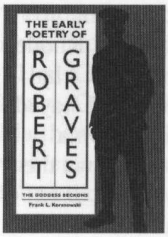

The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons, *by Frank Kersnowski.*

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. $40.
ISBN: 0-292-74343-2. pp. 192.

John Woodrow Presley, Illinois State University, USA

Frank Kersnowski bases his argument in his new study, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves*, on close reading of both Graves's poetry and his criticism, and rejects the compulsive linking to the (admittedly compelling) biography that, candidly, has tended to bog down otherwise good scholarship on Graves. Yet Kersnowski intelligently focuses on Graves's critical relationships: with Marsh, Sassoon, and Nancy Nicholson, relationships critical to Graves's poetic development. One notes, too, that Kersnowski chooses to end his study with *Poems (1914–1926)*, which means Laura Riding is only a vestigial presence in his book, thus also helping him avoid the temptation of the psychobiographer.

Kersnowski's thesis is that WWI 'opened [for Graves] a door into the unconscious', and that this 'made his poetry into an experience of its own, one informed by his psychological and spiritual discoveries'. He sets this change in Graves's work into the context of the post-war change in modern writing, and he places Graves in a group of writers similarly affected, sensitively noting the now-familiar effects of 'war-neurosis' and sensibly noting that the work of W. H. R. Rivers (Graves's 'therapist'), along with that of others immediately after WWI, speeded the birth of modern psychiatry.

Kersnowski, though, amplifies this admittedly widely-held view of Graves's war experience with close readings of the poems and shows how Graves's discovery of the unconscious transformed his view of the phenomenal, rational world – into, in his words, 'love, passion, and unpredictability'. Kersnowski completes the equation: Graves's discovery of the unconscious so transformed his perception of reality that he rejected 'the essential components of the Western idea of reality' and this resulting void, one that threatened sanity as much as the war-neurosis, was filled by devotion to 'his own life as it was given to him by woman or a woman, initially his wife Nancy Nicholson'. This devotion to the power invested in woman, along with the threats of the non-rational world that he had experienced, leads to the appearance of early versions of the White Goddess in Graves's poetry well before her 'first' appearance in the 1940s. This new approach to Graves's early work and to his development as an artist establishes new chronological cruxes in Graves's development, and certainly new explanations of *why* these changes occurred and how the ideas

manifest themselves in the poetry.

Kersnowski's reading of the poems that argues for his equation is, more or less, chronological; Chapter One establishes credentials, and expands the outline of the argument, Kersnowski using his access to Graves and his family to argue that Graves's experience of the White Goddess was real, using the 1924 'A History', a poem considered minor – if considered at all – by other Graves scholars. (Kersnowski argues that only by the mid-1940s, after Jung's work was widely known, could Graves speak of the White Goddess and be understood, if only figuratively.) In this chapter, Kersnowski also places Graves in the context of the 'politics' of the poetic movements of the time, his associative and non-linear thinking (in 1921, after the war) making him less Georgian, more Modernist.

Kersnowski also makes a careful distinction between Graves the patriot, firmly planted in his social class despite his bohemian exterior, and the 'rising professional intellectuals' such as Richard Aldington and the unpatriotic Pound. This chapter also places Graves with his cultivated relationship with Edward Marsh, Graves stepping into the Georgian ranks and moving easily among the great poetic names of the day. In 1916, he gave Marsh a free hand to revise as his literary executor; the war changed his poetry so much that five years later, Kersnowski says, 'he would not have considered repeating the request'. His Georgian poems began quickly to use the familiar Georgian items as the backdrops, and sometimes as the sources, for horror, as Graves began to experience the trench-life of WWI. Chapter One moves from the 'Charterhouse' section of *Over the Brazier to Country Sentiment*, from *The Pier-Glass to Whipperginny* – largely linked by Graves's changing use of the moon as an image in these early poems – and brings Graves's critical writing in *On English Poetry, Poetic Unreason*, and *The Meaning of Dreams* to bear in proving that 'the war had become entangled with the very fibre of his creativity, intricately bound to all he had ever experienced because it opened for him a door into his own attraction to violence and power' and that 'only when we accept his writings as telling of his spiritual reality directly, not rhetorically, can we approach the awe and terror of Graves's writing'.

No one has advanced this idea before, and no one has read the poems from *Over the Brazier to Whipperginny* before with this complex conception of what war-neurosis means to Graves's development, nor with this sensitively developed context of biography, poetry, critical writing, and contemporary intellectual background. And Kersnowski's discussion of Graves's war-neurosis is so evocative of its disjunctive effects that I felt as though I was actually thinking for the first time about what the effect of the war on an individual veteran must have been like 'directly, not rhetorically'.

Chapter Two, on the war poems, opens with a personal reminiscence of Graves that shows the centrality of the war in Graves's behaviour, some fifty-three years later. There follows a superb reading of the poems, advanc-

ing Kersnowski's argument by focusing on how Graves developed the use of analogy as a technique to provide answers to the great questions his war experiences posed. Kersnowski's analyses are distinguished by a focus on manuscript versions of the poems in some cases and, in others, on poems Graves later dropped from his self-ruled canon, poems which have not drawn great critical attention before. Chapter Three focuses on the poetry written directly after the war and places Graves again, this time by contrast, with Sassoon and Owen. Kersnowski focuses first on 'The Gnat' and later on the short story 'The Shout' to show that the war poems' concern with sound perseveres long afterwards, even a decade later in the prose, and he argues that sound is finally associated – especially in the poetry – with the traumas of love. These postwar poems have been characterized as 'hauntings' by many critics; Kersnowski here points out that 'the poems present them [the hauntings] as part of [Graves's] reality'.

Chapter Four focuses on *Country Sentiment* and *Whipperginny*, and is built around a very persuasive reading of 'The Children of Darkness', working from the manuscript versions. The traumas of childhood, war, and love are equated, made equal by their 'common denominators: helplessness and violence'. Chapter Five follows on with the poems of *Whipperginny*, with a reading of 'Song: Sullen Moods' that also proceeds from manuscript evidence. Kersnowski makes clear that these early 'goddess poems' [my term, not his] presage White Goddess-period work so explicitly as to anticipate the original beginning of *The White Goddess*, 'The Roebuck in the Thicket' and even 'Postscript: 1960'. The poems of *The Feather Bed* and *Mock Beggar Hall* are frequently given short shrift by Graves scholars, but Kersnowski pays them great attention, even the odd and difficult 'Interchange of Selves' written with Basanta Mallik.

Chapter Six summarizes the development of Graves's poetics from the Charterhouse period to 1925, focusing on Georgian, Victorian, Modernist influences and, most convincingly, on the influence of Keats (Kersnowski finds precedents for Graves's images and themes in many other Romantic poets, as well). Graves's satires and attacks on his contemporaries further define his growth for Kersnowski, in *The Marmosite's Miscellany, A Survey of Modernist Poetry and Contemporary Techniques of Poetry.* (What makes this last compelling are the strong links to Kersnowski's argument about Graves's development). I am particularly impressed with Chapter Six's use of 'The Cool Web' to sum up Graves's 'dominant concerns over the past ten years: the damage done by war, children's fears, the paradox of love, and the possibility of madness. He would not write a more complex and self-revelatory poem, nor one that would place him more securely with the poetic concerns of his time'.

The 'Afterword' picks up the pieces of the argument again, and adds a bit more context – the Anglo-Irish tradition – to our picture of the early Graves.

Kersnowski's argument is a carefully woven text. He frequently must go backwards to pick up precedents, revisit earlier parts of the argument, or reintroduce certain pieces of illustration and proof, such as the central Cath-

erine Dalton letter. The style of the text, though, is conversational, evocative, with skilled use of figurative language, free of cant and jargon – scholarly yet relaxed, and mature. Kersnowski's style can be playful and allusive, yet it is a mature voice one hears, a voice unafraid to point out comparisons with other writers or to draw the larger inference where appropriate, and unafraid to present judgements on the worth or importance of a poem or idea.

The scholarship is sound, the sources accurate and, in some cases, new. Kersnowski has made excellent use of the Graves archives in American and English universities and makes good use of unpublished material such as H. E. Palmer's essay 'Robert Graves at World's End' in the University of Texas Ransom Center. Moreover, his decision to use manuscript or first published versions of the poems, which also required archival work, was intelligent: to do otherwise, as some naive Graves critics have done, is to work with the poetic ideas of the *later* Robert Graves, the compulsive reviser of even his published poems. Kersnowski has also wisely used his interviews with Graves and his access to Beryl Graves and Catherine Dalton to bolster key sections of his argument.

The Early Poems of Robert Graves should be of interest, of course, mainly to Graves scholars, but it will also be of interest to those studying the literature of World War I, or the Georgian or Modernist movements. But its main contribution is as a corrective to the few studies of Robert Graves's early poetry. One example: of Douglas Day's *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (1963) only 98 pages deal with poetry of the period Kersnowski deals with in his study, and Day downplays the importance of the war in Graves's poetry (his first chapter, only 17 pages, is called 'Juvenilia and the War'). In his second chapter, 'Poetry as Therapy', Day argues that Graves's reaction to the war was to reject subjectivity in his poetry, and that as a Romantic poet this was a bad choice. Day finds that Graves's criticism, especially his second and third books, are at odds with his writing: in *Whipperginny* and *Mock Beggar Hall Graves* is 'trying to avoid his real self [...] to divorce his poetry from his own emotions, and to develop a style and an attitude that would provide him with a sort of shield against his own conflicts'. Very different, indeed, from Kersnowski's reading of the works of this period.

Kersnowski's study is not only different, but important. He writes convincingly about the central problem in appreciating or even understanding Graves. In 1970, Harold Bloom said that the Last Romantics – among whom he included Graves – had, unlike the First Romantics, succumbed to 'shamanism' and 'phantasmagoria', the worst being Graves's 'masochistic insistence on the mutual rendings of poet and Muse as being true love'. Kersnowski's study helps explain the source and use and finally, success, of what became the Gravesian strategy.