

One Story and One Story Only: Robert Graves's American Reputation

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A few years ago, I was asked by the managing editor of the Dalkey Archive Press to consider writing an article on Robert Graves's reputation in America for one of the Press's journals. The precise wording of the request is instructive: 'Why do so few Americans read, or know about, the works of Robert Graves?' The assumptions stand stark: was this editor correct? And if so, what are the reasons for this situation?

Graves's reputation in America as a novelist might be stronger than his American reputation as a poet; many readers of a certain age, once they are reminded that Graves wrote the *Claudius* novels, seem to have a moment of recognition. An ironic reaction, since Graves always maintained that his popular and prize-winning novels were written solely to support his life in Mallorca and his work as a poet. His using the word 'potboiler' and the critical reception of books such as *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* and *The Original Rubaiyyat of Omar Khyayaam* did not help establish his prose works – apparently the BBC production of *I, Claudius* established the few facts of Graves's prose work known to American readers in general.

And even Graves's biographers are, in fact, ambivalent about his poetry. Richard Perceval Graves, after noting that the *Claudius* novels are still widely read and that *Goodbye to All That* 'remains required reading for all students of the First World War', seems much less optimistic about the poetry:

It is *The White Goddess*, which, alongside a handful of Graves's poems, will from time to time have to be translated into more modern English, and will carry his name down the centuries into some remote future.¹

In the revised edition (1995) of his Graves biography, Martin

Seymour-Smith summarises his view of Graves's work, adding that it had been obvious to those who 'read between the lines' of his 1982 edition, although he suppressed it.

The view is, in brief, that he wrote most of his best poetry between the years 1920 and (approximately) 1950, should never have published *The White Goddess* (as he himself wondered), but because of it eventually fell into a trap the nature of which he had, early (1922) and with wonderful wit, warned himself, in 'Epitaph on an Unfortunate Artist'.²

And what has been the effect of this 'high placed' critical ambivalence on Robert Graves's poetry in American academe?

A search of the Modern Language Association International Bibliography for the most recent ten-year period shows a total of forty-eight pieces of scholarship done on Graves in that time – articles, books, chapters, dissertations. Eighteen of those pieces were chapters in Patrick Quinn's *New Perspectives* volume and Ian Firla's *Historical Novels* collection (this last published in Germany). Seven pieces were published in the UK (but not many Americans or their libraries subscribe to *PN Review* or *Cambridge Quarterly*). Ten of the entries do not mention Graves in their titles, so his work is probably of only passing notice in these works. Only three American presses are represented and, most alarmingly, there are no doctoral dissertations listed.

Contrast these results with the results of a ten-year search for W. B. Yeats, which yielded 503 items.

If one searches the standard databases for doctoral dissertations, one will find fourteen listings for Robert Graves in the last ten years. Only one of these dissertations lists Robert Graves in the title – and it was done at the University of York in 2007. In contrast, there are 117 entries for T. S. Eliot and ninety-one for Ezra Pound.

This lack of academic interest exists in spite of the fact that Graves's poetry was praised early on by American critics and despite Graves's friendship with an American icon, Robert Frost.

John Crowe Ransom praised *On English Poetry* in Allan Tate's magazine *The Fugitive*, and considered him to be much more accomplished a poet than the High Modernists so in vogue at the time.

We know that Graves considered America a prime market for his work: in the 1950s he began publishing in America in the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, the *Hudson Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, to name only the more prestigious journals. In 1958 Graves toured America for a fortnight (what he called in a letter 'just a smash and grab money-raid'). He lectured at Mount Holyoke, for example, and made a not-entirely-successful first appearance on American television – alongside Gypsy Rose Lee – but also lectured at many other prestigious venues such as Dartmouth, Brandeis, Michigan and Texas. In later forays, Graves read in Pennsylvania, New York and Washington, squeezing in meetings with agents, lecturing to the American Academy and Institute of Arts, and receiving, from Robert Frost, the Gold Medal of the National Poetry Society of America. In 1963, Graves spent three weeks in America, a tour during which he delivered the Arthur D. Little Memorial Lecture at MIT, which he later published as 'Nine Hundred Chariots'.

But it was during this period, when Graves's reputation in America was becoming that of a major poet, that Randall Jarrell published his 1956 *Yale Review* article 'Robert Graves and the White Goddess', casting the longest, darkest shadow over Graves's academic and critical reputation in America. It was Jarrell who first advanced the minimalising thesis – grounded in somewhat amateur Jungian psychology – that the White Goddess myth grew out of Graves's personal experience with women. Jarrell summed up his thesis rather viciously:

by making the accidental circumstances of your life the necessary conditions of all lives, you have transformed yourself from an accident-prone analysand into an emblematic Oedipus.³

This simplistic, accusatory assumption has had the effect of

tempting everyone – certainly almost every American – writing on Graves to feel justified in an unproductive, and, to many readers, unseemly, fixation on biographical information, whether real and quotidian or speculative. Jarrell's thesis has become a licence to become more interested in the details of an admittedly eccentric life rather than in working with the poetry as poetry. In America, the temptations of the 1956 Jarrell thesis have become more seductive as the years have passed.

Early American academics writing on Graves were most certainly affected by the Jarrell thesis, but wrestled more obviously with the issue of Robert Graves's stature as a minor or major poet. And, for subsequent academics and would-be academics, these early volumes are sometimes the only scholarly works readily available to them (most obviously affecting undergraduates, of course). Using Milner Library at Illinois State University as a fair example of a large, public, research-intensive doctoral institution, one might consider Milner's Graves holdings (and it is relevant to this choice of example that Illinois State's Ph.D. in English Studies has been lauded as a model by the Modern Language Association).

When I arrived at Illinois State in 2003, Milner Library held 55 books by Robert Graves in its collection – poetry, prose, letters, conversations. Milner began its collection in 1920 with *Country Sentiment*, and its last poetry volume is *Collected Poems 1975*. Milner has copies of all three major biographies, but its collections contain only ten volumes of criticism, most published or written in the 1960s. James Mehoke's odd *Robert Graves: Peace Weaver* dates from 1980, as does Robert H. Canary's volume on Graves in the Twayne series and Keane's *A Wild Civility*.⁴

I will not bother to argue here for more funding for academic libraries, though that is certainly not an irrelevant topic. With limited resources, public university libraries must choose their book-purchasing priorities carefully, and literary reputations are reflected in faculty and student use, and are therefore reflected in the choices of where libraries will spend their acquisition dollars.

But more important are the critical opinions in these limited

collections. Throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, American critics and literary publishing houses were reluctant to accord Graves the status of a major poet. J. M. Cohen's *Robert Graves* was originally published in Edinburgh, but in 1961 Grove Press in New York made it a title in their Evergreen Pilot Books series. Like most of these early scholars, Cohen spends much of his effort on Graves's mastery, but eventually faces the question: is Graves a major poet? Cohen compares Graves to his 'contemporaries', Rilke and Edwin Muir:

He is however a poet of lesser reach than the poet of the *Duineser Eligien*, who was not content to accept a 'world of discontinuance' but endeavoured to interpret all experience afresh in his myth of the angels. It is rather with Muir that he stands, though Muir is always the more classical poet.⁵

This is in stark contrast to the fact that by the summer of 1961, Graves's reputation was at its highest point, at least in England. He had been elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, *More Poems 1961* was a triumph, with glowing reviews in *Poetry Review*, the *Spectator* and the *Guardian*.

The author of another of these early studies, George Stade, in his *Robert Graves* (a 1967 title in the Columbia Essays on Modern Writers Series) is remarkably ambivalent when he concludes that 'Robert Graves is a minor poet of major proportions' (whatever that means).⁶

Among these early critics was Douglas Day, an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia when his *Swifter Than Reason* was published. Day was very clear-eyed about Graves's reputation in America.

If it knows of him at all, the general public regards him as a writer of ingenious, if occasionally dry, historical novels [...]. Although his poetry is well known in England, it is (except among specialists, and a small corps of lay enthusiasts) largely ignored in the United States [...].⁷

Day advances possible reasons for this state of affairs: ‘partly because of Graves’s attitude toward the public [...] and partly because of neglect or misunderstanding on the part of critics of contemporary poetry’.⁸ And with his third reason, Day addresses the textual issues. ‘There is a final obstacle between Graves and the critic, and it is a large one: the matter of texts’.⁹ For each of his collected versions of his poems, as we know, Graves suppressed many earlier poems and frequently ‘drastically revised’ other early versions, with these revisions sometimes extending over several volumes. Even in 1963, any critic working with any of Graves’s poems had to be very aware that the poet’s ideas about that poem either may have changed or might change drastically, as represented in any collection after the poem’s original appearance. As Day put it,

Unfortunately, his critics have seldom done this, with the result that Graves has generally been described as a man whose poetic technique and attitudes toward life have remained almost unchanged and without development since the beginning of his career to the present. This notion is, of course, an absurd one [...].¹⁰

Daniel Hoffman’s *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* was published in 1967, when he was Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Hoffman notes the textual difficulties, as had Day, and adds another difficulty to working on Graves’s poems, arising from the fact that Graves had himself provided his own criticism of the poetry, down to ‘the phases of his career and the poet’s estimate of the worth of his own work’. Another common difficulty may first have been noted by Hoffman, what we might call the White Goddess Effect. Hoffman believes that ‘the effect of its rigid doctrine upon Graves’s poetry seems to me to have been, after an initial liberation of imaginative energy, a narrowing of subject and a repetitive treatment’.¹¹

In *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (published in 1969, and

distributed in America by Oxford) Michael Kirkham overtly testifies to the textual problem, the self-criticism problem and a new issue – the Laura Riding Problem. The first page of Kirkham’s book describes Laura Riding’s objections to an early version of Kirkham’s ideas, as they appeared in an essay in the *Minnesota Review*. Kirkham points out to the reader that as a result, he had not been ‘able to include for revisions those portions of the article to which she has taken exception’ even though he had responded to Riding’s charge that he was underestimating and simplifying her ‘role in Graves’s intellectual life’. Kirkham even tries to forestall any more Riding objections when, in Chapter 4, he carefully points out that ‘This by no means exhausts the subject of her “influence”, but a thorough investigation would have taken more space than was available to me’. Kirkham goes on apologetically and, he says, admiringly, to speak of the need for a book on Riding. He is, by the way, equally diplomatic about the issue of Graves’s reputation, pointing out that he has ‘avoided classifying his work as either “major” or “minor”, arguing that these are ‘vague categories usually implying standards extrinsic to literary judgment’.¹²

Apparently, the Riding Problem for critics began with a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1962, but she continued her ‘objections’ well into the 1980s, editing, correcting and attacking those who dared write about Robert Graves and her. Perhaps the most documented or explicitly described of these attacks is her 68-page reaction, entitled ‘Vilification Corner’, regarding Seymour-Smith’s Graves biography, in which, Seymour-Smith says, Riding labelled Graves ‘a moral cripple’, with ‘only the appearance of a moral normal [. . .] a being of freakish exceptionality in borrowed human identity’. Seymour-Smith may have been the first to use the phrase ‘Laura Riding Mafia’, citing this group’s description of him as ‘the devil’ or ‘evil’ or at the least ‘a forger’. He says that ‘a thousand and more such heavily corrected pages are in existence’ and that ‘a small amount of this ghastly stuff has been published in obscure journals edited by people with money but no judgment’.¹³ In support of my thesis here, I would point out that at

least one of these journals used for this purpose in 1974, the *Denver Quarterly*, is precisely the sort of journal collected by American university libraries, and the sort read by American students of literature.

Neither Riding's constant, ever-vigilant assertion of conspiracies, her constant assertions that Graves had stolen from her *The White Goddess* and *King Jesus* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (among other titles), nor her tactics went unnoticed in the United States. (I was warned about trying to write on Robert Graves for this reason, even as a graduate student slaving in the rare-book rooms in Illinois. When I discovered in these collections a few manuscript drafts of Riding's work – with Graves's drafts of his work on the verso sides – it was as though I had discovered a live grenade in the vaults of the university.) So, at least some people were dissuaded from writing on Robert Graves's or on Laura Riding's work. Her last of these public attacks was published after her death in 1993 – it had been written in 1975.

Other issues arose in the 1960s and 1970s that may have made Graves a less-than-popular subject for study by American academics. First wave feminists of those decades considered Graves a powerful, central thinker, even a founder of their movement. Richard Perceval Graves quotes a letter to Graves from Elizabeth Gould-Davis in 1973: 'I suppose you know that you are a God of the new Movement here'.¹⁴ Not a good connection to make in America's academe of those decades, where at least as late as 1976 graduate students in English using feminism-informed approaches to dissertations were still criticised and academically harassed.

Another negative connection was in regard to the occult. Colin Wilson, who had taught in 1969 at the Dowling Mediterranean Institute, wrote 'at some length' about *The White Goddess* in the second chapter of 'what would become his classic work', *The Occult*. Wilson sent drafts of that chapter to Graves, and apparently Graves was as accepting of this context for the interpretation of his work as he was accepting of the feminist context.¹⁵

This association with the occult has grown over the years: as readers of the Robert Graves Online Discussion Forums know, the New Reformed Order of the Golden Dawn, one of the larger neopagan organisations, has an e-mail discussion list devoted to *The White Goddess*. And one of the posters there has written a well-researched and well-considered 250-page manuscript on Robert Graves and Wicca. These connections, along with stupid rumours about Robert Graves and the drug trade in the Mediterranean, were retailed in the United States. And immediately after the uproarious 1960s and 1970s, American academics, given the depressed academic labour market that first bottomed out in English literature in 1974, were understandably conservative when choosing topics for dissertations (or any other research).

There are, I believe, still other reasons for the lack of American academic interest in Graves's work. I have written before about the deleterious effects of the Untermeyer anthology on American perceptions of Graves's work.¹⁶ First appearing in 1920, Louis Untermeyer's *Modern British Poetry* was designed to be used in both graduate and undergraduate surveys of British poetry, and its 'New and Enlarged Edition' appeared first in 1964.¹⁷ The Untermeyer anthology is the anthology that most likely introduced the poetry of Robert Graves to the generation of poetry scholars and teachers who are now senior faculty members – and at the most productive points of their careers – in the United States. Graves's work appeared in every edition of Untermeyer, beginning with the 1920 edition – four Graves poems, along with a very short introduction referring to Graves as 'one of the three rhyming musketeers'.

By the time the 1964 edition appeared – its bad proofreading seemingly centred on the Graves section – the Untermeyer collection had dominated in sales and influence for almost five decades, and Graves's poetry was in its mature years. Sixteen Graves poems appear in 1964, preceded by a still very condescending introduction, even if the introduction had grown in length. Others have written about Graves's well-known hostility to

anthology-collectors, and to Untermeyer's in particular, so perhaps Untermeyer's tone may be easily explained. But Graves's reputation has suffered for generations, I believe, as a result of this introduction.

In brief, Untermeyer uses trivialising phrases such as 'rustic simplicity' and 'buoyant fancy' or 'a surplus and careless fertility, with little effort, scarcely with thought' to describe Graves's poetry. From his at one time closest colleague among the War Poets, Untermeyer distinguishes Graves thus: 'fortified by a lighter and more whimsical spirit, where Sassoon is violent, Graves is volatile; where Sassoon grew bitter, Graves was almost blithe in his irony'.¹⁸

Untermeyer uses 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' and 'The White Goddess' to bolster a perspective that would diminish Graves's reputation for decades. 'Although Graves truculently derided the obscurantists [. . .] his own poetry is not always easy to comprehend.'

[I]n order to appreciate its cryptic lines the reader must have an acquaintance with mythology, the many-titled queen-goddesses, the kings who must die and be reborn at the winter solstice [...] and an understanding of *The White Goddess*.¹⁹

This is, as I have argued elsewhere, a reductionist and naïve view of the many ways readers may experience Robert Graves's poetry which, I would argue, communicates a complete message with or without the arcane knowledge Untermeyer believes the reader must first bring to the poems. But Untermeyer's thesis, that Graves cannot be understood without reading first all Graves's mythography, has kept readers away from Graves for a half-century and more.

Nor are any of the newer anthologies breaking step with Untermeyer, I'm afraid. The newest, and increasingly popular *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* is perhaps even more condescending to Graves than is Untermeyer's collection. The Norton anthology idolises Riding, to Graves's loss, even when it

gets the facts wrong, as when it gives Riding credit for inspiring William Empson to develop his methodology in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.²⁰

The *Norton Anthology* includes thirteen Graves poems (twice as many D. H. Lawrence poems are included, and twice as many Auden poems). It is an interesting, not particularly eccentric set of poems, including the omnipresent ‘Down, Wanton, Down!’ along with ‘The Devil’s Advice to Story-Tellers’ and the only nod to the goddess story, ‘To Juan at the Winter Solstice’; and one might note that the latest poem included is ‘My Name and I’ from *Poems and Satires 1951* which, while entertaining, it is not a very important Graves poem. The seven paragraphs of the introduction focus again on the First World War years, and on the Laura Riding years. The Norton editors, Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair, argue that Graves is not a High Modernist, given his emphasis on intelligibility, and therefore not-quite-mainstream. His influence on poetic form and craft is reduced to ‘his [. . .] frequent epigrammatic tidiness’. The editors consistently use very genteel diction to describe Graves’s poetic aims, and all the while argue for the centrality of *The White Goddess* to an understanding of Graves (contradicting, of course, their point about Graves’s intelligibility):

In advancing his thesis Graves was almost always urbane, and most readers – apart from specialists, who are quite properly outraged by Graves’s speculative foolhardiness – value the book, both for the light it casts on some of Graves’s most beautiful poems (especially ‘To Juan at the Winter Solstice’), and also as a thesaurus of poetic motifs.²¹

This sentence sums up much: Graves’s poetry can be explained by *The White Goddess*, and in his scholarship he is, after all, ‘foolhardy’, so the academic specialists are correctly outraged. But Graves was ‘almost always urbane’. This language is the very exemplar of condescension, I would submit.

Some of this condescension can be explained as a result of the

way American academics have organised the teaching of modern American poetry (or have organised their perceptions of the history of poetry). Modern poetry began to be taught in American universities in the late 1930s, but these courses were offered in earnest only after the Second World War. The first of these taught that the American tradition was descended from Walt Whitman – but, in fact, these courses used the framework of the New Critics and tended quickly to focus on poets whose work lent itself to this approach, such as T. S. Eliot and other High Modernists (to use the language of these courses). Against this High Modernist, academic poetry, periodically any number of poets and schools of poetry which actually did claim Whitman as a progenitor might be taught: the short-lived New York school founded by Kenneth Koch, the Black Mountain poets, including Paul Blackburn and Robert Creeley (who happily admitted to the influence of Robert Graves), and the ‘language poets’ like Charles Bernstein and Cindy Buffalo. Over the years, the High Modernists tended to be the anthologised poets, but after the 1960s anthologies like *The New Naked Poetry*, which was meant to be a teaching anthology, appeared to give cachet once again to the Whitman-esque poets and they began to be taught alongside the High Modernists. So thorough is their influence now that the language poets with their origins and interests in Laura Riding’s work are responsible for the rather surprising popularity of Riding’s poetry and writings on language.

It is rather difficult to situate Graves in any of these currents. He is certainly no descendant of Whitman; nor is he a kinsman of Eliot, though the two admired each other’s work. His closest affinity is with Robert Frost, for whose *Selected Poems* Graves provided an introduction. It is certainly worth noting that while American poetry courses place Frost among the company of Eliot, Williams, Stevens, and Pound, applying the tenets of the New Critics to Frost is in fact a bit of a violent, anti-poetic action. Treating ‘After Apple Picking’ as a stand-alone lyric, for example, when it was clearly meant to be one poem only in the collection *North of Boston*, may make the poem teachable in the paradigm of

the New Critics, but it loses its external connections. And the loss of Frost's aims and aesthetics and ideas, not to mention its biographical connections, is a high price for entrance to the American teaching canon. Perhaps for some of the same reasons, these same preconceptions about American poetry, American academics find Graves difficult to site within the field of British poetry. It is not at all uncommon to talk with American academics teaching modern British poetry who know little about Graves and who in fact simply do not include his work in their courses.

It is, in fact, much easier to find an American with a Ph.D. in English who studies the semiotics of tattoos, or the rhetoric of stress, or the meaning of the regional vocabulary of the public spaces of cemeteries, than it is to discover one interested in the work of Robert Graves. (Not long ago, I was introduced to a new English Department chair as 'a Graves scholar'. The pause was palpable – clearly she was trying to decide what question to ask about cemeteries.)

Now, outside the classroom, criticism of Graves's work becomes more disparaging (and, ironically, much less like the work of the New Critics) with every passing year. One might consider a group of reviews and articles that appeared around 1995, the centennial year of Graves's birth, and a year in which new biographies and new editions of biographies appeared.

In his review of the biographies, Denis Donoghue begins with the astonishing sentence 'Scholars have been blowing on Graves's embers since he died in 1985'.²² (Donoghue may be Irish, but he holds the Henry James Chair of English at New York University, and is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Review of Books*, arguably the most important and influential literary review in the United States.) He dismisses Seymour-Smith's biography as 'joyless' because Seymour-Smith recognised that 'the poet, the centre of it, was tedious'. Miranda Seymour, Donoghue says, is too fixated on the women in Graves's life, too pro-Riding.

That Donoghue calls Graves's literary criticism 'sordid' illustrates another issue with Graves's reputation. But Donoghue demonstrates his 'regard' for Graves's poetry by a long section

describing how he would have organised Graves's 1975 *Collected Poems*. He demonstrates his regard for Graves the man by criticising the biographies for not focusing enough on the contradictory, the vindictive, the small-minded in Graves's life – all while parading an accusatory tone and displaying his entertaining skill with diction: 'nymphological disquiet' is one of his creations. One finds this tone in much of the writing about Graves in the major newspaper and review outlets, both in the United States and in the U.K. It amounts to little more than gossip and flaunting of the reviewer's assumed moral superiority, but for readers it is nearly unavoidable.

In a similar review in the *Wall Street Journal* of 24 October 1995, after opining that

Graves's reputation has declined [...]. Graves appears to be in danger of being known primarily as the author of the historical novels upon which the hit television series 'I, Claudius' was based.

the reviewer, Jamie James, continues a fairly positive review of the Seymour biography.²³ But he cannot resist using the word 'gynaecolatry' to describe *The White Goddess* and what he calls its 'purported' thesis. And, like some other reviewers and critics, James is startlingly unfeeling in his descriptions of Graves's last years.

Some of these attitudes are also evident in another Seymour review in the 20 November 1995 issue of the *Nation*, by James Longenbach, a Wallace Stevens scholar. Longenbach, committed to study of the High Modernists, argues that the Seymour biography is flawed by its bias against Laura Riding, so beloved by American poets. Longenbach argues that Riding's 'poetry is unique', and has 'been championed not only by Graves' but also by Auden, Davie, and Ashbery. Nonetheless, even after praising Riding at length, Longenbach declares both Riding and Graves to be minor poets, Graves especially a minor poet 'who turned out love poems almost by rote'.²⁴ Nor can Longenbach, like so many

other American critics, resist the moral superiority reflected on to himself when he accuses Seymour of soft-peddling ‘Graves’s reprehensible behaviour’ and then retells two episodes regarding Graves’s children, Riding, and his mother, Amy Graves – the reviewer himself attempting to prove, by his overt moral posturing, the truth of the ‘reprehensible’ label he has placed on Graves’s imputed words and actions.

To his credit, Longenbach lauds the Graves love poems, and the early work. He makes the perhaps useful remark that the ‘body of work will need to be winnowed severely, however, if future readers are to see its real value [. . .] after a while, one daffodil looks pretty much like another’.²⁵ And it may well be that critics hoping for a broader reputation for Graves now need to winnow. Having established a *Complete Poems*, perhaps critics should focus on close reading of the best, the most Gravesian poems in order to argue for the teaching, publishing, studying of these poems.

Though written in 1988 and mentioning prominently only the Seymour-Smith biography and the first volume of the R. P. Graves biography, Robert Richman’s long article in the *New Criterion* is actually a summation of Richman’s view of Graves’s poetry and prose. Richman begins admiringly, speaking of Graves’s ‘extraordinary productivity [. . .] on a scale we associate more with the previous century than with our own’ and Graves’s ‘reputation as a rebel’ and his ‘fame as a cranky individualist’. But Richman too goes quickly to the biographical, arguing that this ‘posture as a rebel’ can only be viewed as ironic, lingering over his thesis that Graves ‘craved guidance’ and over some of the ‘1960-ish’ rumours about Graves, hallucinogens, and the ‘liberated sexual atmosphere’ in Deyá.²⁶

Richman seems fixated on the Graves-Riding relationship, even quoting Tom Matthews’s very acerbic account of that relationship. In fact, like so much of the American scholarship on Graves, fully one-third of Richman’s ‘review’ rehearses and repeats the seemingly sordid and the ‘hooks’ on which hang so many barely Freudian interpretations of Graves’s life and work: the ‘mania for

purity' of Amy Graves, the 'bizarre' behaviour toward Riding, the oft-repeated imputed fears of sex and women. It is here, of course, that Richman quotes, most approvingly, the Jarrell thesis 'that Graves's poetry, along with the theory of poetry he constructed around it, was a sublimation of his life with Laura Riding'. Of Jarrell's thesis, Richman writes, 'There is little reason to disagree'.

Richman believes that the White Goddess is an invention, 'the author at his crankiest', its rejection by so many 'anthropologists and literary critics alike' only more reason for Graves 'to intensify his devotion. It was the same kind of devotion he had evinced for Riding, who appears for Graves a rare embodiment of the long-lost Goddess'. The novels, too, were 'means of correcting the false history propagated by various anti-Goddess forces'.

In fact, Richman does credit Graves with 'his advocacy of the plain style' and with the 'refreshingly heady swagger' of *Goodbye to All That*, but he is very dismissive of the fiction, citing Graves's 'refusal to develop original plots or psychologically persuasive character'. Richman is impressed that the novels are popular despite their 'extremely short imaginative reach'.

Richman's reading of the 1975 *Collected Poems* is even more critical, and many of his comments on these are easily recognised as common American critical opinion, but more clearly stated:

[O]ne is struck by how fine some of them are. But one is also struck by how much the verse sinks from the weight of the 'one story and one story only,' especially the later poems [. . .] the bulk of Graves's verse is marred because he persists in addressing the Muse directly instead of allowing the poem to invoke her implicitly. If Graves had not been so often compelled to be literal – that is, anti-symbolical and anti-metaphorical – he probably would have been freer to take on a wider range of emotional and thematic concerns in his verse.²⁷

'In Her Praise' is an example, Richman says, of Graves 'discussing his conceptions of the Goddess, rather than presenting

his emotional response to her'. 'Three Times in Love' and 'Crucibles of Love' and 'Depth of Love' are poems in which 'love's power is depleted by Graves's purely intellectual apprehension of it'. To be fair to Richman's ideas, he admires 'A Love Story' for its 'symbolic landscape' and its 'rare chance to get an extra-literal sense of the poet's internal emotional state'. He admires the 'resonant, charged language of 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' and the more generalised female figure there – 'she' could be any woman (one might note here that Richman's ideas about this poem are in sharp contrast to the views of the editors of the two anthologies discussed earlier, all of whom use 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' as a prime example of Graves's obscurantism). Those poems that succeed are charged with imagery, but 'more common is Graves's literalism, which spoils many of his love poems'. For Richman, most of Graves's best poems pre-date his 'post-Thirties absorption in the Goddess'. He reads 'The Cool Web' as setting the stage for this absorption, but in expressing 'gratefulness for the protection from reality that language affords' it is 'exquisitely written'.

Richman's cruel final judgment is, ironically, based on this admiration for the early work:

[H]is worship of the Goddess prevented him from securing major status as a poet, largely because it led him to adopt an anti-metaphorical, anti-symbolical stance toward poetry (He once characterized this in a letter as his habit of discussing things 'truthfully and factually'). The limited imaginative range of his work – the 'one story and one story only' obviously owes everything to her [the Goddess] as well.²⁸

Richman clearly shows the bias of the American literary establishment in his analysis: a fixation on biography and on the Jarrell thesis, to list just two examples. But one is drawn to his insightful analyses of the poems. This combination of skilful close reading and Jarrell-based bias is particularly damaging, one might say, to Graves's reputation in America. Richman's last close

reading here is a reading of ‘Through Nightmare’, which he interprets as ‘a lament for the unfulfilled promise of this enormously gifted, and tragically tormented, writer’. A resounding sentence, but one which embodies both the deleterious biographical bent of American writers on Graves and the assumption of minor status that American critics have accorded to him.

Can those of us who study Graves reverse this assumption and its effects? I would argue that the answer is yes. I applaud, for example, the connection made between the Robert Graves Society and the War Poets Association; as many such connections as are possible with larger groups will provide broader venues for presentations of Graves scholarship. I also applaud the society’s growing reliance on the internet. All that can be done to make Graves scholarship simpler and faster, with internet access to diaries and collections that are now scattered around the world, and all that can be done to help Graves scholarship more rapidly appear in print (especially on the internet) should be undertaken.

While doctoral students are ‘the coin of the realm’ in academe, and Graves scholars should do all that is possible to encourage younger scholars to take up work on Graves, I would argue that it will also be very helpful, with the larger population of readers, if we focus on teacher preparation courses. If teachers working in the lower grades have been taught to rely on Graves’s work as much as they rely on the High Modernists (after all, Graves’s language and ideas are more accessible, by design), these younger readers will grow up with an appreciation of Graves’s work and with ideas about that work that are not now being taught.

Can Robert Graves scholars encourage the use of Graves in non-literature courses? Graves’s work might be a very effective starting point for courses in history, mythology, or archaeology. Even courses in leadership or business ethics might find *I, Claudius* useful for their purposes, for example.

Is it time to ‘winnow’ the Graves canon – especially to help in regard to teacher education programmes?

Is it time for more books and articles on Graves’s influence on

other writers? Or more studies of the traditions of Goddess poets or of the many, very serious poets overtly following bardic traditions?

Is it time to take Graves scholarship to larger venues at every possible opportunity to do so? With popular culture groups growing so rapidly, shouldn't *The Long Weekend* and *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* and others of Graves's works be of great interest? Some of these venues may seem far-fetched: for example, with the rapidly growing academic study of travel and tourism, is Graves's experience in Deyá of interest?

Can Robert Graves's work be used as evidence or illustration of arguments in larger causes, such as in arguing against the commodification of prose by today's publishers and retailers? I have argued that one reason Graves's reputation as a novelist has suffered in America is that he never became a 'brand' that marketers could expect to produce one more detective novel, one more historical novel, one more novel set in Rome or Jerusalem – every Graves book seemed different from the one before, with the hugely meaningful counter example of the two Claudius novels. And of course, Graves's work can be used to argue against the lack of historical approaches to poetry and its traditions in modern and postmodern scholarship.

Graves readers and scholars must attempt to counter the sorts of scholarship and reviewing that I have discussed earlier in this paper. Letters to editors might be a good start with the journals aimed at the widest audiences, and many scholarly journals encourage post-publication dialogues in subsequent issues between their authors and other scholars who disagree. Such public discussion can be very effective, and may be more and more needed, as British journals and newspapers seem to be beginning to take on the same attitudes as have the American journals. Witness the news stories of the reappearance of Aemelia Laraçuen in 2006²⁹ and a number of reviews of new work in mythology that have used Graves's *The Greek Myths* as a straw man, and a straw man discussed in very dismissive terms.

Graves scholars should look for ways to help in the efforts to

bring Graves's work to the attention of wider audiences. The BBC *I, Claudius* production remains the most popular production ever broadcast on American public television, and until recently the VHS and DVD versions of the production (which very generously included the BBC documentary about the Charles Laughton attempt to film *Claudius, The Epic that Never Was*) were the most popular items for sale in their fund-raising catalogues. Graves scholars should be doing all we can to bring those productions back to American audiences – I have never received a clear answer about the fact that the BBC's production is not re-broadcast – and all we can do to support the making of other Graves movies, plays – and operas and ballets, for that matter.

Possibly most heretical: is it time for Graves scholars to make connections with the Laura Riding Jackson Foundation? Riding scholars have, admirably, spoken at Graves conferences, and there should be more such interactions, especially in America, where the Laura Riding Jackson Foundation is located, and where Riding's work is so highly regarded by American poets and critics. And there may in fact be much to learn from the Laura Riding Jackson Foundation, with its Writers Workshops for students in grades 9–12, a series of workshops that, in cooperation with College Applications Consultants, have reached over 600 student writers (and future readers or scholars). In addition, the Foundation sponsors a series of readings for the public and the popular Vero Beach Book Festival, which between 2005 and 2007 brought 125 writers, including Nobel and Pulitzer prize winners, to an audience that during those three years totalled over 20,000 people – and the Festival was covered by CSPAN2, a national public television network. All these activities help forge connections with the greater public for Laura Riding and her work, as they might also do for Graves – or at least serve as a model to do so.

Robert Graves is known in America, but most typically only by an older generation who learned about his work from the BBC. Clearly many of this older generation went on to read more of Graves's work – as evidenced by the number of Graves books in

print. But many of this generation stopped after reading *Goodbye to All That* and *I, Claudius* (in this past week, a gentleman with an M.A. from Yale asked me, in all seriousness, if Graves had ever written anything else). And a younger generation has not been taught Robert Graves in school, even in college. In the last year I interviewed a young woman who holds a doctorate, and who teaches survey courses in modern British poetry – she had ‘heard’ of Graves, had read a few of his poems, but never mentions his work in her courses. These examples, and my reading of American publications about Robert Graves and his work, combine to make me very pessimistic about the future of Graves’s reputation in America, unless the Graves community can increase the amount of Graves scholarship, can counter the current assumptions about Graves in the popular and literary press, and can successfully reach out to wider audiences to make Graves’s work more widely known and appreciated.

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NOTES

¹ Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940–1985* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), p. 513.

² Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. xii.

³ Randall Jarrell, ‘Robert Graves and the White Goddess’, *Yale Review* (1956), in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. by Mary Jarrell (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 175. (Page numbers in text refer to this 1999 collection.)

⁴ Patrick J. Keane, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980).

⁵ J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 117.

⁶ Robert H. Canary, *Robert Graves* (Boston: Twayne, 1980); George Stade, *Robert Graves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

⁷ Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. xx.

- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. xx.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- ¹¹ Daniel Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. xii.
- ¹² Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 274.
- ¹³ Seymour-Smith, p. ??
- ¹⁴ Richard Perceval Graves, p. 481.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 481.
- ¹⁶ John Presley, 'Robert Graves: El Poeta y Su Reputación', in *Robert Graves: Una Vida De Poeta* (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2002), pp. 87–115.
- ¹⁷ Louis Untermeyer, ed., *Modern British Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964).
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 382.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 383.
- ²⁰ Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds, *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), p. 9.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 567.
- ²² Denis Donoghue, 'The Myths of Robert Graves', *New York Review of Books*, 43, no. 6 (4 April 1996), 27–31 (p. 27).
- ²³ Jamie James, review, *Wall Street Journal*, 24 October 1995, p. D8.
- ²⁴ James Longenbach, review, *Nation* (20 November 1995), 633–640 (p. 634).
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 634.
- ²⁶ Robert Richman, 'The poetry of Robert Graves', *New Criterion* (October 1988), 1–12 (p. 1), <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/07/oct88/richman.htm> [accessed 11 October 2004] (Page numbers in text refer to the online version.)
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ²⁹ Richard Brooks, "'Goddess" reveals bizarre affair with Robert Graves', *Sunday Times, Times Online* <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article783994.ece> [accessed 20 December 2008]