

‘You may not believe it, for hardly could I’: Robert Graves and the Bible

Anne Mounic

True religion is of natural origin and linked practically with the seasons though it implies occasional states of abnormal ecstasy which can be celebrated only in the language of myth.

Robert Graves, ‘Answer to a Religious
Questionnaire’

The task of writing on the connections between Robert Graves’s work and the Bible is not as easy as one might expect. Although the biblical influence is fairly obvious in the prose and poems, with quotations and reminiscences peppered throughout, Robert Graves remained highly critical of the biblical heritage, especially as transmitted by Christianity, while being acutely aware of the necessary connection between poetry and the divine. He was also convinced that a poet needs a common ground of existential figures known to his readers in order to ensure genuine communication with them. This question, as will be seen, raises the delicate issue of the relationship between the poet and the community, with the risk in our time of poetic solipsism.

Graves was aware that the Bible, despite its wide range of interpretations within the Jewish world, is a book that is the foundation of a community. It provides a common ground of references, a representative history of a spiritual kind, unceasingly tracing the existential metamorphoses of the Word back to its ontological root – God as the secret Name of the unknown energy of being, the principle of life. God’s unpronounceable Name is the limit ascribed to human knowledge and wisdom, as Ecclesiastes says (8. 17): ‘though a wise *man* think to know *it* [the work of God], yet shall he not be able to find it’.¹ Yet this Name is also a way of naming what cannot be conceived by reason, or by the intellect – that is, Life.

Another point to be taken into account is that Graves's viewpoint, although absolutely coherent throughout when considering his overall outlook, underwent an evolution through the decades. The 'God Called Poetry' of his younger years (*Country Sentiment* (1920)) became the Muse and Goddess, White, under Laura Riding's influence, and then Black in the mature years. Moreover, the poet's early taste for fairy tales left more and more room for the darker side of the marvellous when he referred to primitive magic and, with acute anguish, confronted his strong desire to live with the violence that life keeps in store – a paralysing awareness in 'The Shout' (1924), a short story deeply marked by the trauma of war, growing into the appalling statement in *The White Goddess* (a book written during the Second World War): 'No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!''²

Graves's strong taste for the mystery of life and death ('I am all for religious mysteries, as is natural to a poet'³) is counterbalanced by a highly critical sense of reality ('The concept of the supernatural is a disease of religion'⁴) verging on positivism, if we follow this definition derived from Auguste Comte's philosophy: a doctrine based upon the knowledge of facts. Graves claimed affinities with his great-uncle Leopold von Ranke, the famous German historian who lived almost exactly one century before him (1795–1886). Von Ranke insisted on the study of historical facts (how things had really happened), on the critical reading of documents, and, with his Protestant outlook, was sure that history was a manifestation of God. He dismissed the notion of progress since he thought that each generation in history was in relation with God Himself. This biblical conception of history could not but appeal to Graves. Besides, his historical handling of myth is deeply rooted in a nineteenth-century apprehension of myth and religion, with Frazer and his *Golden Bough*, to which he

frequently refers. When considering his account of Jesus's life, we may also think of Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863), which he criticises in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953), since Renan 'would not apply his knowledge of Hebrew to dispersing the prejudices with which he had been imbued at the seminary of St Nicholas du Chardonnet'.⁵ Graves and Podro mention other attempts: David Friedrich Strauss's *Leben Jesu* (1835), 'the first scholarly attempt to free the Gospels of their supernatural element'⁶ and Joseph Klausner's *Jésus de Nazareth* (1928).

Graves also denounces dogma, following in Nietzsche's steps. The German poet and philosopher advocated what he called *Gaya Scienza* and rejected Christianity. Yet Nietzsche's views on this subject are not in fact so clear-cut.⁷ Without expatiating on this, one may nevertheless recall Nietzsche's outlook on tragedy as a combination of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the mysterious inner upsurge of undivided life and its transfiguration into individual beauty as a process of 'redemption through illusion', as he says in *The Birth of Tragedy*: 'Apollo I see as the transfiguring genius of the *principium individuationis*, the sole path to true redemption through illusion. While in the mystical triumphal cry of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken and the path is opened to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost core of things.'⁸ In this passage he connects 'Dionysian mirth' with the Faustian world of Mothers, one of Goethe's representations of what he called the 'demonic', or ambivalent creative energy linking together in its depths the inner and the outer worlds. Nietzsche's view of the double nature of poetic language is behind Graves's demand for a balanced proportion of individual rhythm and traditional metre in a poem and his conception of language as evinced in 'The Cool Web' – an instrument blunting sharp feelings. Dogmatic language would lead to a complete suppression of Dionysian depth and therefore to a drying up of life and poetic inspiration. However, poetic language deprived of its inherited rules would not serve the poet's purpose but reduce his voice to a solipsistic account of his psychological torment.

Graves finds himself confronted with two tasks: reconciling

religion and the intellect,⁹ and stripping from his reading of the Bible the features he disliked – what he calls ‘patriarchal’ rule: ‘But I am not a pessimist, and will now explain why: quoting, by your permission, from the now discredited Judaeo-Christian Bible.’¹⁰ Nevertheless, the reference to Hitler in Chapter 26 of *The White Goddess*¹¹ sounds to me disturbing and out of place, although I recognise that it is also subtly ironical. But this is much too subtle for the Nazis.

Frazer’s viewpoint is also discussed in Chapter 26, and an essential dimension of the Bible is stressed – the central significance of the individual, which is what Kierkegaard highlighted in his work.

Firstly, I am going to consider the works, articles, and chapters in books which Graves devoted entirely to biblical questions. Then I shall examine how he strives to debunk dogma, before analysing how he remained truly dedicated to the Bible: considering the poet as prophet, choosing as his central existential myth that of Jacob wrestling with the angel (*Genesis* 32) and viewing the poet’s task as a way of giving rhythm, meaning and resonance to man’s existence – which is what the Bible does.

The Major Works

We find biblical references throughout Graves’s works. However, some of his books are more particularly dedicated to biblical subjects. *King Jesus*, a novel on Jesus’s historical life, was published in 1946. It was written at the time when the poet was working on *The White Goddess* and it develops the mythic pattern: ‘Yet the history of Jesus from his Nativity onwards keeps so close to what may be regarded as a pre-ordained mythical pattern, that I have in many instances been able to presume events which I have afterwards proved by historical research to have taken place, and this has encouraged me to hope that where my account cannot be substantiated it is not altogether without truth.’¹² In this formulation, we notice Graves’s indebtedness to Von Ranke’s

method but we also gather that when the facts do not bear out the poet's intuition, he is not at all daunted by what could have been deemed as a hindrance.

As Martin Seymour Smith says in his biography,¹³ Graves's view was later altered by Joshua Podro's suggestions and the collaboration of the poet with the scholar of Judaism gave birth in 1953 to that enormous, ambitious book, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. In it the authors reconsider Jesus's sayings in the light of Judaism. The book sold with great difficulty and has not yet been reprinted,¹⁴ but Graves developed the same themes¹⁴ in various other works afterwards, in articles such as 'Paul's Thorn' (*5 Pens in Hand*), in which he summarises the theory that Paul, reading the Bible in Greek, misinterpreted it; or in an article initially published in 1956 under the title, 'Jewish Jesus, Gentile Christ', and then as 'Don't Fidget, Young Man!' in *5 Pens in Hand*. In both articles, he asserted Jesus's Jewishness, claimed that Paul was the 'perverter of the original Nazarene Gospel'¹⁵ and thought that Jesus had survived his Crucifixion, an idea he had in common with D. H. Lawrence ('The Man Who Died').

Yet I believe it is a pity that this book has not been re-printed. It reveals another aspect of Graves's 'honest' research (the adjective 'honest' recurs throughout *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*), since here, instead of assimilating the biblical lore with primitive myth, Graves and Podro endeavour to strip the four Gospels of their Greek distortions, additions, or misinterpretations. It is a way – usual with Graves – of getting rid of dogma by seeking to retrieve access to the origins. It is also a way of debunking Christian anti-Semitism.

The two authors denounce the 'attempts to dissociate Jesus from Judaism [...], to prove that he debarred the Jews from the Kingdom of God in favour of the Gentiles',¹⁶ and point out the 'deliberate misdirection against the Pharisees of denunciations originally intended for the Herodians and Sadducees' and 'misdirection against the Pharisees of denunciations intended for the "feigned Pharisees"'. These distortions are ascribed to 'miscopying' and 'misunderstanding of the Aramaic original', the

connection with ‘inappropriate contexts’, the ‘running together of different sayings’ and deliberate distortion: ‘invention of sayings and incidents which would authorise second-century Church practice’, as well as ‘iconotropy’, that is, misinterpretation of images.¹⁷

The authors aim at restoring ‘the original Nazarene Gospel’, which was ‘terse, factually accurate and intellectually satisfying to those chosen students of the Law and the prophets for whom it was primarily intended’, until ‘Gentile heretics pirated it, mistranslated it into pedestrian Greek, recast it, and then subjected it to a century-long process of emendation and manipulation’. The book is made up of several distinct parts. In the Foreword, the general argument is outlined. The Introduction has three movements: first, the personality of Jesus is considered, then the ‘Pauline heresy’, and finally the ‘process of Gospel-making’. Then the different episodes are quoted in their concordance within the four Gospels, the veracity of facts and original sources being commented upon. Lastly, the ‘Nazarene Gospel’ is ‘restored’, preceded by a ‘Summary of Critical Principles’.

Graves and Podro strove to reveal the historical Jesus: ‘In allegory, Jesus may be God; in history he must be man.’¹⁸ For them, Jesus abided by the Pharisaic tradition, which was wholly oral, hence the problems raised by the written account – made years later, after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD – of his sayings, which were for the most part *midrashim*, i.e. comments on the Bible, whether *Numbers*, *Leviticus*, *Deuteronomy*, or any of the other books. The Gentile Christians ‘transformed Jesus’s teaching into a Greek mystery-cult’.¹⁹ ‘Christianity was unmistakably a “daughter” religion – but what daughter would side with her mother’s alien oppressors, jeer at her calamities and declare herself the sole inheritress of the family title and culture?’²⁰

The two authors both claim their independence and remain humble: ‘It happens that neither of us has a chair, post, or pulpit to lose. Working when and how we please and consulting our own libraries, we acknowledge no spiritual authority, except the still,

small, nagging voice of conscience – a survival from our early Scriptural education – which urges us to tell the truth as we know it. We are, in fact, amateurs or irregulars, well aware, from recent analogues in medicine and warfare, of the deep mistrust our book will arouse among those whose livelihood depends on a careful observance of theological etiquette.²¹ The way they describe themselves tells much about their deep concern – to do justice to Judaism by overcoming ancestral prejudices: ‘One of us grew up as a devout Eastern European Jew and passed his childhood in terror of Christian pogroms; the other an Irish bishop’s grandson, born in the same year, grew up as a devout Anglican and soon learned to abhor the Jews ‘who crucified Jesus’. It is less remarkable than may appear that we arrived eventually at a common point of view: both developed a historical conscience and ceased to hold orthodox beliefs long before we came to know each other in England during the recent war. We knew that an enormous effort was needed to wipe out the traditional misrepresentations of Jesus acquired in childhood. Comparing notes, we realised how much each could learn from the other.’

Several important questions are tackled in this book, such as the question of faith and the modern world, the Christian belief in the absolute truth of the Gospel and the miracles counterbalancing our ‘crudely mechanical views of existence’.²² ‘Life is not considered worth living in the West if completely controlled and behaviouristic; and the Gospel message combines evidence of miracles with an insistence on the individual’s right to be master of his own spiritual fate. It is said: “Look what has happened to personal liberty in Godless Russia! Destroy belief in the authenticity of the Gospels and you destroy belief in a man’s right to think or act for himself.” This is not, of course, so: the most important contributions to modern imaginative literature and scientific discovery have been made by agnostics and atheists.’ Through describing the personality of Hillel, ‘a Jewish lay-teacher of the first century B.C.’,²³ the authors give a definition of religion (in keeping with Graves’s outlook): ‘He regarded the Godhead as a mystery, notoriously beyond definition, which it was most

improper for theologians to discuss in public. While conceding the need for strict ceremoniousness in obedience to the law, he insisted that love for one's neighbour was the sole beginning and end of religion.'

In this book it seems that Graves restored the Jesus he was predisposed to like – an 'honest' individual striving after an ideal denied in everyday life. To a certain extent, if we bear in mind the fact that in the summer 1916 he had himself recovered from 'his death-like coma' and that in 1929, saying 'Goodbye to All That', he went to Majorca, self-exiled, we may say that with this Jesus he could identify. 'We hold also that he officially died on the Cross, but afterwards, when he recovered from his death-like coma, and found that the Kingdom of Heaven had not come, it was gradually borne upon him that his sacrifice had been premature. He therefore tried to expiate his error by self-exile from Palestine, intending to return only when the "Day of the Lord" finally dawned.'²⁴ And this shows how personal was Graves's concern with the Scriptures.

Another book followed, *Hebrew Myths*, written with the American Hebrew scholar Raphael Patai, and published in 1964. What prevails here is Graves's method of revising the Bible ('putting it right', one of his favourite phrases) to find there remnants of the so-called matriarchal age in which he believed. He had already published a short essay about *Genesis* in 1955, *Adam's Rib*.

I do not mean to go into these works in detail, but to try and capture Graves's overall perception of the Bible so as to measure its impact on his poetics and his poems. The essays he published in various books in the sixties and seventies will be useful for this purpose.

'But I am not a pessimist...'

From the very beginning, Graves constantly refers to the Bible. Chapter 7 of *On English Poetry*, his first book of criticism, is called a 'parable', a direct reference to the Gospel, and deals with

the relationship of poet and reader, 'The parable of Mr. Poeta and Mr. Lector'. Nevertheless, as I have suggested above, the subject is not irrelevant to our purposes since it deals with the capacity of words to be shared and create a common human ground. In the same volume, in the chapter called 'Poetry and Primitive Magic', Graves writes: 'Bad poetry is simply the work of a man who solves his emotional problems to his own satisfaction but not to anybody else's.'²⁵ Another chapter with a clear biblical reference is 'My Name is Legion, for We Are Many' (Matthew 5. 9) on the poet's manifold personalities – another significant element of Graves's myth-making.

Later, in 1965, the title *Mammon and the Black Goddess* provides a synthesis of the poet's outlook. Mammon is the Aramaic noun for material riches, sometimes used as a proper name. In Matthew 6. 24 (in the Beatitudes), we may read this warning: 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' Part of this title therefore points to the Scriptures and the second half of it to myth, namely Gravesian myth.

In this collection of lectures, two titles contain direct biblical references, 'Nine Hundred Iron Chariots' and 'The Poet in a Valley of Dry Bones'. The first title belongs to Judges 4. 3: 'he [Jabin, King of Canaan] had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.' From these twenty years of oppression in Canaan, Israel is released by Deborah, the prophetess who judges her people. 'And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey which thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the Lord shall send Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh.' (Judges 4. 9.)

In this lecture, given at MIT in May 1963, Graves explores the gap between scientists and poets ('It is politely assumed that scientists have souls as well as minds'²⁶) and pleads for humanity and the inner life: 'The difference is, roughly, that the scientist concentrates on analysis and classification of external fact even if fact be beautifully disguised as mathematical relation; whereas the poet concentrates on discovery of internal truth. To a poet,

analysis and factual classification are a reputable pursuit only so long as they serve a natural human need – which they often do in medicine, geology, or botany; not when they become obsessive and inhuman.²⁷ He attacks the effect of such a widespread outlook on everyday life, and one thinks of Blake's reply (reported by Alexander Gilchrist) to someone showing him *The Mechanic's Magazine*: 'Ah, sir, these things we artists HATE!'²⁸

Graves advocates the leap of the Imagination which Coleridge had already described in *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter VII) and distinguishes between true originality ('a leap taken by the mind across a dark gulf of nothingness into new regions of scientific thought'²⁹) and the routine of poetical originality: 'the routiners must pretend to possess it, by embellishing their poems with rhetorical tropes borrowed from abstractionism, psycho-analysis, and undigested foreign literature'. The gap, he then suggests, may be bridged by the 'original scientist' who 'may find some analogy between his experiences and a poet's'. Graves's strong individualism comes across: 'The poet is, on the whole, anti-authoritarian, agoraphobic and intuitive rather than intellectual; but his judgments are coherent.' Defining the genuine poet as a Muse poet, he shifts to another distinction: 'I left out an element from my proposition about scientists and poets standing at opposite extremes of contemporary thought: namely, that mankind is composed of men and women; and that woman's thought now oscillates between two extremes – quasi-male and authentic female.'³⁰ Should the world be ruled only by the male principle, the poet asserts, it would be as if only one propeller were going round in a plane. This means that with the help of the Muse, he recovers his unity of being – a form of plenitude. And it is not only the case for the poet but also for the individual as such. Graves refers to Goethe, criticising him because, even if he emphasised 'the value of intuition and of contemplating', he described it as 'the bright beam that joined him to God'³¹ – a male God.

Then the poet as critic resorts to the 'now discredited Judaeo-Christian Bible' from a paradoxical point of view, which is, I

think, quite characteristic of him: ‘The Bible was edited, during or shortly after the Exile, by a monotheistic and misogynous Guild of prophets; they set themselves to delete all favourable reference to women who controlled men by their intuitive wisdom. Only one such case somehow escaped the censors: that of Deborah.’³² And he concludes: ‘No release from the present impasse can come, in my view, except from a Barak who has put himself under Deborah’s orders. *Barak* means ‘lightning’, but is associated with *báraka*, or ‘blessedness’ that comes from divine Wisdom.’³³ Love, then, is unity of being, assimilated to ‘creative Nature’, *natura naturans* rather than *natura naturata* (a point made in the seventeenth century by Spinoza, who thought that God was Life’s creative energy): ‘Nor must love be read as grand-scale international philanthropy; but as a personal understanding between Barak, the male mind, and Deborah, the female mind. This alone can lift humanity out of the morass where intellectual arrogance has sunk it and develop the so-called supernatural powers of which both sexes are capable.’ We shall see that this outlook, although advanced with caution and in the light of paradox, is genuinely biblical.

The next lecture, given in Oxford in 1962, refers to Ezekiel 37. The prophet is led to a valley full of dry bones, which the Word of God restores in their flesh and breath. The Word of God, again, is the Word of the living. Graves takes this as a metaphor of craftsmanship, which is ‘self-taught’³⁴ and does not mean sheer technique, which only implies creating a puppet, ‘articulating the skeletons with wire’³⁵ (as in Hawthorne’s tale, ‘Feathertop: A Moralized Legend’): ‘When one treats poetry in this sort of way, the notion of technique falls away: all that remains is the poet’s service to the Muse, his unwavering love of whom, for all her unpossessibility, assures his work will be truthful... Every dictionary is a valley of dry bones. The poet is inspired to breathe life into them (as Ezekiel did when he prophesied), and convert them into language.’

This lecture inspires two impressions, apparently contradictory.

The reader feels that the biblical test is reduced to individual use and scope; yet, at the same time, with the Bible in mind, the poet lifts poetry to a higher level, at a stage where the individual's inner life shares in the divine. Graves writes, at the beginning of the last lecture in this collection, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess': 'Poets, like prophets and saints, claim to live by certain unshakeable principles. But just as the sole judge of saintliness or prophetic truth is God – not popular awe or fallible Church councils; so the sole judge of poetry for the professed poet, is the Muse-Goddess – not textbook critics or auditors of publishers' net-sales.'³⁶

In 'Technique in Poetry', he refers to a myth quoted in *Hebrew Myths* – God creating Eve and inviting Adam to 'watch while the divine fingers built up a woman's anatomy from primeval sludge. [...] This technical demonstration caused Adam such disgust that, when the first Eve stood up in all her beauty and smiled at him, he turned his back on her.'³⁷ Then he says: 'I inherit Adam's mistrust of creative technique.' This shows Graves's minute interest in the Bible – a will to trace the text back to its origins – and it also highlights his strong desire to 'inherit', that is, to participate in these origins and to actualise them – the past becoming the future within the unit of the present moment.

From this study of a few of Graves's writings, it is, then, fairly clear that, although critical of the distortions superimposed on the text by the dogma, Graves could not repudiate the Bible. In 'The Uses of Superstition' he writes: 'Yet though determined against the validity of most Church doctrines, I should find it both needless and uncomfortable to abjure many superstitions which are part of my cultural heritage, chief of which is the idolatrous respect paid to a Bible. I could never (except to save life), bring myself to stand on a family Bible, or even lay another book on top of it.'³⁸

I shall now endeavour to probe the meaning of such a paradoxical outlook.

'the honest agnostic'

In 'The Bible in Europe', an essay he published in *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* in 1973, Graves writes that 'the honest agnostic who feels his mind becoming split into two irreconcilable parts, the religious and the practical, feels obliged to leave the Church for the protection of his sanity'³⁹. His aim, through the knowledge of mythical facts, is to strive to reconcile 'religion and the intellect':⁴⁰ 'But if certain writers find that ethics and ritual alone are insufficient and that something more is needed for their spiritual well-being, they should try to make scholarly sense of the Gospel and see to what religious conclusions that leads them; and if they find that it cannot be re-stated in a manner acceptable alike to the historian, the anthropologist and the poet, they should be content to let it go down the flume, and turn elsewhere.'

Graves would not 'turn elsewhere', hence his re-writing of the Gospel (*The Nazarene Gospel Restored*) and his quest for 'a historical grammar of poetic myth' (*The White Goddess*). The quest, nevertheless, is constantly placed under some sort of vivid tension, as though the desire to wonder at the mysteries of life were always confronted with the demands of the intellect; as though in order to conquer the right to indulge in the mysteries of life's experience, Graves needed to satisfy his inherited positivism.

On the one hand, as is obvious in his address to the MIT scientists, he stated that if the intellect alone was working, the plane was flying with a single propeller going round, which produced a lack of unity and balance. On the other hand, he admitted that the Muse was not to be possessed as a secure gift, which is exactly what Ecclesiastes suggests: we know nothing of the mysteries of life and death. There is a limit to the capacities of reason and even of wisdom.

Yet, although Graves never talks in philosophical terms, we can state that he never accepts the Kantian denial of any possible metaphysics. On the contrary, he shares Bergson's confidence in the powers of the intuition. Although his view of the Bible seems

to have evolved from distrust to quasi-acceptance, thanks to his coming back to the Hebrew origins of the text and tradition, his praise of intuition in spite of his positivist intellect is a characteristic of his work throughout.

In his 1925 collection of essays entitled *Poetic Unreason*, he talked of ‘The Illogical Element in Poetry’: “‘Illogical’ I am using here in a narrower sense as meaning poetry which does not conform with those principles of logic which govern what I have been calling intellectual as opposed to emotional thought. This logic is a system wholly deduced from the broadest and most impersonal analyses of cause and effect, capable of empiric proof.’⁴¹ The poet calls ‘logical’, more or less, what I defined above as his positivism (the ‘empiric proof’). He opposes ‘emotional thought’ to ‘most impersonal analyses of cause and effect’. The important word here is the adjective ‘impersonal’. What Graves means to withstand is the concept, abstract knowledge and generalisations, what Blake as an artist ‘HATED’, favouring what he called the ‘minute Particulars’. Yet Blake also thought that individual dreams as such did not reach the poetic goal of embracing the deeper significance of life’s experience. Graves, influenced by the new concepts of psychoanalysis and psychology through his acquaintance with W. H. R. Rivers, deemed that individual dreams reflected the metamorphic character of Romantic poetry: ‘in Romantic poetry the conflict is expressed in the illogical but vivid method of dream-changings’.⁴² However, he also asserted, in the chapter of *Poetic Unreason* called ‘Poetic Genius’, ‘Poetic or other genius is a term most intelligible hitherto in the context of mankind’s struggle for the divine.’⁴³ The verb ‘struggle’ tells us much about the conflictual nature of this aspiration.

Graves’s criticism of religion is twofold: firstly, dogma, whether Protestant or Catholic, does not satisfy his intellect: ‘Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has made no doctrinal change of importance since the counter-Reformation; nor has the Protestant Church

since the Reformation, and in neither Church has there been any official attempt to revise even the glaringly unhistorical passages in the Gospels. Intellectuals who turn Catholic and submit to Church discipline have to admit that their confessor knows not only his sacred, but his profane, history better than they do. They must, in fact, surrender their critical rights, and cease to be intellectuals.⁴⁴

Dogma, moreover, impedes any kind of metamorphosis. Transcending time, it also denies its creative, and human, significance. Therefore it cannot be true to life and even less respond to the individual's existential needs. Graves speaks of Christianity as turning into 'a militant State religion' in the fourth century AD, and asserts: 'Totalitarianism is not the antonym of Christianity, as the questionnaire suggests – the Spain of Philip II was both totalitarian and Catholic.'⁴⁵

Therefore, although the intellectual and poetic claims seem to be at variance, we may now begin to grasp their coherence. In both cases, from the intellectual or from the poetic standpoint, Graves defends his rights as an individual, using for himself the two 'propellers', his intellect and his intuition, for an ever-renewed, balanced unity of being. In his definition of religion, he is in the tradition of English poetry, a poetry celebrating the immediate world of reality, a poetry of things and feelings: 'True religion is of natural origin and linked practically with the seasons though it implies occasional states of abnormal ecstasy which can be celebrated only in the language of myth.'⁴⁶

And this celebration of agrarian rites and biblical references is not alien to the great poetic tradition leading from Langland (Piers Plowman, identified with Christ) through Chaucer's idealised ploughman to Blake: 'we sit down within / The plowed furrow, list'ning to the weeping clods'.⁴⁷ The divine can be reached through the earthly labour of everyday life. In Chapter 59 of *On English Poetry*, Graves denied that poetry should only be a 'gentle recreation like cutting out "Home Sweet Home" from three-ply wood with a fretsaw, or collecting pressed flowers'.⁴⁸

His case against 'mystical Catholics'⁴⁹ was not always clear-cut.

Catholic Mallorca seemed to him closer to his ideal than 'moralistic' Puritanism, as he suggests in his 1961 Foreword to *The White Goddess*: 'I am nobody's servant and have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is ruled by the old agricultural cycle.'⁵⁰ Moreover, he deemed the Virgin Mary worship to be a remnant of the old matriarchal rule of the Goddess. He strongly attacked the Puritans, and Milton as their representative, in *Wife to Mr. Milton*, opposing the folklore of Merry England, as staged by Shakespeare in such a play as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to the stiff Puritan morality. The poet who had entitled one of the chapters of *On English Poetry* 'The Gadding Vine' (from 'Lycidas', 1637, line 40), speaks on behalf of Mary Powell, stating with irony: 'My husband was never wanton with me either in word or act, nor ever lay with me but with the express intention of procreation, and that very seldom.'⁵¹ Graves's own assessment recalls Blake's criticism of Milton, described as having 'part of his mind sunk in a superstitious awe of God'.⁵²

However, the most convincing feature of Graves's criticism of Christian biblical dogma is his view of the linguistic issue. He states it in his own provocative way, but this is in line with *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*: 'The Pharisees, a high-minded and puritanical Jewish sect, whose religious rules Jesus ordered his disciples to follow (Matthew 23. 13–15) while at times condemning certain unworthy members of the sect – who because of St. Paul's later quarrel with them are consistently misrepresented by Gospel editors – agreed that one of Israel's worst calamities was when the seventy-two Jewish scholars of Alexandria translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. This version, now called *The Septuagint* ("The Seventy"), is the basis of our Christian Old Testament. Its publication in the reign of King Ptolemy Philadelphus about the year 288 BC allowed a national religious document – the true meaning of which, it was held, only trained Doctors of the Law could expound – to be studied by ignorant foreigners who might, and did, quote its verses in ridicule of the Jewish Faith.'⁵³

Paul being Greek, Graves says, and knowing neither the Hebrew

nor the Aramaic that Jesus spoke, misinterpreted both messages. This point is not wholly misconstrued. What Paul advocates in Galatians 3. 11 – ‘But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is* evident: for, the just will live by faith’ – is based upon an incomplete interpretation of the word ‘Torah’, which covers a wider range of meanings than simply the strict notion of ‘law’, as is usual in Hebrew. ‘Torah’ in its first meaning is derived from the verb meaning ‘to throw’. Then it means ‘gold’ and ‘light’, and thirdly ‘teaching’, ‘transmission’ and ‘doctrine’.⁵⁴ Therefore the ‘Torah’ should not be considered outside time but in a movement, as teaching ‘thrown’ through time. It is then antithetical to the eternal fixity of dogma. The Greek word used by Paul is *nomos*; the word stresses the notion of inherited custom, of tradition. Then it comes to mean a ‘rule of conduct’ and then a ‘law’. The word used for ‘faith’ is *pistis*, which means ‘trust in others’, then ‘trust or credit’ from a commercial point of view, faithfulness, and then ‘faith, belief’.

Graves also makes his point about the Vulgate, Jerome’s Latin translation from the Hebrew (*circa* 391–405 AD), which was in its turn ‘furtively translated into German, Dutch, English, and other vernacular languages. A great mass of uneducated people were thus freed to interpret the Scriptures as they pleased, and form dangerous new heretical sects. The Pharisees had been right in deploring the Septuagint. Without it, Christians would have persecuted no Jews; but, also, without vernacular Bibles there would have been no Lutheranism and no protracted religious wars fought between Catholics and Protestants.’⁵⁵

Certainly, as a cause of war, the linguistic question is not as relevant as the political issue of who is wielding temporal power and who wants freedom from it – or to take over. Nevertheless, Graves stresses two significant points related to the poetic significance of the Bible: ‘Faithfulness to their own Scriptures keeps the main body of religious Jews far more closely united than the Christians have ever been. [...] The Christian Bible, in contrast, suffers from a lack of linguistic cohesion.’⁵⁶ In opposition, we may highlight the danger of poetic solipsism in a world which no longer

acknowledges, or is even ignorant of, a common body of myth. Edwin Muir was also aware of this issue in modern times when he remarked: ‘The old story was quite simple. It followed some figure – Odysseus, or Ruth, or King David – through time; and it remains the most pure image that we have of temporal life, tracing the journey which we shall take.’⁵⁷ Moreover, this disenchanted world is, as Wordsworth notices in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a prey to boredom, due to ‘the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident’.⁵⁸ The Romantic poet, with great insight, speaks then of ‘this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’.

Graves’s second point is that the Hebrew Scripture is poetry as such: ‘Finally, the Bible lay under the great disadvantage, compared with the Jewish Scriptures and the Koran, of not being a national historic document. Its geographical names and the names of its leading characters conveyed little to non-Jewish converts, and being a translation of a translation of a translation, rather than an original text, it lacked the insistent poetic rhythms which made a great part of the Hebrew Scriptures, and all the Koran, easily memorizable.’⁵⁹ And it is true that, traditionally, the biblical text cannot be read only through the eyes. The reader must move his lips when reading it, which means that each reading of the biblical verses is an actualisation of the text in the present moment.⁶⁰ The Bible speaks for life (‘A living dog is better than a dead lion’, Ecclesiastes 9. 4) and, as Blake wrote in *Milton*, ‘Time is the mercy of Eternity.’⁶¹ For both poets, the poet is a prophet. What does this mean?

Poet and Prophet

‘The poet is not a schizophrenic – with his mind torn in two parts – but a *deuteropotmos*: a “second-fated” one who has, as it were, already died and conversed with the oracular dead, thus being gifted with the spirit of prophecy.’⁶² Graves uses a Greek word and implicitly refers to the world of Hades to introduce this notion of prophecy – the world of myth rather than biblical lore – but we shall see that there is no contradiction here. First of all, the word

deuteropotmos is worth analysing: *deuteros* means ‘second’, or ‘what comes next’, ‘what comes after’; *potmos* is ‘what is decided by fate’, hence ‘death’. What is interesting here is the notion of repetition, ‘once more once’, as a jazz singer might say, and on another plane of life, since *Hades*, etymologically, is the world of the invisible. We move beyond the phenomenal world into another sphere of apprehension and knowledge.

Later, in the same 1965 lecture in Oxford, Graves recounts a moment of illumination in his childhood, at the age of twelve. ‘I was sitting on an iron roller behind the school cricket pavilion, with nothing much in my head, when I received a sudden celestial illumination: it occurred to me that *I knew everything*.’⁶³ He clearly states that he discovered, at that very instant, the power of intuition, the necessary ‘propeller’ which should go round beside the intellect: ‘This is still with me, for I now realize that what overcame me that evening was a sudden awareness of the power of intuition, the supra-logic that cuts out all routine processes of thought and leaps straight from problem to answer. I did not in fact know everything, but became aware that in moments of real emergency the mind can weigh an infinite mass of imponderables and make immediate sense of them. This is how poems get written.’⁶⁴

One thinks here of the German Romantics, of Coleridge, and, again, of Blake:

The Spectre is the reasoning Power in Man, & when
separated
 From Imagination and closing itself as in steel in a Ratio
 Of the things of Memory, It then frames Laws and Moralities
 To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms &
Wars.⁶⁵

Like Blake and the Romantics, Graves claims consideration for what has been left aside in the age of reason, rejecting poetry into the narrow field of aesthetics, detached from existential, and temporal, to use Muir’s word, realities.

[...] but the Sublime is shut out from the Pathos
 In howling torment, to build stone walls of separation,
compelling
 The Pathos to weave curtains of hiding secrecy from the
torment.⁶⁶

This split of imagination and reason, of the pathos and the sublime, means true disenchantment, a state of boredom demanding more and more ‘extraordinary incident’, to use Wordsworth’s phrase. Living with only one propeller going round is to condemn the writer and poet to a ‘degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’, to please his readers.

Graves describes the immediate power of intuition in the following way: ‘I nevertheless held the key of truth in my hand, and could use it to open any lock of any door. Mine was no religious or philosophical theory, but a simple method of looking sideways at disorderly facts so as to make perfect sense of them.’⁶⁷ He then calls this an ‘embarrassing gift’. Indeed, since, as in Hades, there is no visible, or palpable, reality to give evidence of the knowledge thus provided. The eye sees shades only, the hands reach but ‘thin air’, as Shakespeare said, but this knowledge within discloses itself through rhythm; it is the soul in act and in the making (this is not very far from Keats).

In *L'évolution créatrice* (1907),⁶⁸ Bergson, a strong critic of Kant, showed that knowledge implied two faculties, the intellect and intuition, the former giving a knowledge of matter and intuition providing direct access to life from within. Intuition is immediate participation in life and communication with the rest of the living through a dilation of individual consciousness. Metaphysics is founded on such a theory of knowledge, which is based upon the working together of what Graves called the two ‘propellers’. How can this be related to the Bible?

The biblical narratives give a mythical account of life in the historical process of becoming. Life cannot be thought of outside duration, Bergson writes,⁶⁹ and this is what Virginia Woolf effectively showed in *Mrs Dalloway*, that we cannot conceive real

time, but we have a living experience of it because life overflows our intelligence. Graves talks of ‘looking sideways at disorderly facts’. In *The White Goddess* (Chapter 19), he uses the word ‘slantwise’, thus defined: ‘Poets will know what I mean by slantwise: it is a way of looking through a difficult word or phrase to discover the meaning lurking behind the letters.’⁷⁰ The knowledge thus acquired, slantwise, is intuitive and cannot exist outside the flow of time; however, ‘To think in temporal terms is a very complicated and unnatural way of thinking.’⁷¹ It is most unnatural to the intellect since it means thinking in movement, the present moment being situated, so to speak, at the crossroads of the past and the future, what Graves called ‘analeptic’ and ‘proleptic’ thought. Intuition, he says, is ‘memory of the future’ and the poem is such synthesis within the present moment of ecstasy, ‘a suspension of temporal criteria’. The poet asserts, like the philosopher, that such intuition of time evades the concept: ‘But an interesting feature of prolepsis and analepsis is that the coincidence of the concept and the reality is never quite exact: gamma coincides with Zeta, but not so closely that either loses its identity.’⁷² The intellect can conceive fixity only. It therefore deals with concepts, and dogma, for people counting only on this propeller, is a strong temptation – revealing some sort of laziness.

The Bible derives its meaning from a particular quality of Hebrew grammar related to the tense of verbs. The past and the future co-exist in the letter *vav*, called ‘conversive’ since it can convert the past into the future and vice versa. This is the language of prophecy, this conversation with the ‘oracular dead’, the figures of the past speaking the word of the future, and it is true that when Ulysses or Aeneas descended into Hades, they wanted to know about their future lot.

This means that what is called messianic time, as Gershom Scholem put it, is the time of the conversive *vav*, that is neither the past, or what has been accomplished, or the future, or what remains to achieve, but their inversion.⁷³ The biblical language is the language of the mind at grips with otherness, or transcendence, what is out of intellectual grasp or beyond the human will (of which

Ecclesiastes says that we cannot find it even through wisdom), the language of experience spiritually embraced.

A door opens into another temporal dimension, as in Graves's 'Red Ribbon Dream'. The spirit wrestles with Death-in-Life within duration, in the everlasting process of becoming. This feature is also a characteristic of the Greek god Hermes, or the Latin Mercury, whom Graves describes, in Chapter 13 of *The White Goddess*, as the god of poetry. To deceive Apollo, whose herd he had stolen, Hermes inverted the animals' footprints and his, in order to confound his pursuers. The god that Stevie Smith called her 'ambassador' is a guide of the souls into the Underworld and the speaker of a language without any visual counterpart or representation, the *askopon epos*⁷⁴ of Aeschylus's *Libation-Bearers*.

The language of prophecy therefore is that of hope against fate, of life in its mysterious temporal reality. It is the language of creation, of utopia certainly, this place of no-place, of no tangible reality to respond to the sheer thought of it, the sole projection of the mind on what might be. The words then are living entities because there is no other testimony of this science of the invisible.

We also find a biblical element in the syncretic title of Graves's utopia, *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949). New Crete refers to Graves's myth but seven days is the biblical time of Creation. Graves's utopia is rooted in the world of the origin, in the inverted time of the human spirit. In this novel, Graves voices the ironical hope that wars could be converted into sporting events. He satirises our civilisation and its positivism, considering our mythic past in his own light: 'I did not bother to put him right. The post-Exilic Jews had shown an equal disregard for historical fact, in ascribing all ancient religious poetry to King David and all ancient amatory verse to King Solomon, and in rewriting their national annals for the purpose of moral edification.'⁷⁵ (A Blakean outlook again.)

In Chapter 19 of *The White Goddess*, Graves quotes his own poem 'On Portents', published in *To Whom Else?* in 1931, during his Laura Riding period. It is worth paying attention to these lines:

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 be wondered at,
 Being tourbillions in Time made
 By the strong pulling of her bladed mind
 Through that ever-reluctant element.⁷⁶

The French poet Claude Vigée speaks, with reference to poetry, of ‘spiritual violence’⁷⁷. This is a phrase I would like to use here to refer to ‘the strong pulling of her bladed mind’, and I would say that the Goddess is not only for Graves the female conversion of the transcendent principle (Jehovah) but also the actual presence of the human desire to grasp and undergo life’s experience at the same time. The ‘ever-reluctant element’ is Time itself, real otherness. Through this spiritual wrestling, the individual mind dilates so as to communicate with the rest of the living and reach the proper realm of life.

When he referred to Hitler in Chapter 26 of *The White Goddess*, Graves also quoted Frazer: ‘Sir James Frazer attributed the defects of European civilisation to “the selfish and immoral doctrine of Oriental religions which inculcated the communion of the soul with God, and its eternal salvation, as the only objects worth living for”’. This, he argued, undermined the unselfish ideal of Greek and Roman society which subordinated the individual to the welfare of the State.’⁷⁸ Again we stumble against the issue of temporal power and the position of the individual. Kierkegaard showed that the Bible encouraged the individual to go beyond the ethical stage without denying it, but nevertheless asserting his own choice before God.

Thus the question of what Max Weber, inspired by Schiller, called ‘disenchantment’, is transcended through the acknowledgement of intuition, but it is also an ethical issue. The individual is no longer ‘disenchanted’, and subject to boredom, when he creates himself in duration, in the present moment of the ethical and personal choice,

when facing the truth of life (what Kierkegaard called God, what Graves calls the Goddess) and one might again quote Bergson, who talks of continual self-creation. Graves insists on this aspect: ‘Then why not say ethics [...]? Because ethics are held to derive from revealed religion, notably the Ten Commandments [...]’.⁷⁹

In *The White Goddess*, Graves strove to deduce the character of the Goddess from the letters of the Tetragrammaton, which he manipulated analogically with mythical facts in Chapter 16, ‘The Holy Unspeakable Name of God’. YHVH, the Tetragrammaton, on which he wrote a poem,⁸⁰ is the God of the inner soul, the God within. It is submitted to conjecture in the Bible. When Moses, in the episode of the Burning Bush (Exodus 3. 13–14), asks the angel of God for his Name, the translation again raises a problem: ‘I am what I am’ is not correct, and we should ‘put it right’. As Claude Vigée, as well as Henri Meschonnic, has pointed out, the Hebrew *ehye ascher ehye*, which is the angel’s reply, means: ‘I shall become what I shall become’,⁸¹ which implies the notion of self-creation in time rather than the idea of immovable eternity suggested by the present tense. Now Claude Vigée adds that the Cabalists, in the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendour, through calculating the numeral value of the Hebrew letters involved (Graves proceeds in a similar way in *The White Goddess*), came to the conclusion that the Name of God was ‘Maybe’ or ‘Perhaps’: ‘Un ‘peut-être’ qui fonde aussi bien toute l’expérience poétique!’ (A ‘Maybe’ which also founds the whole of poetical experience!)

This understanding opens a door into time, a door leading to the human re-appropriation of duration, time becoming the inner duration of self-creation, the inner experience of personal achievement. Graves draws this door in the shape of a dolmen, showing its sacred value, in *The White Goddess* (Chapter 12), and says in Chapter 16: ‘Have we not already stumbled on the secret? Was the Name not spelt out by the seven vowels of the threshold, cut with three times nine holy nicks and read sunwise?’⁸² The access to messianic time is provided by the rhythm of poetic language.

This account of human experience is not idealistic (Graves

dismisses the one-sided character of classical Apollo and connects it with the chaotic figure of Dionysus, as Nietzsche had done) but highly realistic. The continuous becoming of the human soul means unceasing wrestling with the unknown, the Transcendent, the 'ever-reluctant element'. The central biblical figure for this existential struggle is Jacob wrestling with the angel. It is a major episode in the Bible; Jacob is a central figure in Graves's myth.

Jacob and his Rival

In Chapter 18 of *The White Goddess*, 'The Bull-Footed God', Graves associates Jacob, 'the heel-god', with Samson, Dionysus, Llew Llaw and Hercules, among others, and connects these figures with time, or more precisely with the dialectics of life and death apprehended within the rhythm of the sacred year. His purpose is not to dismiss biblical lore but to highlight its existential (or mythical) relevance once all dogmatic belief has been ruled out: 'Poets who are concerned with the single poetic Theme, cannot afford to draw disingenuous distinction between "sacred history" and "profane myth" and make the usual dissociation between them, unless prepared to reject the Scriptures as wholly irrelevant to poetry. This would be a pity, and in these days of religious toleration I cannot see why they need accept so glaringly unhistorical a view of the authorship, provenience, dating and original texts of the Old Testament, that its close connection with the Theme is severed. In the following chapter I will knit up a few more broken strands.'⁸³

In doing so, he makes of Jacob and all the connected figures living symbols of existential wrestling, the work of 'Contraries' as Blake would say, but not of 'Negations'; or how the poetic Word becomes flesh, the living entity restored in the valley of dry bones. Contraries work together and create a human being who, even injured, *is*, while negations leave the individual aside on behalf of abstraction, of the concept. This is certainly why (and here we may think of Tolstoy) Graves asserted that 'a crusade against Communism can be launched only in the name of religion'⁸⁴.

With this article in view, I asked Claude Vigée if he would translate the passage of the Hebrew text (Genesis 32) and explain to me the choice of words and their complex meanings. He was kind enough to do so and I am very grateful to him. This passage is of major importance to him, as the foundation of his poetics. In *La lune d'hiver*, he writes: 'Jacob, homme-temps, se fait origine du messie innombrable que réalisera, à travers l'histoire, sa descendance. Le poète célèbre, par tout acte de création, la répétition de ce mystère, dont il propose dans l'œuvre un simulacre. Tout poème, en se réalisant hors de l'absence, du chaos, de la solitude, mime le combat de Jacob avec l'ange.'⁸⁵

Graves says that 'Jacob wrestles all night with an angel at Peniel and is lamed by him so that the sinew in the hollow of his thigh is shrunken.'⁸⁶ In Genesis 32. 25, the word used to refer to the wrestling implies that the wrestlers are clasping each other. In the verb *aveq*, we find the same root as in *avaq*, for 'dust'. As Claude Vigée said, 'nothing glorious in this', which reminds the reader of Graves of the uncouth dance around the crucified Naked King.

The word used to describe the adversary is *ich*, which means man in the sexual meaning, and an effect of ambiguity as to who is who is created throughout with the use of the pronoun 'he', which can mean both Jacob and the other. Therefore Jacob, wrestling thus with his *alter ego*, is given a name, Israel, a compound of two elements: 'wrestling' (*isra*) and 'God' (*el*). *Isra* means withstanding and mastering. And this occurs *with* God, *against* God and *face-to-face* with Him, at the same time. Jacob resisted when confronted with Elohim, the God of the Creation and the Law, of cosmic exteriority, of time and space and of the political and social order. The original text stresses the fact of Jacob's *capacity* against his opponent (32. 29), who will not disclose His own Name but blesses him instead. The other, with no Name, is Jacob's (now Israel's) blessing, such blessing being obtained through a personal act, a direct connection with God. This interaction of contraries suggests a dialectical view of Time as an everlasting process of Life and Death, a process of self-creation, or becoming: *ehye ascher ehye*.

Moreover, the whole passage is written in the past/future of the

convertive *vav*. It comprehends the whole temporal pattern of past and future as realised in the present moment, but in the end (32. 32), when Jacob is said to ‘limp’, the present is used. The verb used for ‘limping’, *tzolea*, is connected with the noun meaning ‘salvation’ (*hadzala*). There is salvation in the ordeal itself, that is in life’s wrestling with the ‘ever-reluctant element’. Jacob is really the symbol of human achievement in time. The injury itself has been interpreted as castration by the Talmud.

The translation Graves gives of the passage in *Hebrew Myths* is close to the original text. The poet favours a historical interpretation: Jacob thus became ‘chief’. Yet Graves does not expatiate on the existential, or poetic, significance of the episode.

It is interesting nevertheless to add a few remarks on Jacob’s questioning of God. The verb *lichol*, for ‘to ask’, implies a link with what is missing, with the void, and the *Sheol* (derived from this root), or the Hebrew equivalent of Hades, is the world of questioning. Jacob’s wrestling with time is a questioning of the unknown. In the question is the blessing, but also the meaning itself. Kierkegaard was right to distinguish between tragedy, submitted to Fate, and the Bible, the subject’s questioning of life and participation in its essence. The notion of disenchantment is then irrelevant since the individual finds the meaning of his life in his own self-creation and personal achievement, in his inner self, and not in any outer belief. As Graves noted, it is a case of *natura naturans*, life creating life.

Intuition connects the individual with others, not only his contemporaries, but also the dead and the unborn (see ‘On Portents’). Graves, like Blake and Traherne, perfectly understood the biblical message in this respect. The process of being is a shared process of self-creation but it also means an injury and a limp, which denies the possibility of intellectual, or conceptual, arrogance. This is why Graves asserts that he can think only ‘in broken images’⁸⁷ – his way of fighting against the positivist temptation: ‘When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.’ It is also a way of tackling life’s mystery in the soul: ‘I in a new understanding of my confusion.’ The poem is built upon the

opposition of 'He', a third person, 'ever-reluctant' in his idolatry of 'clear images', and 'I' – an instance of wrestling against the angel of the intellect.

In the same way, the poet compares himself to the butterfly who 'Will never now, it is too late, / Master the art of flying straight', but has 'A just sense of how not to fly'. Relying on his intuition and lurching 'by guess / And God and hope and hopelessness', he finally turns what could have been a fault from the conceptual point of view into a 'gift'.⁸⁸ This is the blessing Jacob received with the injury and the denial of an answer to his question about the name. The 'flying-crooked gift' is the coming to terms with the possibility of experiencing life without being permitted access to the knowledge of it. This is the hero-poet's plight.

'my headstrong and heroic way'

As Graves said at the beginning of Chapter 18 of *The White Goddess*, it would be a pity to 'reject the Scriptures as wholly irrelevant to poetry'. In his introduction to *Seven Days in New Crete*, Martin Seymour-Smith remarked: 'Then the lack of religion, poetry and feeling will lead to a collective insanity.'⁸⁹ And we could add that the deliberate ignorance of all ancestral lore, whether mythical or biblical, might well mean the disappearance of poetry, which loses its *raison d'être* if it remains enclosed within the limits of an aesthetic play with words and narrow expression of personal frustrations and desires (which Blake stressed when he made the distinction between visions and dreams).

In the poem, the poet supplies his reader with a metamorphic figure of being. He creates himself, and his reader, in time. This is indeed the very function of language: to set the *I* in an *I and you* relationship, unceasingly wrestling with the third person of absence. A convincing example of this is given in the Psalms, in which God is alternately directly addressed as 'thou' or referred to in the third person of transcendence. The Lord is the one who hears (116. 1) and also improves Man's hearing through His Word (40. 6). André Chouraqui translates this as: 'Tu m'as creusé l'oreille'⁹⁰ ('you have

hollowed my ear'). God is both reciprocity and absence, the soul's existential nakedness, which is what Graves retrieved in creating his Goddess:

But I am gifted, even in November
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense
Of her nakedly worn magnificence[.]⁹¹

The Muse is the object of an everlasting quest, an everlasting intuition of the unknown: 'It was a virtue not to stay'. Like the biblical God, she is either a second person or a third person, a refuge or a figure of awe, the womb and the tomb, a figure of rigour and mercy.

Graves had already caught a glimpse of such ambivalence, perfectly biblical, in 'In the Wilderness', a poem in which Christ is accompanied by the scapegoat (Leviticus, 16. 20–22): 'Comrade, with ragged coat, / Gaunt ribs – poor innocent'.⁹² *Goliath and David* is the title of his second poetry collection. The eponymous poem suggests the reversal of values experienced during the war since David dies and 'Goliath straddles over him'.⁹³ The 'God Called Poetry' is a Janus-like character: 'I am YES and I am NO'.⁹⁴ In 'The Red Ribbon Dream', Graves borrows from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: Time is 'Girdled around with the Slough of Despond',⁹⁵ which only language can overcome, with the reciprocity it establishes:

But a voice said 'Easily', and a voice said 'Come!'
Easily I followed with no thought of doubt,
Turned to the right hand, and the way stretched out;
The ground held firmly; I was no more dumb.

The voice is the voice of intuition since it arouses 'no thought of doubt'. Language opens a door into an unheard-of reality, 'For that was the place where I longed to be'.

Graves later wrote about 'The Universal Paradise' which can be reached by the poet in a state of trance. In this essay,⁹⁶ he quotes Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation*, a passage in which the poet of

unmitigated joy describes his wonder at seeing the world when a child: 'But all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared: which talked with my expectation and moved my desire.' Traherne adds: 'The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven.' The world is transfigured through the child's wonder. The world is new in the pristine innocence of the first glance at it. Thus the poet's capacity to wonder changes the ordinary world into the newly created world of Paradise. Graves claims that in our disenchanting world, the poet can reach the state of illumination through the poetic trance: 'intellect and habit starve out imagination'. 'Civilised man' with his classifying mind can no longer have access to the wonder of the universe: 'To gaze at a wild rose or buttercup for even a minute and find illumination in the sight, would never occur to him', and 'His spirit, also, has lost touch with the ideas of mystery, grace and love that originally informed it'.⁹⁷ Quoting Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality', Graves suggests that retrieving the lost unity of childhood through intuition, the poet can open a door into the wall of Time ('The Red Ribbon Dream') and find entrance into the 'small white-washed cell (furnished with only a table, a chair, pen, ink and paper) to which a poet may retire and write poems honouring her – my own peculiar Paradise'.⁹⁸ Paradise can be regained, albeit intermittently.

The poetic trance is 'active',⁹⁹ since it opens the 'gates' (the same word as used in the Psalms) to a new temporal dimension, the time of achievement, not the end of time but the time of the end, the time of the soul in the making. *Ehye ascher ehye*.

Graves seems to be very close to Ecclesiastes in the poem he first published in *Mock Beggar Hall* (1924) and called 'Knowledge of God': 'Weep, sleep, be merry [...] But cast no net for God.'¹⁰⁰ If we consider the poem 'The Door',¹⁰¹ we can venture that the Goddess is the mystery of existence made visible; she is, as Christ is from the Christian viewpoint, the intercessor, the embodiment of God. She is the poetic trance itself, the figure of a visitation,

enlarging the universe:

When she came suddenly in
 It seemed the door could never close again,
 Nor even did she close it – she, she –
 The room lay open to a visiting sea
 Which no door could restrain.

She is the figure who releases the poet from ‘The Castle’,¹⁰² in which the solipsist soul is shut up.

One of Graves’s poems (in *More Poems*, 1961) is called ‘The Visitation’¹⁰³ (from the episode of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, Luke, 1. 39–41). The Muse is the intercessor:

Drowsing in my chair of disbelief
 I watch the door as it slowly opens –
 A trick of the night wind?

Your slender body seems a shaft of moonlight
 Against the door as it gently closes.
 Do you cast no shadow?

She alone is able to overcome the poet’s ‘disbelief’. He writes, in ‘Intimations of the Black Goddess’: ‘Hebrew prophets gave God sole credit for any miracles done through them; a poet gives the Muse sole credit for his poems. But God, for the prophets, was a national deity; the Muse, though originally a tribal goddess, must now be a personal one.’¹⁰⁴ She guarantees the poet’s access to the divine in times of ‘disbelief’. The figure of the Goddess is Graves’s personal tabernacle, his way of remaining religious although an ‘honest agnostic’. I remember that Beryl Graves, in Deyá, told me that *The White Goddess* had been for her husband a religious quest.

The figure of the Black Goddess stems from Graves’s reading of the *Orphic Fragments*: ‘Throughout the Orient, Night was regarded as a positive power, not as a mere absence of daylight; and black as a prime colour, not as absence of colour, was prized for capturing the Sun’s virtue more than any other.’¹⁰⁵ The poet also derived it

from the ‘Provençal and Sicilian “Black Virgins” who are ‘Sufic in origin’. The Black Goddess is Wisdom. Like the moon, she captures the ‘Sun’s virtue’. Graves describes her as sister to Ishtar, a figure of the White Goddess. The moon is cyclic time, death and resurrection, connected with the serpent but it is also, simply, the star which reflects the Sun’s light in the night. ‘And when the Shunemite bride, whom Solomon in his wisdom adores, says in the *Canticles*: “I am black, but comely,” her meaning is: “Though comely, I am as wise as any crone.” She adds, half-humorously: “The Sun has looked upon me.” And the Orphics, seekers after wisdom like Hebrews and Sufis, chose the Sun as their metaphor of illumination.’¹⁰⁶

Graves’s mythic quest is a reconciliation of opposites, not only life and death, the most obvious, but also the intellect and intuition – the two ‘propellers’. Graves describes the Black Goddess – his figure of reconciliation – as the Goddess of love and good with an experience of contraries. She is the poet’s final reward and inner peace, ‘his more-than Muse’,¹⁰⁷ as he describes her, parodying John Donne’s ‘more than moon’.

This existential wrestling gives the poet the certainty that his words are flesh. He thus describes the poetic trance as ‘a world where words come to life and combine under the poet’s supra-conscious guidance, into inevitable and true rhythmic statements’.¹⁰⁸ The poet’s personal rhythm combines with the impersonal rules of prosody, but the poet’s personal rhythm is his genuine incarnation in words. This existential significance of rhythm is truly biblical, not only through Ezekiel’s account of the valley of dry bones but also as the essential meaning of rhythm in the Bible, ‘the prophecy of what is given to be heard’, the rhythm being understood as ‘the arrangement of the movement of speech’. This is a poetics of human life. ‘Pas le pan-pan des métriciens’, as Henri Meschonnic mischievously makes clear.¹⁰⁹

With the Black Goddess, Robert Graves reached the Land of Promise – ‘your delectable broad land of promise’¹¹⁰ – through the ‘Dance of Words’, allying personal rhythm with ‘traditional steps

and postures'.¹¹¹ Rhythm opens the world of possibility, converting the past into the future, and therefore opening a door into the genuine time of the human spirit at work. With the 'Dance of Words' we remember the Psalms, and David preparing a place for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem (I Chronicles. 15), dancing and singing with joy while the Levites were carrying the Ark and setting it in the tent David had prepared. The Chronicler remarks that Michal, Saul's daughter, 'looking out at a window saw King David dancing and playing: and she despised him in her heart' (15. 29) In II *Samuel* 6. 14, 20, the case is even worse since David is reported to be 'girded with a linen e-phod', that is, almost naked!

The poet's 'Dance of Words' is a paradoxical conversion to joy, as is clear in 'The Word':¹¹²

'God' is a standing question
That still negates an answer.
The Word is not a question
But simple affirmation,
The antonym of 'God'.

Who would believe this Word
Could have so long been hidden
Behind a candid smile,
A sweet but hasty kiss
And always dancing feet?

Graves's mythopoetics, which he claimed rested on facts, therefore meeting the demands of the intellect, re-opened for him the way to faith ('my lifelong faith in the poetic trance'¹¹³), that is, to free intuition and wonder, an immediate, pristine, apprehension of life within. This is how the poet managed to reconcile religion and the intellect: 'You may not believe it, for hardly could I'.¹¹⁴ The pumpkin, a decisive metamorphic element in fairy tales, provides verbal assurance that time can be regenerated and that the mind can recover its unity in spite of the intellect's classifying habits: "'You may hack me in slices, but I'll grow again.'" The poem can

certainly be read as a parable.

Poetic intuition restores the unity of being. It also redeems the present moment from chaos: ‘a miracle to believe; / And so was Adam born, and Eve’.¹¹⁵ Graves actually aimed at making poetry possible in ‘times of penury’¹¹⁶ as Hölderlin had already stated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and he managed to reconcile wonder and reason. Wondering means coming to terms with the impossibility of finding, which Ecclesiastes described as the human plight, and contemplating life nevertheless. Graves’s outlook is typical of twentieth-century mistrust of any kind of superimposed dogma which might impede individual creation. Yet he left the door open for the right appreciation of the existential and ontological inheritance. He helped to keep it in memory, which is, I think, essential for poetry. All these mythic and biblical figures are a source of creative energy. They are part of the common ground of spiritual lore, and prove metamorphic enough, when stripped of the straitjacket of dogma, to found a community of thinking, and feeling, individuals – moreover believing in the power of language, of the ‘Word’. The task is ethical – it concerns us as individuals in the process of becoming and of making choices – and not only aesthetic, viewing the poem as object, from the outside.

Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle

This article is dedicated to Claude Vigée.

NOTES

¹ Biblical quotations in English, unless stated otherwise, are from the Authorised Version.

² Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 448.

³ Robert Graves, ‘Answer to a Religious Questionnaire’ (1950), in *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, ed. by Patrick Quinn (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 285.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁵ Robert Graves and Joshua Podro, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (London: Cassell, 1953), p. 3.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷ See Giorgio Colli, *Ecrits sur Nietzsche*, trans. by Patricia Farazzi (Paris: Editions de l'Éclat, 1996; 1st edn, in Italian, 1980). See also Anne Mounic, 'Friedrich Nietzsche, ou l'épopée de la connaissance', *Temporel*, 3 (March 2007) <<http://temporel.fr/Friedrich-Nietzsche-ou-l-epopee-de>>

⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 76.

⁹ See 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 285.

¹⁰ Robert Graves, 'Nine Hundred Chariots', Arthur Dehon Little Memorial Lecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 14 May 1963, *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 49.

¹¹ *The White Goddess*, pp. 474, 475): 'Adolf Hitler said later, more succinctly: "The Jews are to blame for all our troubles." Both statements [the other is Sir James Frazer's: see below], however, were historically untrue. [...] Yet neither Frazer nor Hitler were far from the truth'.

¹² Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (London: Cassell, 1946), p. 13.

¹³ Martin Seymour Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1982; repr. London: Paladin, 1987), pp. 428–29.

¹⁴ Carcanet is to publish a new edition, edited by John W. Presley, in December 2010. [Ed.]

¹⁵ Robert Graves, 'Don't Fidget, Young Man!', in *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, p. 91.

¹⁶ *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, p. XIV.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. XXII.

²² *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. XIX.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 833.

²⁵ Robert Graves, *On English Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1922), p. 21.

²⁶ 'Nine Hundred Chariots', p. 30.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

- ²⁸ Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, ed. by Ruthven Todd (London: Macmillan, 1863; repr. London: Everyman, 1982), p. 325.
- ²⁹ 'Nine Hundred Chariots', p. 42.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ³⁴ Robert Graves, 'The Poet in a Valley of Dry Bones', *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 87.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- ³⁶ Robert Graves, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess', *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 143.
- ³⁷ Robert Graves, 'Technique in Poetry', *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 69. In *Hebrew Myths*, Chapter 10, the following sources are enumerated in note 9: Genesis Rabba (fifth century, Palestine) 158, 163–64; Midrash Abkir (ninth century), lost Midrash quoted in the *Yalqut Shimoni*, 133, 135; Abot Dir (Abbi) Nathan (Vienna, 1887; repr. New York, 1945), p. 24; Sanhedrin (Talmud), 39a.
- ³⁸ Robert Graves, 'The Uses of Superstition', *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, p. 336.
- ³⁹ Robert Graves, 'The Bible in Europe', *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, p. 367.
- ⁴⁰ 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 285.
- ⁴¹ Robert Graves, *Poetic Unreason* (London: Palmer, 1925), p. 117.
- ⁴² *On English Poetry*, p. 74.
- ⁴³ *Poetic Unreason*, p. 242.
- ⁴⁴ 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 285.
- ⁴⁵ 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 283.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- ⁴⁷ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 55, 42–46, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 687.
- ⁴⁸ *On English Poetry*, p. 134.
- ⁴⁹ 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 284.
- ⁵⁰ *The White Goddess*, p. 14.
- ⁵¹ Robert Graves, *Wife to Mr. Milton* (London: Cassell, 1942; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 325.
- ⁵² Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton University Press, 1947; repr. 1969), p. 346. This statement

refers to Blake, *Milton*, Book the Second, Plate 37, 15–18, *Complete Writings*, p. 528.

⁵³ ‘The Bible in Europe’, p. 366.

⁵⁴ I am very grateful to Claude Vigée for all this precious information.

⁵⁵ ‘The Bible in Europe’, p. 366.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 363.

⁵⁷ Edwin Muir, *The Estate of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 29.

⁵⁸ William Wordsworth, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 249.

⁵⁹ ‘The Bible in Europe’, p. 364.

⁶⁰ Again, I gratefully thank Claude Vigée for this information.

⁶¹ Book the First, 24, 72, p. 510.

⁶² Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 135.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁶⁵ William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Chapter 3, Plate 74, 10–14, *Complete Writings*, p. 714.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, Plate 90, 11–13.

⁶⁷ *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 137.

⁶⁸ Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), pp. 178–79.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁷⁰ *The White Goddess*, p. 345.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁷³ See Giorgio Agamben, *Le temps qui reste: Un commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains*, trans. by Judith Revel (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000; Paris: Rivages Poche, 2004), pp. 131–32. The Italian philosopher, a specialist on Walter Benjamin, quotes *Gershom Scholem: Zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. by Peter Schaefer and Gary Smith (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 295.

⁷⁴ ‘his mysterious utterance’: Aeschylus, *The Libation-Bearers*, trans. by Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 237, l. 816.

⁷⁵ Robert Graves, *Seven Days in New Crete* (London: Cassell, 1949; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 82.

⁷⁶ *The White Goddess*, p. 343, and *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995–1999), II (1997), p. 63.

⁷⁷ Claude Vigée, *La lune d'hiver* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970; repr. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), p. 96.

⁷⁸ *The White Goddess*, p. 474.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁸⁰ *Complete Poems*, II, p. 173.

⁸¹ Claude Vigée, *Le passage du Vivant* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2001), p. 67.

⁸² *The White Goddess*, p. 285.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁸⁵ *La lune d'hiver*, p. 138. 'In Jacob, the Time man, originates the manifold messiah whom his progeny will realise throughout history. Through each of his creative acts, the poet celebrates the repetition of this mystery, of which he offers an imitation. All poems, being created out of absence, chaos, loneliness, duplicate Jacob's wrestling with the angel.'

⁸⁶ *The White Goddess*, p. 324.

⁸⁷ *Complete Poems*, II, p. 14.

⁸⁸ Robert Graves, 'Flying Crooked', *Complete Poems*, II, p. 47.

⁸⁹ *Seven Days in New Crete*, p. xxii.

⁹⁰ *La Bible*, trans. by André Chouraqui (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1985).

⁹¹ 'In Dedication', *The White Goddess*, p. 5.

⁹² *Complete Poems*, I, p. 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁹⁶ Robert Graves, 'The Universal Paradise', *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973,) p. 78; Thomas Traherne, 'The Third Century', *Centuries of Meditation* (Fintry, Scotland: The Shrine of Wisdom, 2002), p. 106.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁰ *Complete Poems*, I, p. 229.

¹⁰¹ *Complete Poems*, II, p. 144.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹⁰³ *Complete Poems*, III, p. 19.

¹⁰⁴ ‘Intimations of the Black Goddess’, p. 144.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁰⁸ ‘The Universal Paradise’, p. 92.

¹⁰⁹ Henri Meschonnic, *Au commencement: Traduction de la Genèse* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002), p. 15.

¹¹⁰ ‘The Black Goddess’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 82.

¹¹¹ ‘Dance of Words’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 74.

¹¹² ‘The Word’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 135.

¹¹³ ‘The Universal Paradise’, p. 92.

¹¹⁴ ‘The Pumpkin’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 353.

¹¹⁵ ‘Dead Cow Farm’, *Complete Poems*, I, p. 39.

¹¹⁶ ‘und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?’, Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Brot und Wein’ (1800–01), *Poèmes/Gedichte* (Paris: Aubier, 1986), p. 344.