

Charles Williams, Robert Graves and

The White Goddess

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Some four and a half years ago I was invited to edit Robert Graves's 'Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth', *The White Goddess*, for the new centenary edition of his works. I had no idea at the time that the preparation of an edition of this strange, famous and influential book was going to lead me to discoveries about Charles Williams. But I have gradually learned that almost anything to do with the history of English poetry sooner or later leads one to cross the path of Charles Williams, and this proved to be no exception.

In this case, the connection began with a tall story. Robert Graves himself loved tall stories, and few are taller than the tale he has to tell about his efforts to find a publisher for *The White Goddess*. It occurs in a lecture about *The White Goddess* and its composition which Graves gave in New York in 1957 and which he subsequently published in two collections of essays, *Steps and Five Pens in Hand*. Here is the story as it appears in those books:

I offered *The White Goddess* [Graves tells us] in turn to the only publishers I knew who claimed to be personally concerned with poetry and mythology.

The first regretted that he could not recommend this unusual book to his partners, because of the expense. He died of heart failure within the month.

The second wrote very discourteously, to the effect that he could not make either head or tail of the book, and could not believe it would interest anyone. He died too, soon afterwards.

But the third, who was T. S. Eliot, wrote that it must be published at all costs. So he did publish it, and 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.¹

Was this bizarre story, I wondered, simply a fantasy of Graves's? What truth, if any, lay behind it?

Before answering that question, some background must be sketched in. Robert Graves and Beryl (who would become his second wife in 1950) had spent the years of the Second World War in England. Graves had been exiled from his home in Mallorca at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War with his then companion Laura Riding. After a period in America, where Riding left Graves for her second husband and lifelong partner Schuyler Jackson, Graves had returned to England, to be followed two months later by Beryl Hodge. With Graves not fit enough for active service, they settled down in the village of Galmpton in South Devon. He was best known then as now for his memoir of the First World War, *Goodbye to All That*, and for his historical novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. The more discerning also ranked him high as a poet, though since he published rarely, wrote only lyrics and the occasional

short, barbed satire, disliked anthologies and avoided public and political statements in his work, his poetry was not widely read – which, he stubbornly believed, was just as it should be.

Graves, however, was much concerned with the nature of poetry. In 1941 he began to correspond with the Welsh poet Alun Lewis. They discussed the nature of poetry and poets; the name of the medieval Welsh poet Taliesin, and his mythical counterpart in the *Mabinogion*, cropped up. Then, in July 1942, as they completed their prose-writers' manual *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, Graves and his co-author Alan Hodge began to consider writing a 'book about poetry'. Topics mooted by Graves for treatment included the psychology of poetic inspiration, and the reasons for the 'aura or halo, or whatever, that clings to the name of "poet" in spite of the lamentable history of bad poetic behaviour'. They agreed to 'put [the] book on to simmer very, very slowly', but Graves was unable to leave it alone for long, and by July 1943 he was writing to Hodge about possible links between poetry and 'primitive moon-worship'.² Further research followed, including extensive reading in the fields of Celtic mythology and medieval Welsh and Irish literature, and in March or early April 1944, in a sudden overwhelming burst of inspiration, Graves found himself forced to interrupt his other literary work and write (as he claimed in his 1957 lecture) a 50,000-word book in three weeks. That book was, essentially, the first draft of *The White Goddess*.

To summarise *The White Goddess* would be an impossible task. It is, as Eliot was to write later, 'a prodigious, monstrous, stupefying, indescribable book, the outcome of vast reading and curious researches into strange territories of folklore, legend, religion and magic.'³ It is a book which should be read by anyone interested in poetry and the creative process.

But its most important central idea is that true poetry is produced not by reason or effort or literary conventions but by the inspiration of a Muse-goddess: it is a survival, or intuitive re-creation, of the ancient Goddess-worship which prevailed throughout Europe and the Middle East until late prehistoric times, when it was gradually overthrown, together with the matriarchal societies it fostered, by patriarchal invaders who worshipped male rationality. Graves presented this thesis not by direct exposition but by involving the reader in a thrilling process of detective work whereby ancient myths and medieval Celtic poems were decoded to reveal their secrets: which turned out, in each case, to be records of the cult of the great Goddess and of her overthrow by the usurping male forces of reason, science and militarism which in Graves's view had wrought such havoc in the course of the past two thousand years.

Taliesin figured in all this not only as an exemplar of the figure of the poet but also because one of the prime pieces of evidence in Graves's detective process was the 'Song of Taliesin' which features in the *Mabinogion*. It is the song which begins, in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation, with the lines

The White Goddess

Primary chief Bard am I to Elphin,
And my original country is the region of the summer stars.

Graves analyses this poem and deciphers it (at least to his own satisfaction) to show that it is a series of riddles whose answers are the letters of a secret alphabet of the kind which, according to Julius Caesar, the Druids used; and that this alphabet in turn contains traces of a system of knowledge originally cultivated by the priests of the Goddess herself.

None of this can really give the flavour of Graves's book. For those who love the magical, the mysterious, the powerfully imaginative and strange it is a delight, and its masses of recondite incidental information are as much a part of its attraction as its (very debatable) theories. Above all it conveys the feeling, the rich atmosphere, of poetic creativity.

But we must return to our story. Having completed in the spring of 1944 a first version of this splendid book (at this stage under the title of *The Roebuck in the Thicket*), Graves set his literary agent A. P. Watt to find a publisher for it. This, as you might surmise, was not an easy task, and contrary to what Graves implied in his later recollections, rather more than three publishers were approached. And we do not know really in what order this happened. But certainly among them were Richard Church of J. M. Dent, and Desmond Flower of Cassell. Church rejected the book promptly. At Cassell, Flower thought it so bizarre that he not only rejected it but offered to buy Graves a free lunch if he could find anyone willing to publish it (an offer which Graves in due course triumphantly accepted).

Graves was continuing to work at his draft all this time, and we cannot know in quite what form the book went to these various publishers. But we do know that, besides these commercial publishers who were very much in the normal orbit of A. P. Watt as literary agents, they also approached a publisher undoubtedly recommended by Graves himself: Charles Williams at the Oxford University Press.

It is not hard to imagine why Graves might have expected Williams to be sympathetic. To begin with, Charles Williams had included a chapter on Robert Graves in his survey of twentieth-century poetry, *Poetry At Present*, which had been published by the O.U.P. in 1930. The chapter had, by chance, assessed Graves's work at an interesting moment, for in 1926 Graves had left England for Egypt, where his marriage broke up and his intense personal and creative relationship with Laura Riding began; in 1929 *Goodbye to All That* had appeared, signalling Graves's determination to leave his previous life behind him; and at the end of 1929 Graves and Riding settled in Mallorca.

Williams's chapter therefore just happens to sum up the first (British) phase of Graves's work, the writing done up to the time of his departure from England. Essentially the chapter is based on Graves's *Poems* (1914–26), a collection which contained a large number of excellent poems which Graves subsequently decided to exclude from his *Collected Poems*. As a result, the Graves whom

Williams discusses is an interestingly different Graves from the one with whom we are now familiar.

Williams is strikingly enthusiastic about Graves's work, and makes fewer reservations about him than about almost any other poet in his book. In particular, and most significantly, Williams praises Graves for his technique. The opening words of his discussion are: 'The greatest tribute that can be paid to Mr Graves is to say how difficult it is, once his book is put down, not to copy him or to wish to do so. Others are for admiration and memory, but he is for imitation.'⁴

Williams goes on to praise the nursery-rhyme poems, in which Graves had reworked traditional themes with such facility and felicity:

Is there any song sweet enough
For Davey and for Jenny?
Said Simple Simon to the pieman,
Indeed, I know not any.

I've counted the miles to Babylon,
I've flown the earth like a bird,
I've ridden cock-horse to Banbury Cross
But no such song have I heard.'

'This,' says Williams, 'is the old and the new in perfect harmony, poetry no less perfect that it is (in a sense) on a small scale.'⁵

But he reserves stronger praise and deeper analysis for that remarkable early poem, 'The Poet in the Nursery', which Graves subsequently suppressed and which has only become accessible again recently in the new three-volume edition of Graves's *Complete Poems*. This, says Williams, is a poem that has 'taught the true doctrine'. Here, the 'youngest poet' finds a book

full of funny muddling mazes,
Each rounded off into a lovely song,
And most extraordinary and monstrous phrases,
Knotted with rhymes like a slave-driver's thong,
And metre twisted like a chain of daisies
With great big splendid words a sentence long.

Williams comments: 'The line "most extraordinary and monstrous phrases" could hardly be better exemplified than by the one that follows it, and again the union of the teaching of what ought to be done and the being able immediately to do it causes a new and remarkable delight.'⁶

In general, Williams admires Graves's poetry for what he calls its 'interlacing of old and new', 'a curious mingling of what would have been called, in the old phraseology, romance and realism'. Graves, he explains, is 'A poet who

can talk of unicorns and the Holy Grail' and relate 'in another poem how as a child he heard Mozart and, being rapt into an ecstasy, knotted his handkerchief for evidence that that ecstasy at least had been....' This is, Williams, says, 'the entirely credible detail which persuades us that poetry is a perfectly normal state of being.'⁷

The work which Williams singles out for the highest praise is 'The Avengers', which is indeed an extraordinary poem – quite possibly one of the dozen or so best poems Graves ever wrote and which, perversely, he in due course excluded from his *Collected Poems*. 'The Avengers', written in 1923, is, as Williams puts it, about 'the effort (desirable or disastrous) to graft upon Europe, especially northern Europe, a tradition from the East': that is, the Judaeo-Christian tradition and Christianity itself. One might add that the poem is also and at the same time powerfully about Graves's internal struggles between sensuality and Puritanism (a struggle not unknown, perhaps, to Williams himself), represented by the trees and plants of the two regions which are presented in the poem as at war with one another – a conceit which Marvell or Spenser might have enjoyed developing and which forms a 'Battle of the Trees', fascinating in the light of the discussion Graves was to offer in *The White Goddess* about the hidden meanings of the medieval Welsh poetic tradition of a Battle of the Trees. The poem itself is also deeply interesting when we think of it in the context of Williams's own Taliessin poems with their awareness of the cultural and historical tensions between northern Europe and the East and the many things these could symbolise.

The poem has six stanzas, and Williams quotes half of them in full, interspersed with his own enthusiastic comments. The poem is so little known now, yet it is so good and impressed Williams so much, that I think it worth repeating in full:

THE AVENGERS

Who grafted quince on Western may?
 Sharon's mild rose on Northern briar?
 In loathing since that Gospel day
 The two saps flame, the tree's on fire.

The briar-rose weeps for injured right,
 May sprouts up red to choke the quince.
 With angry throb of equal spite
 Our wood leaps maddened ever since.

The mistletoe, of gods not least,
 Kindler of warfare since the Flood,
 Against green things of South and East
 Voices the vengeance of our blood.

Crusading ivy Southwards breaks
 And sucks your lordly palms upon,
 Our island oak the water takes
 To war with cedared Lebanon.

Our slender ash-twigs feathered fly
 Against your vines; bold buttercup
 Pours down his legions; malt of rye
 Inflames and burns your lentils up....

For bloom of quince yet caps the may,
 The briar is held by Sharon's rose,
 Monsters of thought through earth we stray,
 And how remission comes, God knows.

As Williams says, 'The rhythm, the adjectives, the meaning, are all so simple and so moving, and the meaning strikes at so deep a possibility, that one can only say "What good poetry!" and leave it there. [PAP 201]' A comment towards the end of the chapter is especially perceptive: in Graves, he says, 'it is as if consideration of man's mind and the nature of things had almost begun to shape itself in a new myth.'⁸ Indeed it had; and the myth would emerge in due course as *The White Goddess* – written during the same years in which Williams was creating his own mythical transformation of the Arthurian legend in the Taliessin poems.

Williams praises many poets in *Poetry At Present*, for it is a book of enthusiasms, but none is praised with the same degree of inwardness as Graves. The confessions that it is hard not to imitate him, the fascination with Graves's technique and myth-making, and such pregnant statements as that 'The Avengers' 'strikes at so deep a possibility' – what possibility did Williams glimpse here? He seems almost to be thinking aloud – indicate that Williams found something deeply congenial about Graves's work and ways of thinking.

What Robert Graves thought of Charles Williams's discussion of his work we do not know, for there is no record of any communication between the two poets until 1943, when Williams wrote to Graves what was evidently not his first letter, though it seems to be the earliest letter from him preserved in the Graves files at Deyá, Mallorca. Unexpectedly, the letter is about Milton. It is dated 5 March 1943, from Southfield House in Oxford, the 'London' O.U.P.'s temporary premises during the war.

My dear Robert Graves,

I am very much obliged (in every sense) by your letter, and very much indebted to you for it. I only hope I made clear in the other letter how much I admired your book. On the other hand I hope you do not think that I am

entirely trammelled by the old academic views of Milton. The truth, I think, lies somewhere between your novel and my own (rather too extreme) opposition. I am permitting myself the pleasure of sending you a copy of the World's Classics Milton with my Introduction, which you may think untrue. You will however see that I think the poetry there discussed must have sprung from something real in Milton, and that that reality has still to be sought for. But I don't at all deny that there were times when he must have been quite intolerable.

I shall keep your letter with my Milton stuff and treasure it as a courtesy. If you are ever in Oxford, where I am fixed during the war, perhaps we could lunch together and talk more.

Yours very sincerely,

Charles Williams

Clearly the subject of debate here is not so much Milton himself as Robert Graves's novel *Wife to Mr Milton*, published just one month earlier in February 1943, in which Graves had portrayed Milton through the eyes of his first wife, Marie Powell. The portrait of Milton is done with such an excess of vindictive hatred that Eddie Marsh was moved to protest plaintively that he would 'continue to believe that the man who wrote 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' can't have been the *unredeemed* monster you have depicted'.⁹ So vicious is Graves's presentation of Milton, indeed, that Graves's biographer R. P. Graves surmises that in the character of Milton Graves had drawn an unconscious self-portrait! Graves himself was decisive in his view. 'Nothing can make me like, admire, or even pity John Milton,' he told James Reeves. 'That was my earliest judgement and the more I read the sounder it seems.'

There has evidently been already at least one letter in each direction on the subject, and speaking of 'the truth' as lying 'somewhere between your novel and my own (rather too extreme) opposition' seems to suggest that Williams had either written to Graves criticising *Wife to Mr Milton* or had even reviewed it somewhat combatively. This was, of course, midway between the two periods when Williams lectured at Oxford on Milton (he lectured on Milton in Hilary Term 1940, and in Hilary and Trinity Terms 1945).¹⁰

What became of the World's Classics Milton I have no idea. So far as I can tell from a fairly thorough search conducted in October 1997, neither this nor any other book written or edited by Charles Williams is now in Graves's library at Deyá; but this is not too surprising when we remember that at the time of the correspondence Graves would have been living in Devon, and cannot have taken many books back with him when he returned to Mallorca in 1946. Perhaps letters disappeared at that time also. One would like to think that the correspondence might have continued, but the tone of Williams's letter – cautious, apologetic, modest, carefully refusing to give too much ground – makes it unlikely that anything much followed. It is the sort of letter that expects to be

the last for the time being.

Nonetheless, Graves may well have known of *Taliessin Through Logres* and, if he did, must surely have read it: in the excitement of composing *The White Goddess*, he would hardly have neglected a recent collection of poems bearing in its title the name of one of the book's dominant figures. And Williams was, after all, a publisher. Poet-publishers then, as now, were not easy to find, and Graves, as we know, was looking for publishers who 'claimed to be personally concerned with poetry and mythology' – a criterion which fitted Williams perfectly. Graves's biographers have never been in any doubt that Charles Williams was the publisher who, according to Graves's somewhat highly coloured account, 'regretted that he could not recommend this unusual book to his partners because of the expense' and who 'died of heart failure within the month'.¹¹

As an enthusiast for the work of both men, I must confess that I had long wanted to find out the truth about this. Did Graves submit *The White Goddess* to Williams shortly before his death? And if so, did Williams turn it down? I wanted to believe otherwise. Surely Williams would have seen at least some of the virtues of Graves's strange and marvellous book, at least as clearly as Eliot was to do shortly afterwards. But the evidence was lacking. When I started work on my edition, I contacted Peter Foden, archivist of the O.U.P., to ask him if any correspondence with Graves survived in the files. He came back with a negative report. Records from the Southfield House period were not good, he told me, because of the untidy wartime conditions; and in any case files on rejected books were not normally kept.

So when I went to Mallorca to look through Graves's books and papers with a view to editing *The White Goddess*, I was determined to look out for evidence of Charles Williams's attitude to the book. And sure enough, after lengthy hunting through the dozens of box-files full of letters, I found it: or perhaps I should say, I found them – not just a letter from Charles Williams but also one from Graves's literary agent, A. P. Watt, and one from Humphrey Milford, the Publisher himself. Together they told an unexpected story.

The letter from Williams had been misplaced in the Graves files because nobody had recognised the scrawled 'CW' at its foot as an identifiable signature. It is dated from Southfield House, 18 July 1944, and reads as follows:

My dear Robert Graves,

I had better say at once that I have failed. I am very sorry indeed, not that it will make any difference to you, because you will get the book published easily enough, but because I should very much have liked the Press to publish it. Sir Humphrey was sympathetic enough, but he simply dare not commit himself to the necessary paper and so on in our present unhappy state. I have every reason to know this to be true, so you will not suspect him of any hypocrisy.

I read the book with very great interest indeed. It seemed to me a thrill-

ing description of the way the poetic mind works, and very valuable on that account. The mere etching of Taliessin reading *The Book of Enoch* in an Ethiopian translation was astonishing and moving. It's so exactly the kind of thing my own Taliessin might have done that I felt as if you knew more of my own invention when he was travelling through Caucasia than I did myself.

So with all the collations; I mention this because it was so intimate to me. But I know no other prose book that so suggests the annexations, as it were, of poetic genius. Lowe's *Road to Xanadu* had a touch of it, but had not the same power of individual approach. I do very profoundly regret that we can't do it. I have said all this here, and pressed it as far as I can. But, as Sir Humphrey has written to Mr. Watt, we are more hampered than any other publisher with learned works of the past and present to which we are committed.

I very greatly admired your attitude towards scholarship. But, wise though that was, it was the whole scope of your pursuit of the Roebuck that so fascinated me. As soon as my own new Taliessin poems (which are indeed from that riddle), 'The Region of the Summer Stars' appear, I shall do myself the honour of sending you a copy merely as a humble salute.

It is, of course, impossible for me to write like this and not to feel something of a fool when I know the MS. is going back to Watt. But there I must rely on your generosity. The Press is not free to do all that it would, nor I even within the Press.

Most regretfully and sincerely yours,
CW.

That is a fascinating and rather moving letter, suggesting a more intimate correspondence between the concerns and views of the two poets than had ever been acknowledged before. It is also a very rich and suggestive letter, on which one could build a lengthy commentary. But let us turn to the other letters – those of Watt and Milford.

In fact Milford's letter is copied into one from W. S. Watt, which is dated 27 July 1944 – so that Graves no doubt received the letter from Williams before Watt's arrived. Watt writes:

Dear Graves,

As you anticipated Milford has decided against us, and here is his letter. He writes to me as follows:

'I am returning to you today by registered post the MS. of Robert Graves's book, with much regret and many apologies. I passed it to Charles Williams, as your letter suggested, and he liked it very much and was much in favour of my publishing it. And I have myself admired Mr. Graves for so long that I should have been only too glad to consent.

But the profound and lasting difficulties of the time do stand in the way. There is not only the direct difficulty of finding actual paper and all the rest;

but the indirect [one] that the Press, when it does find any, is already committed to so many specialist works: the remaining volumes of the Oxford History, the History of English Literature, and so on. I am far from denying that Mr Graves's book is worthy to stand by these. But the Press is already committed to these works of scholarship and not to his study of the poetic mind.

I am really very sorry. But I am imprisoned in necessity. Perhaps Fabers, who even have a poet among their directors, might be more free?'

In these circumstances [Watt continues], and acting upon your recent suggestions, I have now offered the book to Messrs. Dent with a note that you think it would [be] interesting to Mr. Church, and I hope soon to be able to tell you that I have been more successful with them than with Cape and Mr. Milford.

Yours sincerely,

W. S. Watt.

It now seems clear that we can exonerate Charles Williams from the charge of timidly rejecting *The White Goddess*. Far from 'regretting that he could not recommend this unusual book to his partners because of the expense', Williams had been entranced and moved by it, and had urged it on Sir Humphrey. It was Sir Humphrey Milford who turned the book down, and the wartime paper shortage offered – as always at that time – an ever-ready excuse for rejection. But one does not have to look very carefully between the lines of Sir Humphrey's letter to see what other factors were at work. One pointer is the comment that Faber and Faber, 'who even have a poet among their directors', might be willing to do it. If the problem is shortage of paper, this is a curious non-sequitur. One suspects that what Milford really means is that publishers eccentric enough to have a poet on the board might even be eccentric enough to publish Graves's book.

Still more telling is the touch of complacency with which Milford refers to 'the Oxford History, the History of English Literature and so on' before stating urbanely that the Press 'is [...] committed to these works of scholarship and not to his study of the poetic mind.' Surely the words 'poetic mind' have a particular resonance here. Milford must, in this context, be recalling Charles Williams's own critical studies, *The English Poetic Mind* and *Reason and Beauty in the Poetic Mind* – published by the O.U.P. in 1932 and 1933 respectively to indifferent reviews and poor sales. To him, *The White Goddess* was yet another book in the same category: not real scholarship – not a safe and solid Oxford History of this or that – but the undisciplined speculations of a poet. Milford had indulged Williams in the past, as he no doubt reminded himself, and he was not going to be caught like *that* again. Let Faber and Faber waste their precious paper on that kind of thing if they chose.

Returning to Charles Williams's own letter, we see that he too uses the phrase: he calls the book 'a thrilling description of the way the poetic mind works'. He also emphasizes what he calls (in a brilliant and suggestive phrase) 'the

annexations, as it were, of poetic genius': the way in which Graves's book demonstrates the poetic fusing of materials from disparate sources. This is, of course, an aspect of the hybrid richness Williams had admired in Graves's work fourteen years earlier in *Poetry At Present*. The particular instance he gives is Graves's suggestion that the twelfth-century Welsh bard Gwion who called himself Taliesin might have read the Book of Enoch in an Ethiopian translation.

The suggestion is made by Graves in a passage which must have been of the greatest interest to Williams: that is, his discussion of the 'Song of Taliesin' in the *Mabinogion*. This is the poem which begins (in Lady Charlotte Guest's translation):

Primary chief bard am I to Elphin,
And my original country is the region of the summer stars;
Idno and Heinin called me Merddin,
At length every king will call me Taliesin.

I was with my Lord in the highest sphere,
On the fall of Lucifer into the depth of hell
I have borne a banner before Alexander;
I know the names of the stars from north to south;

– and so on. In due course we come to the line 'I was instructor to Eli and Enoch', on which Graves comments:

Who instructed Enoch? (Eli does not, apparently, belong to this riddle.) I agree with Charles, Burkitt, Oesterley, Box and other Biblical scholars that nobody can hope to understand the Sayings of Jesus who has not read the *Book of Enoch*, omitted from the canon of the *Apocrypha* but closely studied by the primitive Christians. I happened to have been reading the book and knew that the answer was 'Uriel', and that Uriel instructed Enoch 'on the fall of Lucifer into the depth of hell'. A curious historical point is that the verse about Uriel's instruction of Enoch is not included in the fragments of the Greek *Book of Enoch* quoted by the ninth-century Byzantine historian Syn-cellus, nor in the Vatican MS. (1809), nor in the quotations from the *Book of Enoch* in the *Epistle of St. Jude*. It occurs only in the text dug up at Akhmim in Egypt in 1886, and in the Ethiopian translation of an earlier Greek text, which is the only version which we know to have been extant in the thirteenth century. Where did Gwion find the story? Was a knowledge of Ethiopian among his attainments? Or did he find a complete Greek manuscript in the library of some Irish abbey that had escaped the fury of the Vikings' war against books?¹²

It is, surely, the suggestion of hidden mystical lines of communication which

Williams so enjoys in this passage: the suggestion that the medieval Welsh poet might read the Apocryphal Greek book in Ethiopian, or might find the Greek text itself hidden away in an Irish abbey. The rich sense of cosmopolitan and yet secretive transmission of spiritual knowledge across the whole of Christendom seems very much attuned to his notions of the 'breathing geometry' of the Empire. As in so many of Williams's comments on Graves's work, we note the sympathetic identification: 'It's so exactly the kind of thing my own Taliessin might have done that I felt as if you knew more of my own invention when he was travelling through Caucasia than I did myself. [...] I mention this because it was so intimate to me.'

Williams's letter must have shown Graves how right he had been in sending the manuscript to the O. U. P., and also how wrong. Williams had the enthusiasm but not the authority. Graves's disappointment must have been bitter, and perhaps he irrationally blamed Williams for not having tried harder. By 1957 his memories of the whole business had become blurred: Williams and Milford had merged into a single supercilious figure, and so the garbled story emerged. Maliciously, Graves became convinced – or pretended to be convinced – that Williams's death, not 'within the month' but in fact ten months later, was somehow a consequence of the book's rejection. It was a cruelly false notion.

Even after Williams's death, however, the names of the two poets continued to be linked. *The White Goddess* eventually appeared from Faber in the summer of 1948, delayed though not sunk by the paper shortage, and garnished with a blurb written by T. S. Eliot himself. The reviews were mixed, and even those by fellow-poets were not always enthusiastic. But somehow, in a variety of ways, the brief encounter of the two poets seemed to leave its subtle reverberations in the ether. In the *Dublin Magazine* a review of *The White Goddess* by Blanaid Salkeld was printed immediately above one by a certain 'M.C.' of *Shadows of Ecstasy*.

Austin Clarke, in a publication I cannot identify (I have the cutting but no hint of where it comes from: could it be *The Irish Times*?) – reviewed *The White Goddess* alongside the newly published *Arthurian Torso*. 'As an enormous escapade into remote eras,' Clarke decides, '[*The White Goddess*] is intellectually stimulating'; but, he asks plaintively: 'Who can profit by its wildness?' Moving on to Charles Williams and *Arthurian Torso*, Clarke tells his readers that whilst Williams's poems 'lack religious reality, their theological ingenuity and symbolism give them an unusual quality'. He concludes that 'One is left with the impression that Charles Williams, if the phrase can be allowed, was a religious dilettante'.

From these complacent timidities it is refreshing to turn to *The New English Weekly* for 8 July, whose critic opens with the proposition that 'Mr Graves is one of the few really significant poets writing in English today', and goes on to argue that *The White Goddess* is 'a book of great interest and importance, but one whose real point may very easily be misunderstood'.

‘The argument [the reviewer continues] has, in reality an importance quite independant [*sic*] of any unlikely-seeming theories about Irish or other alphabets. It is a plea for a return to imaginative, mythopoeic, or poetic forms of thought, as distinct from the abstract “Apollonian” thinking which has become dominant in the West.’

Most interestingly, the reviewer suggests at the conclusion of the article that:

After W. B. Yeats, Charles Williams was perhaps the only one among Mr. Graves’ contemporaries who made that intellectually conscious use of traditional mythological symbols which constitutes the ‘Bardic’ poetry which this book is written to advocate. [...] For Williams, as for Mr. Graves, the shape-shifting of Ceridwen and little Gwion (later reincarnated as Taliessin himself) is an image of the cycle of death and rebirth to which all things, under Nature, are condemned. But Williams’s Taliessin was initiated, by his baptism, into another, a supra-natural, order of life, and could conclude triumphantly:

I was thrall to Ceridwen and free in the manger of an ass.

It is in the truth or falsehood of that claim, I think, that we must look for the heart of the matter.¹³

The reviewer was, of course, John Heath-Stubbs; and in the course of his judicious review he was able to correct Graves on such matters as the geographical starting-point of Odysseus’s descent into the Underworld, a confusion between Giraldus Cambrensis and Geoffrey of Monmouth, and the colour of cranes’ legs – which, contrary to Graves’s assertions, are not red.

John Heath-Stubbs was surely right to see a kinship between Graves and Williams as practitioners of ‘Bardic’ poetry. Clearly both men felt the kinship and were drawn towards each other despite their very obvious differences. Would they have got on together had they eventually met? One feels that the outcome would have been balanced on a knife-edge. The two poets were so extremely different that the very polarity of their differences becomes a kind of similarity. On the one hand, Graves, who despite his Christian upbringing was a pagan in the full sense of the word – a man who was conversationally fluent in classical Latin and Greek, minutely intimate with classical mythology and ancient history and who had lived for years imaginatively immersed in the Greek and Roman worlds whilst writing his many historical novels; a worshipper of a pagan goddess who was not merely pre-Christian but positively anti-Christian; and on the other hand, Williams, certainly the most profound and imaginative Christian thinker since Coleridge, a man saturated with the theology, history, myth and emotions of Christendom. Their meeting would almost have been a meeting of two worlds or two historical eras. And yet each identified the other from afar as someone who *understood*: to Graves, Williams was a man ‘personally concerned with poetry and mythology’; to Williams, Graves was a man whose

work was 'intimate' to himself, whom he could credit with knowing 'more of my own invention [...] than I did myself'. What linked them, essentially, was that with all their differences they were convinced of the sacredness of poetry and its importance as a route to spiritual understanding. In a secular time, that was enough to set them apart; and it has ensured that both of them remain largely outside the official histories of twentieth-century literature. Sad, then, that Graves should at last have recalled Williams only as someone connected with the rejection of his cherished book, and should have falsified a fascinating encounter for the sake of a tall story.

Grevel Lindop edited *The White Goddess for Carcanet's Robert Graves Programme*. He is currently writing a biography of Charles Williams.

NOTES

1. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, revised edition, edited by Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997; London: Faber, 1999), p. 504.
2. For a full account of the circumstances, and references to the correspondence quoted, see *The White Goddess*, pp. viii–ix.
3. Blurb to the Faber paperback.
4. *Poetry at Present*, p. 194.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 197.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
9. Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940–85* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), p. 63.
10. Lecture lists, English Faculty, Oxford.
11. *The White Goddess*, p. 504.
12. *The White Goddess*, p. 79.
13. *New English Weekly* (June 8 1948), pp. 130–1.