

Editorial

Dunstan Ward

This second electronic issue of *Gravesiana* focuses on Robert Graves the poet.

Six of the essays examine aspects of his poetry in relation to its period and in particular to Modernism, evidencing their origin in the Robert Graves Society's conference 'Innovation and Tradition: Robert Graves in the Twentieth Century', held in 2008 at St John's College, Oxford.

In his 'institutional memoir', 'Takes on Robert Graves', Michael Schmidt considers 'some of the ways in which Robert Graves spoke to, and then spoke through, Carcanet Press, publishers of his Collected Writings, and to Carcanet's authors'. The 'takes' are sometimes positive (Elizabeth Jennings's, for example); more often they are decidedly hostile: 'For Rickword, Davie, Riding ['I could never have brought myself to tell Laura that we had in mind an edition of Robert Graves', Michael Schmidt confesses], MacDiarmid and others Graves served as a critical catalyst rather than as a model. [...] He seems either a radically English presence or a reactionary one, stalling the development of a new poetry in Britain.' As for Michael Schmidt himself, even if he can identify a Graves that 'had and has much to teach the young writer and editor', he places him not with 'the great Modernists' but with Housman and Bridges... Robert Graves is 'old fashioned' (albeit 'like Ben Jonson'). 'He proposes an ancient mission for poetry, an earnest, delighted engagement with language. The poems and poet are in exile, speaking from beyond our borders, as though from the past.'

Hugh Haughton's 'take' on Robert Graves's poetry is strikingly different. In a groundbreaking essay, 'Graves and Ghosts', he ranges widely over the *Complete Poems* 'to pursue the ways in which Graves's own poetry is haunted by the "mental ghosts" he associates with "Modernist Poetry"'. In Graves, 'Ghosts seem to

be figurative embodiments of peculiarly modern, peculiarly anguished psychic pressures – uncannily contemporaneous with Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny” of 1919.’ The ‘historic shadow’ of the First World War often falls across Graves’s ‘developing ghost routine. [...] Though he repeatedly attempted to say Good-bye to All That, the return of “All That” often took the form of ghosts – a return of the repressed, in Freud’s terms, experienced under the sign of psychic trauma.’

In contrast with Michael Schmidt’s essay, Hugh Haughton’s concludes by placing Graves ‘squarely in the company of [...] Hardy, Pound, Yeats, Edward Thomas and Eliot’ – ‘other tradition-haunted modern poets’. ‘These poets were all conscious of the need to renew poetic tradition, to escape the “traditional” and through innovation of various kinds find their way back into tradition.’

An instance of such innovation, Chris Nicholson believes, was the use that Graves made of psychoanalytic theory. The development in his post-WWI writings of an approach to poetry in terms of the reconciliation of internal conflict, ‘set as it was in the context of his confrontation with war neuroses and emerging psychoanalytic ideas, was at this time an entirely unique and paradoxically personal grappling with the tensions and conflicts of modernity’. Through an analysis of a critically neglected early poem, ‘A Patchwork Bonnet’, Chris Nicholson shows ‘the depth of Graves’s absorption of psychodynamic ideas into his own poetic mode’. Moreover, he argues that, far from being restricted to Graves’s early work, the influence of psychoanalytic theory, accessed chiefly through W. H. R. Rivers, was a lasting one, as can be discerned in *The White Goddess*, or in a much later poem like ‘The Three-Faced’.

Rivers advised Graves that ‘the very *source* of his poetry would be terror’, David Constantine emphasises, and, in his dedication to the *White Goddess*, ‘Graves actually courts that terror’. Taking as its starting point a line from *The Tempest*, this essay draws out the implications – poetic, moral, even social – of that hazardous

commitment to the Muse, her ‘grace’ that is ‘devouring’. ‘Most characteristically, in the coming or making of the poem, in the love of the woman Muse whose gift the poem is, in conviction and bodily presence itself, there is a large admixture of terror.’

David Constantine assimilates this ‘terror’ to Housman’s famous (and Graves-endorsed) ‘*frisson* of mixed horror and delight that lines of poetry may cause’. He points out, however, that there was ‘a vast reservoir of terror in Robert Graves long before the White Goddess came along’ – from childhood, school, above all from the war. With Hugh Haughton and Chris Nicholson, David Constantine sees Graves as ‘permanently traumatised’ by his war experiences, ‘haunted till the end of his days’ (he adduces a number of the same ‘ghost’ poems). But ‘terror is a chief ingredient in his love poetry too’, as this essay eloquently demonstrates.

David Constantine’s poetic account of Graves’s (and also his own) devotion to the Muse touches at several points Devindra Kohli’s essay, in which the ‘*frisson*’ is again evoked. He argues that ‘mythologising of the hands and the related sensitivity to touch and to bodily impressions is integral to Graves’s view of the nature of poetry’, and that this ‘proclivity’ is the basis for Graves’s ‘special affinity’ with ‘the tactile Keats’, which he explores especially with reference to ‘the poet-Muse paradigm’ in the work of both poets. A crucial connection here is one specific poem: ‘Perhaps the most important element of [Graves’s] paradigm is the *frisson* of the poet’s sacrificial death symbolised in Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”.’ The essay also looks at how Graves’s military training and war experience ‘added another dimension to his notion of the *frisson* of ritual death and to his mythologising of the hands’.

Nancy Rosenfeld’s essay proposes that, far from being ‘reactionary’, Graves in his poetic and critical work ‘both predicts and critiques central themes in postmodern thought’. These include ‘the blurring of boundaries between the humanities and [...] the social sciences; the questioning of the validity of the

traditional literary canon; the questioning of strict separation between high and low culture'. She illustrates her argument with a discussion of a 'delightful' poem, 'Hippopotamus's Address to the Freudians', that glances ironically at his appearances in preceding essays.

The influence of Robert Graves as mentor and friend is recalled by two poets who met him in Mallorca when they were young women in the 1950s. The late Jay Macpherson, to whom tribute is paid in an obituary in this issue, found him 'very warm, very open, full of jokes and songs and stories – very easy to be with'. She was twenty when they met; he published her first collection of poems as a twenty-first birthday present.

Ruth Fainlight was also in her early twenties when she came to Mallorca to live there with Alan Sillitoe for four years. She regarded Robert Graves and Laura Riding 'as exemplary romantic figures, as well as excellent poets', and 'meeting and talking with Robert did not disillusion me'. In a feature article on Graves's influence on her Sibyl poems, she affirms: 'There can be no doubt about the enduring effect on me of Robert's poetry and his writings about religion and mythology – most especially about Sibyls.'

In another feature article, Julia Simonne recounts how Graves came to write 'Tousled Pillow', 'the first of many poems for which I was to be the inspiration', and one of the five, written between 1966 and 1975, that Geoffrey Alvarez set to music in his song cycle *My Last Muse*, dedicated to her; she gives a description of the premiere, in 2008. Julia Simonne's essay, in which 'the poet-Muse relationship' is seen from the woman's viewpoint, also takes in other settings of Graves's poems, and the role of music in his poetry and his life.

Three essays provide perspectives on the work of Robert Graves vis-à-vis that of other writers. The aim of Mark Jacobs's study of Laura Riding's first book, *The Close Chaplet* (1926), is 'to begin

to demonstrate that [it] contains all the themes that will be developed in her *Collected Poems*, and that a clear understanding of these themes will then be found to make the subsequent poems, and her later prose work, [...] perfectly accessible. It incidentally suggests why Robert Graves admired her work so much from this time on and something of what he learned from it.’

Marisa Saracino traces in the work of Robert Graves, Peter Russell and C. S. Lewis a multiplicity of parallels and echoes, shared themes and convictions, common artistic and intellectual priorities. Her essay, originally, too, a paper at the 2008 Oxford conference, presents in a European light further complex interactions between ‘innovation and tradition’.

John Woodrow Wilson’s masterly essay draws a surprising, detailed and illuminating comparison between ‘what may be the earliest successful use of the unreliable narrator in English literature’, in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseide*, and Graves’s narrative technique in the Claudius novels – the latter linking this final essay with others in the journal, and most directly with the first.

As this *Gravesiana* was about to be published, the very sad news came of the death of Dominic Hibberd, on 12 August 2012.

His entry in Wikipedia states: ‘An enthusiastic gardener, he died at his home in the Oxfordshire countryside looking out onto the garden he nurtured. His death came from pneumonia complicating a serious neurodegenerative disorder which had developed over the last few years. He was seventy.’

Dominic was an immensely valued supporter of the Robert Graves Society. He presented outstandingly perceptive and witty papers at several of our conferences, subsequently published in *Gravesiana* and in *Robert Graves and the Art of Collaboration*.

John William Dominic Hibberd, MA, PhD, LittD, Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, was a writer and scholar of exceptional achievements, particularly as the critic and biographer of Wilfred Owen, which were recently recognised by an honorary

doctorate from Cambridge.

Dominic and his partner Tom Coulthard will remain in the thoughts of all of us who knew and admired him. May he rest in peace.

Dunstan Ward was formerly Professor of English at the University of London Institute in Paris. With Beryl Graves he edited the Carcanet and Penguin Classics editions of Robert Graves's *Complete Poems*.