

Takes on Robert Graves

Michael Schmidt

In his 1971 essay on Herbert Reed, Robert Graves and Edgell Rickword, C. H. Sisson said, ‘The places where [...] Graves speaks out most clearly are not those where he speaks most loudly.’¹ There are at least two Graveses in each of the phases of his work, one who projects – an eloquent prose writer of marked if not always stable opinions – and one who infers, who revises and refines until the poem says what it has to say, even if it is not what he intended it to say at the outset.

This essay, a series of tangents, is about 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, from the time the press was born in South Hinksey in 1969. Indeed, Graves belongs peculiarly to my generation, it sometimes seems, and specifically to a group of young poets finding their feet (in two senses) in Oxford between 1966 and 1971. (I dare say other generations have felt the same: that of Brian Patten and Roger McGough, that of Patrick McGuinness and John Redmond.) Be that as it may, I see this as a new species of essay, an ‘institutional memoir’, and in preparing it I was reminded of Christopher Ricks’s comment about Empson, how hard it is to talk about those writers of whom one is oneself made.

When I was an undergraduate, and later when I began to teach, my contemporaries and I were puzzled at how Graves’s presence seemed small beside that of the great Modernists. Books and articles about him were at the time not numerous and concentrated on his life, and despite his generosity and his impact on a number of writers, he had not produced a ‘school’. Ezra Pound’s far less welcoming and less generous *Ezuniversities* was well known, but *Deyá* was a more private affair. While the boat was being rocked by Modernism and its after-waves, latterly *Deyá* seemed more a stabiliser than a storm, a place of reaffirmation rather than innovation. Yet to answer those who still regret the ‘neglect’ of

Graves, we can measure his unarguable effect, the impact of his presence and his example, where he speaks most clearly, while others speak more loudly.

Fifteen years ago I visited the agent Linda Shaughnessy at A. P. Watt. I had in mind the possibility of publishing a proper *Collected Poems* of Robert Graves,¹ but as we discussed this proposal a larger project began to emerge, in keeping with my Victorian hubris as a publisher. Why not publish, over a decade or

¹ *Editor's note:* Michael Schmidt has asked me to add the following details, as recorded in my diaries during these years:

While working from 1989 with Beryl Graves on manuscripts of the unpublished poems in Mallorca, I had become increasingly aware of the need for a complete edition of Robert Graves's poetry. In my 1992 diaries I have noted that I suggested the idea myself to Beryl in Robert Graves's study on 29 July 1992, and that she agreed at once. What I envisaged was a *Complete Poems*, with an uncumbersome apparatus and essential notes, which we would aim to get published by 1995, the centenary of Graves's birth. Beryl thought we should go ahead and worry about finding a publisher later. We put the project to William Graves at afternoon tea the next day when he came over to Canellun, and he was in favour of it. I started work on the edition on 31 July 1992, and came back in September to continue with it, having meanwhile done some research at the British Library.

Over the next twelve months I kept the project moving in Paris and Beryl in Deyá, with concentrated periods working together during my university vacations.

The publication breakthrough came in November 1993: on 20 November, over a year since Beryl and I had started the *Complete Poems*, William phoned to tell me that Michael Schmidt's Carcanet Press planned to publish it, together with a number of the prose titles.

Beryl and I continued our intensive work on the same pattern over the following six years. I visited the United States twice to study manuscripts and other materials. The three volumes of the Carcanet annotated edition appeared in 1995, 1997 and 1999, and in 2000 a one-volume edition without notes, the basis for the 2003 Penguin Classics edition.

two, a Collected Writings of Robert Graves in several volumes – we did not at the time know just how many – following the pattern established by our Hugh MacDiarmid programme, itself the fruit of ongoing efforts with Edgell Rickword, H. D., C. H. Sisson, William Carlos Williams, Ford Madox Ford, Laura Riding and others. Beryl and William Graves generously supported the idea, and so the series was launched under the general editorship of Patrick Quinn.

Patrick credits me with prophetic powers. I told him at our second meeting that, if the series went well, it might aid his academic career. He could even, if he was *really* successful, become a Professor at Oxford, I predicted. And lo, he is indeed a distinguished Professor at Oxford, Mississippi.

Carcenet might have broached the Graves project earlier, but I had become quite a close epistolary friend, and then publisher, of Laura (Riding) Jackson. Robert Nye introduced us. Our correspondence is now housed in the University of Manchester Rylands Library. It ran from 1978 until her death in 1991. It is a voluminous correspondence: she sometimes wrote to me twice a week. In her final years the letters were fewer: we corresponded through her devoted helper and later her official biographer Elizabeth Friedmann.

Though I had risked publishing C. H. Sisson and Donald Davie on one list (they were to become good friends), and more dangerously still Donald Davie and John Ashbery (they weren't), not to mention other volatile combinations like Edwin Morgan, Jon Silkin and C. H. Sisson, or Thomas Kinsella and Donald Davie (I could go on), I never could have brought myself to tell Laura that we had in mind an edition of Robert Graves. That would have been a bridge too far. Here are some of the reasons.

I developed a habit with Laura of asking about people she had known, people I respected or admired, among them Hart Crane, Edgell Rickword and Michael Roberts. Candidly, she characterised each of them, sometimes adding further comments in later letters. While Robert Graves was courteous about her, whatever his private exasperations might have been, Laura's

letters, both private and public (and there is a public aspect to almost everything she wrote in her later years), could be outspoken. Indeed, she was seldom less than outspoken on the subject of her time with Graves, so trudging over by hostile journalists and biographers and, from her point of view, so misread. When we were preparing our edition of *A Trojan Ending* in 1979 she remembered the *Time and Tide* review: her book, it proclaimed, was not unlike *I, Claudius*. ‘In fact,’ she quoted the reviewer, ‘it might have been called *I Riding*.’² She goes on:

I reproduce this intendedly superior impudence – the writer is Malcolm Muggeridge – for the interest of the *I Claudius* reference. As working comrade, in the Seizin Press, and an associate editor of *Epilogue*, of which I was editor, and a chosen collaborator in certain writings, Robert Graves, especially among my working comrades, had concentratedly attentive help from me in all his writer’s texts, in the period of our working association.

At some length she describes the nature and extent of her involvement in editing and shaping the work of those she regarded as comrades, in particular Graves, and though we may not find her use of the word ‘sensibility’ to our liking, and though we may find the credit she claims excessive, there can be no doubt that she engaged closely, passionately, in editing the work of those she believed in. So she insists,

Robert Graves, when he came into association with me, set himself to learn all he could from me of the principles of sensibility of the good in language. Robert Graves lacked the instinct of such sensibility, but he was well-supplied with literary ambition. He had got along until he came into association with me with drawing on the varied and deep-reaching material for tricks of the literary trade that the traditional literary stock provided. The story of what, with my assistance, he drew from my

sensibility-experience and knowledge-experience, in matters of language is a wide-wandering one. I shall just record as to *I Claudius* that if I had not worked to extremes of care upon its text for raising it to a level of fair literary civility, it would have been a production of gross and awkward capering, a mess of vulgarities in a sauce of inept stylistics.

She goes on to note how he suppressed the preface in which he thanked her for improvements wrought by ‘the touch of my linguistic and stylistic hand’.

In another letter she refers to the Graves and Hodge collaborative volume *The Reader over Your Shoulder* as ‘a brazen thievery of a book I planned in the thirties, and spoke confidentially of to Graves’.³ A little earlier she had called this book ‘an ugly steal’. And in 1980 she wrote a powerful letter about the ways in which her poetry was used and ‘pawed over’ as a merely literary resource, no one taking seriously the larger project it represented. Most unforgivable of all Graves’s comments on her work, from her point of view, was this: ‘she is a poet’s poet’.⁴

Well, Graves had several publishers at the time, and she had only Carcanet. And she stayed with Carcanet, without major ructions, for over a decade. She spoke her mind, criticising each issue of *PN Review* as it appeared, always distrustful of how the academy seemed to be ingesting poets, always concerned for the effect this would have on them and on their students.

Thus Carcanet’s approach to the Graves estate was slow, but eventually an agreement was struck. I do not regret the time it took to get to Graves or the Alps through which we had passed. By the time we arrived it was possible to envisage, and gradually to bring about, a republication of the Riding/Graves collaborations whose absence had much to do with the apparent ‘neglect’ of Graves’s work I mentioned before. Some of the most radical critical work Graves did, its residual impact on modern poetry, was done during and in the wake of his association with Laura Riding.

From Carcanet's beginning in 1969, at Pin Farm, South Hinksey, Oxford, Robert Graves was already being woven into the fabric of the operation. We drank in the village at the General Elliott, a rather threadbare pub about which Graves wrote eight balladic quatrains – it lay on his route from Boars Hill into Oxford, through one of Arnold's 'Two Hinkseys' where indeed nothing stays the same. I understand the copy of Graves's poem that used to hang in the pub has been replaced by a mirror, though sadly not a pier-glass. Graves drank here with T. E. Lawrence, and they exchanged messages about the General and his identity. That's what the poem is about:

He fell in victory's fierce pursuit,
 Holed through and through with shot;
A sabre sweep had hacked him deep
 'Twixt neck and shoulder-knot.

The potman cannot well recall,
 The ostler never knew,
Whether that day was Malplaquet,
 The Boyne, or Waterloo.

The poem ends:

And paint shall keep his buttons bright
 Though all the world's forgot
Whether he died for England's pride
 By battle or by pot.

When Carcanet was beginning, one of the people I most enjoyed visiting lived on Boars Hill. After Roy Fuller wrote and arranged a first meeting, I used to cycle up to her house on the Ridgeway. She was Robert Bridges's daughter Elizabeth Daryush, inventor – in the same year as Marianne Moore, but unacquainted with her – of syllabics. Mrs Daryush had married a Persian and left Boars Hill for Iran, but returned in time with her husband, quite wealthy,

to a house her father had built for her. She remembered Graves in the years before Laura Riding, Graves recently out of the army, when he and John Masefield visited her father. She was seven years Graves's senior and she regarded him even in 1969 as a younger man, one of the few whose sense of prosody she respected. She talked of her discussions with her father about Milton's prosody, and it was from Milton that she devised her syllabic theories.

There were affinities between her writing, her sense of 'truth' in language, and Graves's in the first phase of his work, though her insistences may have had more in common with those of Laura Riding, whom she did not come to know. What she called the *barren severities* of history made no lasting wound on a real culture, she insisted, any more than the adjustments of an intellectual border could affect the capital of human sense – as if Darwin, Marx and Freud had not clouded the sky with their unsettling breath; how long had they lived compared with Homer? What was their style, had they really touched language? Would the plane tree, the beech, the signpost cypress on her hillside survive in Eden or Utopia or only there?

In no sense was her poetry dependent upon her biography. Like Graves she was a great reviser, and part of revision was the extinction of mere contingency. I have her amended copy of *Selected Poems* (1972 – one of our earliest hardback books, long overdue for a new edition) with dozens of poems added and each page scrupulously corrected.

Old hunter for youth's head,
 These are your old decoys –
A matron diamonded,
 A man with golden toys;

And these, too, long ago,
 Were children that you charmed –
This lad that failed to grow,
 This girl still empty-armed.

She was certainly connected with Carcanet's large debt to Robert Graves.

Then, among my immediate contemporaries there was Grevel Lindop, already a devoted Gravesian at nineteen, who helped in the founding of Carcanet. It was he who first introduced me to General Elliott and he and I, trudging over Boars Hill one day, reciting snatches of poetry, stumbled upon the idea for Carcanet's *FyfieldBooks* series. He spoke aloud some Chatterton – 'Come with acorn cuppe and throne / Drayne my hertes bloode away' in a Middle English inflection we had all acquired from our Chaucer lectures. We went to Blackwells and there was no Chatterton to be had. There was no Peele, or Crashaw, or Smart. Soon *FyfieldBooks* existed, the trailblazer being Chatterton, selected by Grevel – this was his first publication; and thanks to Graves, Skelton and Peele were among the poets earliest included. And Bridges and Masfield.

Grevel talked a lot about Graves, and about Yeats. In his mid-teens he had read *The White Goddess*, which he was later to edit for me with such skill; and he respected aspects of Yeats, too, which I found tried my patience, the gyres, his vision of history and the rest. There was some contention between the mystical, pre-Marxist Lindop and the pragmatic Schmidt. I remember one particularly hostile dinner at Pin Farm in the room of Gareth Reeves. We were not all of one mind. And that may be why Carcanet has worked.

Gareth Reeves was my closest editorial colleague in establishing Carcanet. And Gareth not only knew about Graves, he knew him. He had spent holidays in Mallorca from an early age, was friendly with Graves's children and with members of the circle. His stories about the island, Deyá itself, the house and gardens, and the man, the person of Graves, were formative for me and others: Graves was what a poet should be, his was the life a poet should live. Rather an odd role model, you might think now, but at the time, with Lawrence Durrell and Dennis Enright, Patricia Beer and other free spirits who had not confined themselves to the smudged

world of England, and in an age before academia had displaced Parnassus as the proper abode of poets, Graves represented a human and creative apex of sorts, a man alive in his body and in his head, for whom history had a specific gravity, and who had worked out strategies for getting, as it were, on the other side of it. As we became more political, of course, his example lost some of its charm.

Gareth's father James had been one of Laura Riding's undeclared Muses, the occasion for her poems 'When Love Becomes Words', 'Friendship on a Visit' and 'Wishing More Dear', in which she laments the lack of customary 'loving signs' in their relationship and, afraid of rebuff, watches her heart which 'piously disowns / Thought of the usual embraces.' I did not know this at the time of our early friendship – I am not sure that Gareth did. But there was a complex seeming closeness to Graves through James Reeves – I used to visit Gareth at the Reeves's home in Lewes.

Riding had persuaded Michael Roberts to include Graves in the *Faber Book of Modern Verse* (and had herself contributed to the composition of his powerful introduction); she tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade Yeats to include Reeves's work in his Oxford Book. Her hostility to Yeats was not only to his writing and what it represented: it was to the man she could not persuade.

In their exchange of letters about James Reeves's poems we watch a gracious-seeming Yeats in all his 'garrulous sociality' trying to charm Riding, and we see how she confronts his gentle mocking, his condescension, his male irony, with a straightness which confounds him. She took especial exception to his view, in response to the work of Reeves, that 'We poets should be good liars, remembering always that the Muses are women and prefer the embrace of gay, warty lads.'⁵ Writing to Lady Dorothy Wellesley, Yeats was categorical about Riding: 'her school was too thoughtful, reasonable & truthful, that poets were good liars who never forgot that the Muses were women who liked the embrace of gay warty lads'. This was before the age of cut and paste. Yeats clearly had a penchant for the phrase 'embrace of gay

warty lads'. In Yeats's view, Riding's primary function was as Muse to Graves; this attitude, not peculiar to Yeats, was a poison for which Laura (Riding) Jackson had to articulate an antidote.

No wonder she and Graves had composed their *A Pamphlet against Anthologies* a few years earlier, in 1928. Inherent in the project of any anthology was a programme that schematised and distorted not only the intentions of the writers included but also the context in which they wrote. Yeats's attitude, the ominously changing political scene in Spain and Europe, and developments in her own sense of what poetry could *not* do or say, quite apart from her personal circumstances, were pointing in the direction not only of *Collected Poems* but of the thirty year publishing silence that was to follow them.

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In London on 9 October 1967 (I used to add dates of acquisition) I got, if I remember rightly as a gift from Gareth Reeves, the Penguin *Robert Graves: Selected by Himself*. It is an odd book in that it has no blurb at all, no critical quotes, and no biographical note. Readers were expected to know what they were getting. I see that I liked his ballads in particular: 'coldly gaped the moon' is marked with two ticks, and, angrily, the last stanza of 'Ancestors':

Their reedy voices I abhor,
I am alive at least, and young.
I dash their swill upon the floor:
Let them lap grovelling, tongue to tongue.

There's also a line along the whole, concise 'Fragment of a Lost Poem':

O the clear moment, when from the mouth
A word flies, current immediately
Among friends; or when a loving gift astounds
As the identical wish nearest the heart;

Or when a stone, volleyed in sudden danger,
Strikes the rabid beast full on the snout!

Moments in never...

It was the vigour of the writing, the metonymic positioning that occurs with 'tongue to tongue', the ironic key-change of diction in the word 'snout', the risk of suspension at the end of 'Fragment', that we found enabling in Graves. Elizabeth Jennings, whom I met the same year and who became a close friend, told me (more than once) how Graves's example had cured her of her early apprenticeship to Eliot, how he had been a kind of prophylactic against a Modernism which was seductive but imaginatively anathema to her. Many of her tauter early lyrics are formal tributes, and sometimes thematic tributes, to Graves. I hope she had been to hear, between her bouts of mental illness and her stays in the Warneford, his Oxford lectures, because he was Professor of Poetry shortly before I came up.

In my first year as a lecturer at the University of Manchester – 1972 – I met for the first time a poet who had been a friend of Graves's at Oxford. He was much younger than Mrs Daryush and slightly younger than Graves. Eric Walter White, head of the Arts Council, organised a meeting of editors to discuss a new arts magazine. Edgell Rickword was there as the oldest and most distinguished survivor of several editorial ventures of the first importance, especially the *Calendar of Modern Letters*, for which he commissioned Graves's *Scrutiny* of Kipling. Stephen Spender was there as *Encounter* and Ian Hamilton as *The Review*. The eventual upshot of that dinner party was *The New Review*, with which Rickword had nothing to do. But he had a lot to do with *PN Review* and with Carcanet Press.

Graves had been Rickword's first publisher, including a story in a journal he edited at Oxford, and though he lost interest in Graves's work when Graves turned away from a growing political interest and went on his Riding tangent, Rickword retained a vital affection for the man and the early work. They had both been

soldiers (Rickword had lost an eye in the trenches), and this was a further bond between them. Rickword reviewed Graves in the *New Statesman* in 1921 alongside Maurice Baring, Nancy Cunard (with whom he was to have a turbulent but extremely literarily fruitful relationship) and Charlotte Mew. The majority of the review is given over to *The Pier-Glass*.

Rickword remarks how the rise of new literary movements is marked by ‘a renovation of the current poetic diction’. Old words put on a ramping youth in unaccustomed surroundings – a youth they gradually lose, so that ‘they lead a merely posthumous existence as commodities’. What was fresh and bespoke – or freshened and bespoke – in time becomes tired, self-imitating, self-replicating, off the peg. Rickword’s sense of the *word* as the unit rather than Pound’s ‘image’, turning first into figure and then into cliché, is serviceable to a wider range of poetry than imagism was. There can be little disagreement about what a word is, even if we disagree about what it does in different contexts. Image is forever a vexed term.

Rickword starts by consideration of words and language; then assesses the new book, how it relates to earlier volumes: ‘less homogeneity than *Country Sentiment*’, itself less homogeneous than its predecessor. Graves’s poetry is not dramatic. It represents deliberation after an event, the contingencies as it were falling away, leaving a kernel. The occasion, the event, ‘may itself have been dramatic’, but the poem is not. Graves is an elegist rather than a poet of presence. Rickword praises ‘*The Pier-Glass*’ itself as a poem ‘reaching out beyond the mere statement which is not common in his work.’

He dislikes Graves’s ‘excessive indulgence of the *bijou*’... He also warns against the sirens of fashion: ‘the serious writer seeking body for his conceptions will be more hindered than helped by the usages fashionable in his time’. In Graves’s new book, Rickword remarks, ‘the fairies have turned to goblins’, the fusiliers undergo sinister metamorphoses. War was the agent.

Two years later Rickword composed his famous review of *The Waste Land* in the *Times Literary Supplement*.

In 1925, in his own great magazine the *Calendar of Modern Letters*, Rickword reviewed Graves's pamphlet *Contemporary Techniques of Poetry: A Political Analogy*, published by the Hogarth Press. It is instructive to recall Graves's proximity to Bloomsbury in the morning of his career. This review of Graves by Rickword falls between his consideration, in the prior issue, of I. A. Richards's *Principles of Literary Criticism*, and in the following issue, of Virginia Woolf's *The Common Reader*, a real run of luck for an editor-reviewer.

Graves's essay divides poets between Conservatives, Liberals and Left-wing Reformers, Revolutionaries and Exiles. There is an apparent movement towards truth in poetry and in the ideology that surrounds it, and beyond the terminology, in the themes themselves, a movement towards politics which went, in a sense, no further: Graves was to settle into what must now look like a Green stance, particularist and nostalgic.

Rickword saw Graves as a powerful, innovative writer, not radical but attuned to the living force of tradition and wary of the dead hand of convention. His enthusiasm for the work continued until the arrival of Laura Riding and Graves's exile from an England his poems – from an idealising distance – had celebrated. Rickword moved towards Marxism and Graves to the Mediterranean.

By the time I knew him, he was a tired old man in Islington. History had grazed him. He lost friends and that eye in the trenches; then a wife back home. Spain harvested a second generation of friends. Madrid he could remember, '37 – steep ruins, corpses, and the writers' prattle. In the 1930s, he surrendered to the Party, an acolyte embracing a dark priesthood out of a hunger for self-effacement. In 1956 he drew the line. Until then he had repeated parrot-fashion things he must have known untrue; he had no energy to start again, there was no place to get back to, nowhere, even though he was the first English pilgrim to Rimbaud, he raised Donne from the grave and brushed him down, and said 'Remember Swift, he's neither dead nor sleeping – we are.'

Who was he? Now he's dead he comes sharply into focus, yet I am wary of interpreting him. What I knew was an old man in Islington who, like Graves, loved his language first, the tongue of Donne and Swift, and loved it last as well, however many detours he took home along the English road. He made it clear in conversation that Robert Graves might have followed a similar road had he not been drawn aside.

In an interview in *Poetry Nation* 1, Rickword remembered how enchanted he had been by Graves's first two books, the war poems, but it was Sassoon who took him by the throat. He 'named things as one talked about them'. 'I liked Graves, but he didn't give the shock of the real thing as Sassoon did. Graves's poems are a bit distanced, I think.'

Many other Carcanet writers engage with Graves. I'd like to linger over two and mention a third. The third is Donald Davie, a poet-critic who occasionally, as in 'Time Passing, Beloved', recalls the grace of Graves's lyrics and who appreciated much that he did, but who also regarded him as an arch mis-reader and an enemy of Modernism who gave lesser poets and readers an unearned exemption from it. Donald Davie resents Graves's dislike of Virgil, his insistence that the Roman poet was a 'time-server'. He disliked the ways in which Graves stripped his poems of contingency, so that they become in a sense anonymous. He speaks of 'The dry unshadowed silhouette of the Gravesian emblematic fable'.⁶ The sense of timelessness in the lack of shadow, and of moralism in the words fable and emblem, underline Davie's sense that the poet was an anachronism, withdrawing from the world in ways that Rickword, too, found difficult to take. The allegiance to Hardy, common also to Blunden and Sassoon, Davie regarded as a flight from the urban and the industrial, from the world which Graves emerged to condemn and not to understand; the pursuit of old themes in old forms was in the end a bankrupting one, and licensed later English writers to follow suit. It is as though Davie was echoing Hugh MacDiarmid's Scottish Renaissance cry: Not Burns, Dunbar! Davie is crying out, Not Hardy, Pound! Not the rural, not the

pastoral, but the urban, the Greek, the Roman. Graves declared, 'experimental work, as such, has no future. Last year's experimental poem is as out of date as last year's hat and there must come a time, perhaps not very many years hence, when there will be a nostalgic reaction from futurism to some sort of traditionalism, and in the end, back will come the Miltonic sonnet, the Spenserian stanza and the mock-heroic epic in the style of Pope.'⁷ Davie understood Milton, Spenser, Pope and their prosodies; he knew not only that Graves was wrong but that this kind of talk was reactionary.

Sassoon's and Blunden's ironies are, like Hardy's and Housman's, cosmic, drawn from the way in which reality confronts the individual. In Graves they are more often strategic, stylistic: a sleight of hand, away from theme onto style and manner, an interest in the vehicle over the tenor. Graves prided himself in running a poem through a dozen or two dozen drafts. Hardy seldom did more than three or four. The real poet's poet is Graves with his over-riding interest in form, and I reckon that is one of his qualities which most riveted the young men setting up Carcanet at Pin Farm in 1969. The integrity of the poem as a verbal artefact was what we thought we were after.

Patrick McGuinness has written one of the best essays on Graves and Davie, written it from the point of view of a practising poet in debt to both writers. I recommend this piece in *PN Review* 126.

Like Davie, though with less subtlety and fairmindedness, Hugh MacDiarmid used Graves as a shorthand term to mean 'Georgian' and anti-Modernist; also, he meant English, he meant Privileged. There is little evidence that MacDiarmid really took Graves on board, despite his review in 1927 of *Poems (1914–26)* in which he reflects on the fact that the poet has yet to write a single durable poem but then declares him 'a stimulating figure in a very dull arena of English verse and poetic theory'.⁸ Mr Graves, he announces, has 'preciously little' to realise. This is said more in triumph than in sorrow or anger: MacDiarmid does not feel that Graves offers significant competition. He has – in this MacDiarmid's view differed from his comrade Edgell

Rickword's, but agreed with Riding's – a fatal 'insensitivity and gaucherie in the use of words'. Graves represents, *in fine*, the 'interminable casualness and heterogeneity that English poetry is at last reacting against, and not before time'. Graves has nothing to say, despite his technical accomplishments, and saying nothing in a dozen different ways is degrading to the art of poetry. It is only with *The Common Asphodel* that MacDiarmid suddenly snaps to attention, largely, one is tempted to say, because he agrees with what Graves has to say about class and poetic style and perspective.

For Rickword, Davie, Riding, MacDiarmid and others Graves served as a critical catalyst rather than as a model. His importance, either as a living or as an emblematic presence, is undeniable and central, he cannot be dismissed or simply overlooked. He seems either a radically English presence or a reactionary one, stalling the development of a new poetry in Britain.

C. H. Sisson's account of the Anacreontic poet, impersonal and classical, a poet with a Landoresque penchant for purity and self-effacement (often concomitants of a strongly defined yet self-protective personality) strikes me as useful, and also as a key to his appeal to my generation of poets repelled by the mere subjectivity of many of the writers around us at the time. Eavan Boland suggested in a lecture on Edna St Vincent Millay that the failure of Modernism was due in part to the fact that while the poem, poetic form and language, poetic diction and address, were subject to radical re-invention, the person of the poet was not, so that Pound and even impersonal Eliot, and Yeats and Lawrence and others retained a Shelleyan sense of their vocation and the trappings of it. Graves looked large and defined to us, but that largeness and definition did not invade the poems. They have, as Sisson insists, an epigraphic and epigrammatic quality, brief, pure and impersonal. He takes as a rather stark example 'Love without Hope': there is no point in the poem where we can say, this is the poet's occasion, his moment, his voiceprint. What is there in this poem specific to the subjectivity of Graves? It might well be a stanza from another poet's poem. Is its fragmentary nature enough

to give it his imprimatur? Its raptness which falls short of rapture? Do the three opening abstract words go with what follows? Is the poem in proportion with its opening? Is not the 'as when', the metaphor, a sleight of sense rather than an equivalence? As Sisson says, 'the theme, of course, is mere pastoral fantasy, a memory of fairy-stories and picture-books'.⁹ The stanza would be almost at home in a poem by De la Mare. Yet there is a magic here which Sisson worries at and which he celebrates, understatedly, *as* understatement.

This Graves had and has much to teach the young writer and editor. More importantly, he has much pleasure to give the reader, and he lives quite comfortably in an atmosphere of fresh oxygen outside modern academia, which itself has much to learn from him. To understand what is owed to him as a poet one must perhaps reconsider notions of influence. Housman and Bridges and Graves are an uninsistent and undeniable resource. They are at the heart of English things. In his best poems statement is inseparable from the words used: paraphrase is not an option. He refused to make concessions to the spirit of his age and his poems do something different from those of his contemporaries. He is old fashioned not like Housman or Philip Larkin or Charles Causley, but 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.

Has he no friend at Court to intercede?
 He wants none: exile's but another name
 For an old habit of non-residence
 In all but the recesses of his cloak.

In his late poems he developed a precision reminiscent of the Greek Anthology. It's a poetry that distrusts facility in language and in feeling and still, with memory failing and the body no longer obedient to desire, engages the durable joys and virtues, as in 'The Green Flash':

Watch now for a green flash, for the last moment
When the Sun plunges into sea;
And breathe no wish (most wishes are of weakness)
When green, Love's own heraldic tincture,
Leads in the mystagogues of Mother Night:
Owls, planets, dark oracular dreams.
Nightfall is not mere failure of daylight.

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NOTES

¹ *English Poetry 1900–1950: An Assessment* (1971), 2nd edn (Manchester: Carcanet, 1984), pp. 187–193 (p. 189).

² Laura Riding to Michael Schmidt, n.d., 1983

³ *Ibid.*, n.d., 1983

⁴ *Ibid.*, n.d., 1983

⁵ 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!', Clark Lectures 1954–1955, in *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 225.

⁶ *With the Grain: Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (1973) (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p. 15.

⁷ 'The Future of Poetry' (1926), in *Collected Writings on Poetry*, p. 31.

⁸ *The Raucle Tongue: Hitherto Uncollected Prose 1927–1936*, II, ed. by A. Calder, G. Murray and A. Riach (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 28–32

⁹ *English Poetry 1900–1950*, p. 190.