

I would also stop in to see what Martin was up to, and often found him at the Graves's apartment. Whether from awkwardness or self-defence, I was still shy of thinking of Robert as someone I might talk to of my situation directly. I hardly knew what it was, in fact, or how it might possibly have any prospect to discuss. Too, I hung onto my heroes for dear life and often, as with Pound particularly, they were none that Robert himself found interesting. But there were times we did talk and I was able to ask him complexly simple questions such as what peers did he value, what previous poets, of what character or fact of poetry's company did he feel himself to be instance. All these years later it's interesting to me that W. H. Davies was, he felt, as pure a poet and as self-sustaining as one might find. The writing was both very simple in its mode and very melodic. He admired Davies's modest practicality, his way of selling his work as an artefact, a thing he had made himself, had then had printed, and so sold as one might a table or chair. Robert liked craftsmanship and industry – and I am sure that his respect for Davies was anchored in Davies's unpretentious and almost innocent commitment to his art.

When I asked his opinion of William Carlos Williams, he answered that he thought him to have integrity but that he found his rhythms too 'urban'. Hart Crane moved him very much as a person. He regretted that so much of Crane's life had been destroyed by his drinking and all the sad conflict provoked by his being homosexual. He said that Crane was a very likeable man and a good poet indeed. D. H. Lawrence met with short shrift – he felt him primarily someone trying to 'rise in the classes'. The American poet with whom he felt most kinship was John Crowe Ransom. The time of poets he felt most particular to himself was that of the 'Cavalier', the conjunction of a still strong romanticism

with a clearly developed formal resourcefulness. Their 'subject' was tacitly the 'one story and one story only' of Robert's own poem for his son Juan.

Slowly I began to find a company of peers not simply 'American' but those who, as I, felt an inexorable distance from the securing habits of the literary status quo and the social authorities to which it related. Quite probably we were just another manifestation of the bitter displacement of the times – the 'Existentialists', the 'Angry Young Men', but equally the 'Lonely Crowd', 'The Man in the Flannel Gray Suit', who felt he had no specific person either to be recognized or to be. Alex Trocchi ('Manus' in *The Island*) is a vivid and defining instance of my own state of mind then, as was his ally, the poet Christopher Logue. I found in them and in their journal, *Merlin*, that 'resistance', as Charles Olson would say, which we had no choice but to be.

Possibly Robert knew all this in some intuited way. I don't recall now ever mentioning to him that I had been an ambulance driver with the 7th Division of the British 14th Army in Burma – the 'Forgotten Army' as it was called. I gained a curious and lasting sense of British disposition from that time – of subalterns and sergeant majors, BORs ['British Other Ranks'] and their often very youthful leaders – and the distant old men in Whitehall, one of whom I remember ending up in hospital with us after his plane skewed off the runway in Rangoon on take-off. General Slim barely spoke to him as he came through the ward, wishing us well.

It was Alex Trocchi who'd said one terrific day together in Paris, 'Everyone in the world must be twenty-eight!' It was also Alex who now sent me word that an older American writer would shortly arrive in Palma and that Alex had given him my name as someone who might help find him a place to live. The writer was Edward Dahlberg, whose relation to Charles Olson I had heard much about – from Olson's side of things, of course, but my loyalty to Olson would hardly permit any other. I was prepared to dislike him but when he actually had come and was in our house, all changed despite the fact my wife loathed him on the instant, recognizing that he would be no ally, rather a questioner of all that our marriage had become. He was the American elder, literally, for whom I had been waiting.

I went to Robert for advice as to how best to find an apartment for Dahlberg, bringing him with me. At first the two seemed to find a common ground in the fact that both felt Judas had played a part that cost him bitterly – he was the evident betrayer whom all rejected – but he was also the necessary forfeit that secured Christ's divinity by means of the crucifixion. So the two met genially for a time, as Dahlberg came to the Graves's apartment to report his progress and to ask for further leads. Then one morning he was a bit early and when Robert suggested he might have some breakfast with the family and Edward said he'd already eaten, Robert gave him a copy of *Punch*, saying perhaps Edward might be interested in a piece that Robert had in it.

Only those who knew Dahlberg could anticipate the abrupt response. Dahl-

berg's account was that he had thrown the magazine back on the table and walked out of the apartment without a word. His very righteous reflection was, 'It's bad enough to publish in such a rag, but to expect another to read it is unforgivable.' So now my elder American friend and mentor was the pariah of the colony surrounding Graves and I felt the two of us were consigned at best to flitting about in shadows, avoiding the common light of day. Just so Robert found Dahlberg and me sitting not long after at one of a café's outside tables – acknowledged me with a generous goodwill but then looking at Dahlberg, looked back at me and said, '*Keep him!*' Then he was gone.

If I think of those days now, I can understand far more clearly the extraordinary balance of work and domestic life, and just the fact of being a well-known person in the world, Robert was somehow holding together. Mallorca is not a large island and he was very easy to find. Person A would inevitably appear as consequence of person B's having sent him – often an endless string. So friends of friends required advice, lodging, and often that took a great deal of time and money. The film company that came to stay for an inordinate period at Robert's seeming expense would be a provocative instance. Then there were the attractive young writers, female and male – like Alston Anderson, whom Robert befriended until one evening, returning from Deyá, the family found themselves locked out of their own apartment, while Alston, inside, got it on, as one says, with an apparently willing companion.

Mallorca was changing, one felt – as one always does in such circumstanes. Robert had done a substantial travel article for *Holiday Magazine* in company with the French photographer Brassaï. There suddenly was dear Bañalbufar in its securing, hermetic glory pictured for all the world to see! Recently in Mallorca I was told by my classmate and old friend, Tony Bonner, that Germans now own 25% of Mallorca's land surface – and that a general population of about 750,000 deals annually with an influx of some 11 million tourists. At least Robert didn't have to take them all to dinner.

Martin Seymour-Smith sadly failed in his responsibilities at the end – as did we all, one way or another. William, whom Martin was to have got ready for his exams, did not do very well at all and the reason seemed to be Martin's lackadaisical tutoring. So Martin, with Jan and their child, headed back to England, making a number of stops in passage at various friends of the Graves. It became an engaging race to try to warn these households of the circumstances involved before Martin could get to them – but Martin, stuck with usual debt and now unemployment, was very often the first on the scene.

Be it said – and it must be obvious from Martin's biography – Robert was the defining elder for Martin. His own father, Frank Seymour-Smith, was somehow displaced in his imagination, despite the father's substantial gifts as a bookman. Martin's mother, the quondam 'Elena Fearn' – and the only woman I've ever known who used rice powder daily as makeup – seems to have felt that her husband lacked sensitivity, a creative spirit – or whatever she may have called

it. In any case, it got to Martin.

There's a poem of Robert's which Martin then told me was his own favourite. It was during the time of our first being in Mallorca and Martin had loaned me his copy of the first edition of *The White Goddess*, so that I might have some means of knowing why Martin felt Robert so crucial to us both. Reading, I came soon to recognize and to value just as did Martin the brilliance with which the book tracked with such idiosyncratic intuition and intelligence the ground of poetry's human history and employment. The poem Martin gave me reads as follows:

ON PORTENTS

If strange things happen where she is,
So that men say that graves open
And the dead walk, or that futurity
Becomes a womb and the unborn are shed,
Such portents are not to wondered at,
Being tourbillions in Time made
By the strong pulling of her bladed mind
Through that ever-reluctant element.

Martin's first edition of *The White Goddess* opened, in effect, with a poem that became my own favourite finally – despite the fact Robert revised it for the second edition – and it still is. There are so many things it does so quietly – like, for example, the way the first three lines hold the image almost without movement, simply *there*. Then the address is simply that of the poet to the goddess – a 'you' of haunting and insistent presence, an 'I' who can only bear witness. But it is the whole poem, in its rhythms, its compactness, its canny rhyme, which moves without distraction to its emphatic close – its *fate*, one wants to say. Here it is.

IN DEDICATION

Your broad, high brow is whiter than a leper's,
Your eyes are flax-flower blue, blood-red your lips,
Your hair curls honey-coloured to white hips.

All saints revile you, and all sober men
Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean;
Yet for me rises even in November
(Rawest of months) so cruelly new a vision,
Cerridwen, of your beatific love
I forget violence and long betrayal,
Careless of where the next bright bolt may fall.