

Privileging the Personal

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Robert Graves: A Life by Bruce King

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While Bruce King's *Robert Graves: A Life* is the first biography of the poet to be published in over a decade, it is the fourth book of its kind to appear in a period of less than thirty years. This new account of Graves's life follows Martin Seymour Smith's *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (1982), Richard Perceval Graves's three-volume biography (1986, 1990 and 1995) and Miranda Seymour's *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (1995). As a distinguished scholar of postcolonial literature who has published widely on major contemporary writers like Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul and Nadine Gordimer, the author of *Robert Graves: A Life* differs from his subject's previous biographers, each of whom, to quote King himself, wrote from 'outside the university world' (p. 219). This is not to say that King's study is written in an especially academic style since, in many ways, it reads more like a popular biography than a scholarly one, but rather that its author demonstrates a literary historian's awareness of the various cultural contexts that shaped and were shaped by Graves's life and work. These contexts, which include modernism, colonialism, feminism and gay history, significantly open out the restrictive 'one story and one story only' that Graves told about himself and point towards engaging new ways of studying a body of writing that has remained largely ignored by the academy.

King is refreshingly attuned to Graves's habit of 'revising history to justify himself' and works from the principle that a critical sense of 'what he obscured and why [...] helps towards understanding his writings' (p. 9). More so than any of the previous biographies, King's book focuses on Graves's 'schoolboy homoeroticism' (p. 25), his close association (and identification) with a 'well-known circle of homosexuals' (p. 38)

during the First World War and his later, sometimes homophobic attempts to distance himself from these episodes. With this in mind, King explores the idea that Graves may have been a repressed homosexual and that this, along with his imperious mother, may have directly informed both his predilection for domineering women who occupied a 'masculine role' and his subsequent formulation of the Goddess myth. At one point, for example, King cites Graves's relationship with Nancy Nicholson and argues that 'It is possible to see his sudden marriage at the age of 23 to a feminist who dressed in men's clothing and wore her hair short as a way of transferring his acknowledged homoeroticism onto a woman' (pp. 60–1). While speculative, the questions that King raises about his subject's sexuality are valid and productively complicate the avowed heterosexuality of Graves's muse poet persona. By extension, this radical perspective facilitates gay readings of a hitherto unequivocally 'straight' theory of poetry.

King's treatment of *I, Claudius* is equally enabling, as he draws suggestive parallels between the historical events described in Graves's novel and the growing opposition to Western imperialism in India during its composition in the 1930s. According to King, 'Graves had many Indian friends throughout his life' and when writing *I, Claudius* 'he would have been conscious of its relevance to the movement to make the British quit India' (pp. 116–17). Again, this kind of detail is important because it implicitly challenges the perceived insularity and ahistoricity of Graves's work while highlighting its relevance to contemporary theoretical debates. Also striking is the way that King draws on his knowledge of postcolonial literature to reveal that, despite Graves's hostility towards the 'idols' of modern poetry, he expressed public admiration for writers 'from the former colonies' (p. 196) like Derek Walcott and the Indian poet Keki N. Daruwalla, who were at the time considerably less well known. Similarly, King argues that 'Graves's seeming lack of any relationship to the internationalist Modernist movement is deceiving', since 'his writing and thought have many of the same

influences although he took them in different directions' (p. 140). Among these common influences, King cites the aestheticism of the *fin de siècle* and the growing interest in supposedly 'primitive' cultures at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since Graves's critical neglect has been largely attributable to the various oppositions (both real and imaginary) that have always existed between him and the more canonical modernists, this reminder of their shared intellectual background reaffirms his place among the most innovative literary minds of the period.

While King's study is at its most successful when underscoring the lesser-known aspects of Graves's life that enlarge and enrich our sense of his writing, it is, perhaps understandably, given its biographical rather than critical standpoint, less satisfying when dealing with his poetic achievement and, indeed, the poetry itself. King regards Graves first and foremost as 'a romantic who wrote about himself' (p. 5) and makes a case for viewing his poetry as a form of 'autobiography' (p. 60) that 'inspired those who saw art as personal' (p. 216). This, for King, is what sets Graves apart from modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound who promoted (without necessarily practising) a more impersonal aesthetic. Though not inaccurate, such a view tells only half the story and, in some respects, the less interesting half. What makes Graves such a strange and captivating poetic talent, after all, is not so much his romantic sensibility, but rather the fact that he couples this with an unusually rigorous attention to form and sense in a way utterly unlike any other modern poet. Though he moved away from the overt Freudianism of his early poetic theories, Graves always held fast to the argument he made in his first prose work, *On English Poetry* (1922), that the poet 'creates in passion, then by a reverse process of analysing, he tests the implied suggestions and corrects them on common sense principles so as to make them apply universally' (*On English Poetry*, p. 13). This universalising tendency in Graves's poetics is what gives his lyrics the dry, 'emblematic' quality that Donald Davie identified in an important article from the early 1960s and what differentiates them from the more unbridled romanticism of, say, Dylan Thomas's verse.

One senses that King himself finds the unqualified ‘romantic’ label an awkward fit at times, since he fleetingly refers to ‘the satirist who was *also* present in the romantic poet’ (p. 182) and even makes the observation, ‘For a *supposed* romantic he can be very classical’ (p. 47) [emphases mine]. At one point he goes so far as to acknowledge that Graves’s ‘concise lyrics, though of autobiographical origins, have the economy and finish of impersonal objects’ (p. 140), thereby rendering problematic his fundamental distinction between Graves and the ‘impersonal’ modernists. Nothing further is said, however, about this crucial tension and its relation to Graves’s place on the map of modern poetry. By privileging the personal over the impersonal dimensions of the poet’s art rather than showing their interdependence, King occasionally risks casting Graves in the role of a kind of proto-confessional poet, when, in actuality, his mature poems contain little (some might argue too little) of the circumstantial detail or frank personal revelations that characterise the autobiographical lyrics of a poet like Robert Lowell, for example. King allows for this point by arguing that a full understanding of ‘the allusions [to Graves’s life in the poetry] requires knowledge of his relationships’ (p. 60). This may be true and there are certainly many illuminating moments in King’s book where he reveals the messy personal events behind the impersonal sheen of Graves’s verse. At the same time, however, one cannot help but feel that it also invites readers to view the poems not as richly suggestive lyric events in their own right, to adapt Lowell’s famous adage, but as autobiographical documents *about* the private events that gave rise to their composition. This wouldn’t necessarily be a problem if the latter approach hadn’t been the dominant mode of criticism in Graves studies since scholars began writing books about the poet almost fifty years ago. But then the author’s purpose here, as I keep reminding myself, is primarily biographical rather than critical, and while seasoned Gravesians will find few surprises in its pages, for those who are new to the author and his work King’s compact and cogent study provides a valuable point of entry into what remains a fascinating but

dauntingly large field.

Matthew Betts was awarded a PhD for his thesis on Robert Graves from the University of York, where he has also taught British and American literature.