



**Review: Alms for Oblivion:  
A Poem in Seven Parts,  
by Bryce Milligan.**

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*A review and an enquiry by Frank Kersnowski*

Robert Graves is, of course, the exemplar ‘muse poet’, perhaps even the source of the appellation. But he was clearly not the first such poet nor is he the last. Though I tend towards scepticism of spiritual awareness and of experiences beyond human sight, I have been touched by experiences I cannot comprehend and certainly cannot explain. In my life, such experiences caused striations in my personality, increased complexity in my scepticism, but did not cause me to re-imagine my life. Accepting the presence of the muse by a poet changes everything: love, poetry, time. In *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves*, I discussed the growth of Graves as poet from a rather typical post-Keatsian Georgian into a poet beyond any classification other than muse poet. Though I still question whether the change was a response to the terror of his ‘war neurosis’ or to a flash of spiritual understanding, I now question as well the narrowness of my own view. Such questioning has come in part from my research, in part from my talks with Beryl Graves, and in part from the troubling (for a sceptic) appearance and reappearance of muse poets. Like saints, muse poets should be in the shadows of the past, but they aren’t, as I have once again been told, this time by a poet, Bryce Milligan, whose life has been shaped (though at times ‘toyed with’ seems a more apt description) by the appearance and reappearance of the muse, who inhabits a variety of female forms. Here, in particular, I place

my comments on the poem's seven parts within the poet's understanding.

Bryce Milligan was, by his own admission, in his early poetry over indebted to Pound and Eliot, especially the latter. In my first reading of *Alms for Oblivion*, I noted the sound and image of Eliot's poetry: arcane references, ample notes, and the same awareness of stillness at the centre of movement. But it was in his reading of *The White Goddess* in 1970, or thereabouts, that Bryce found a validation for his own experience as poet. Since childhood, he had been moved to write almost exclusively by a female presence. Now as then, a young woman, a muse:

The muse for me was incarnate in young women. I thought there was something there beyond what I could explain as being inspired by lust or love. There was some presence I felt as a young, young poet that I also felt in some landscapes; it was definitely female. It's different from being inspired by an idea or by something that is simply beautiful. I had been attracted to the mythologies of both northern Europe (Celtic and Norse) and ancient Mesopotamia since childhood, and I found this presence – a personally affective muse presence – in the goddesses and muses of those cultures. And found this presence there in the incarnate muses and goddesses. I developed a theory over time that if the word was with God in the beginning, the Word was the muse. I've been a Christian my whole life and a Catholic most of my adult life but even so I cannot swear to the existence of God the way I can swear to the existence of this creative spirit I encounter periodically. (Interview)

In *Alms for Oblivion* his muse incarnate brought him to Enheduanna, to whom the poem is dedicated. She was, as the notes explain, 'high priestess of Nanna (the male Sumerian lunar deity)', who wrote hymns to Inanna, her muse and 'goddess of the universe', in Ur in 2600 BC (32).

In the poem, acceptance of the presence, though never in doubt, is tested by the rational side of a contemporary man. Brought up with mathematics and a sense that he would someday be an engineer, Milligan's rational self quarrels with the muse and word-drunk poet, though the two are reconciled as order and disorder, the actual realities or network of life itself. As poet and visionary, he can say:

I too have walked the road to Emmaeus,  
 felt a chill wind rise like a voice  
 but heard no voice, though those before me  
 questioned the leaves stirring upon the path,  
 reason, blood, to have heard  
 a single word, to have tasted  
 one drop from that grail. (11)

All too clearly such experience for one of this time rarely, if ever, occurs, locked in as we are by information and the urge to measure. Though Yeats could say 'in measurement began our might', he was himself compelled to write by visions that defied measurement or even description, as the ineptness of *A Vision* makes clear.

With its beginnings in Einstein rather than Blavatsky, models for reality today come constantly from the information and theories generated by the scientific community. In this time of information, though, synthesis risks being overwhelmed, as is illustrated by Milligan's discussion of inspiration:

Maybe I'm just older, or maybe crazier, but I've come to believe that the muse – this spirit of inspiration – migrates (at least for me) from person to person to, occasionally, a thing. Sometimes it is a tree, sometimes the silhouette of a mountain that looks like a breast, but in these cases it is definitely a host for the muse. This is fundamentally different from simply being inspired by beauty. I have found true inspiration, but not the muse herself, in the concept of string theory, for example, or the incredible symmetry in Maxwell's EM equations or the outright poetry of Einstein's field equations. Nevertheless, even when I do not sense the muse herself in a source of inspiration, I do sense it as being female. And sometimes, of course, the muse manifests herself as a real, breathing, by-god girl. It has little to do with sex, but everything to do with fecundity. (Written statement.)

Milligan found, as a young man, that physical intimacy with a muse was like putting his hand in a fire: he would be hurt. But as he writes in one of his songs: 'I can't believe that you're gone, / but that's how I pay for these songs.' Monogamous by nature, he continues to experience the disruption to life that the muse can (almost inevitably) bring to the life of the poet. As was Graves, Milligan seems powerless in the presence of a force predicated by understandings that are not logical, not sympathetic, not predictable. In fact, when the 'host' to the muse becomes merely human, the light dims, then disappears. Graves, as well, knew the progression, as he indicated to me when we talked during the summer of 1969. I mentioned that I had recently read a poem of his that seemed to me to be inspired by the muse and written to the goddess. Acknowledging the possibility, Graves asked which one. When I said 'Dancing Flame', he replied that the poem had been written to a woman 'who behaved very badly indeed'.

In section seven of *Alms for Oblivion*, Milligan makes an uneasy peace with information and inspiration and does so in metrically controlled lines that nevertheless carry the melodic lightness of his songs:

When winter's sullen skies descend  
into the city's neon maelstrom

and all the colors run and blend  
 he finds himself lost again in desire  
 to be at once her lover and the icon  
 cast on the flat of his mirror,  
 his other self that feels no fire but faith, no faith  
 but in the word whispered by the crossroad-winds.

The poem ends with a vision of the triple goddess, the power of woman as mother, lover, and death-bringer, so familiar to readers of Robert Graves's poetry and prose.

Perhaps because he does not accept the discrete demands of prose and poetry, Milligan's *Alms for Oblivion* leaves this reader a bit unsettled. The poem both celebrates and historically investigates the existence and force of the goddess/muse:

what can be called by one name  
 or another –  
 Mary, Ninhursag, Inanna, Nyneve, Gabrielle, Alice,  
 Maggie, Euterpe, Laighn, Courte, Beatrice, Elizabeth,  
 Jessica, Rose, Claire, Eve, Sharon, Julia, Victoria,  
 Marie, Urania, Gala, Laura, Cynthia, Fanny, Jenny,  
 Jeanie, Anne, Erato, Janis, Geshtinanna, Cerddwen,  
 all daughters of memory,  
 dark angels and light,  
 virgins and crones. (26–27)

The ample notes to the poem provide the reader with information and indicate sources for inquiry, perhaps the devotion of a believer or perhaps the long habit of a former academic. Whatever the cause, information is intrinsic to this poem, symptomatic, perhaps, of this time or, perhaps, of the poet's need to provide some reasonable form to inspiration. The muse pulls the poet into rites of fecundity, difficult for a non-agrarian city dweller.

I quote here from the 2003 edition of the poem, which had appeared in a somewhat different form in 2002. Though I have not seen early drafts, I know the poem went through constant and many revisions. The last was worth the poet's effort: clarity and simplicity occurred in metrical lines that do indicate the trance-like state that poets frequently ascribe to themselves when asked about revision and inspiration. 'The Word' itself is the ultimate host to the muse. As such, inspiration continues without muses being physically present, though perhaps the poet always lingers over their passing.

*I conducted my interview with Bryce Milligan in San Antonio, Texas, USA on 9 December 2003. At that time, he also gave me a written statement.*