

Graves and Ghosts

Hugh Haughton

They felt a sense of unreality
In the proceedings – stop! that’s good, *proceedings*,
It suggests ghosts.

(Robert Graves, ‘A Letter from Wales’)

One need not be a chamber to be haunted,
One need not be a house,
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place.

(Emily Dickinson)

1

T. S. Eliot once wrote: ‘Anyone who is visited by the Muse is thenceforth haunted.’¹ Robert Graves’s theories of the Muse, developed in *The White Goddess* (1948) are familiar, but his own ‘haunted’ poetry much less so. I want to begin my look at the many ghosts that haunt Graves’s poems with some remarks of his on ghosts and poetry in *On English Poetry*, his first sustained piece of poetic theory. It was published in 1922, the *annus mirabilis* in which *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* appeared, the two works which brought ideas about ‘Tradition and Innovation’ – or ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ – in modern literature to their highest pitch.

In *On English Poetry* ghosts figure in three different guises. In the first place the poet speaks of ‘the business of controlling the association-ghosts which haunt in their millions every word of the English language’.² On this model, the inherently associative art of English poetry is essentially a matter of ghost control – related to ‘the business of controlling’ spectral associations. Later in the book, he likens ‘spontaneous poetry’ to the ‘Genie from Aladdin’s Lamp’ and compares the ‘conscious part of the art’ to ‘the

assemblage of sheet, turnip-head, lighted candle and rake to make the village ghost'. The Genie, he says, 'is the most powerful magic of the two, and surest of its effect, but the Turnip Ghost is usually enough to startle the rustics'.³ This is a very different kind of ghost, in which 'the conscious part of art' – as against the spontaneous 'Genie' – turns out to be a naïve theatrical imitation of the spectral to impress 'the rustics'. To the association-ghost and the all-too-conscious Turnip Ghost he adds another, a local Oxford ghost as it happens. The chapter entitled 'Ghosts in the Sheldonian' turns on an anecdote concerning the supreme ghost-master in modern poetry, Thomas Hardy:

The most popular theory advanced to account for the haunting of houses is that emanations of fear, hate or grief somehow impregnate a locality, and these emotions are released when in contact with a suitable medium. So with a poem or novel, passion impregnates the words and can make them active even divorced from the locality of creation.

An extreme instance of this process was claimed when Mr. Thomas Hardy came to Oxford to receive his honorary degree as Doctor of Literature, in the Sheldonian Theatre.

There were two very aged dons sitting together on a front bench, whom nobody in the assembly had ever seen before. They frowned and refrained from clapping Mr. Hardy or the Public Orator who had just described him as 'Omnium poetarum Britannicorum necnon fabulatorum etiam facile princeps,' and people said they were certainly ghosts and identified them with those masters of colleges who failed to answer Jude the Obscure when he enquired by letter how he might become a student of the University. It seems one ought to be very careful when writing realistically.⁴

The claim is that, as houses are haunted by the passions of previous inhabitants, a writer's words can haunt when 'divorced from the locality of creation'. Graves identifies the disapproving spectral academics frowning on Hardy's Honorary Doctorate as

ghosts of fictional figures in *Jude the Obscure*. These particular ghosts, in other words, are a paradoxical tribute to Hardy's 'writing realistically'. On this account, art such as Hardy's is not only haunted by ghosts but haunts as ghosts do. Through ghost-control, or aesthetic control of language inherited from the past, the poet, like a subtler version of the manipulator of the Turnip-Ghost, becomes a haunter of the future.

Ghosts also make a brief appearance in Graves's *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927). Having compared the plain reader's experience of traditional poetry to eating in a 'conservative, well-appointed restaurant', and of 'modern poetry' to eating in an 'artistic' 'tea-room', he suggests that 'Modernist poetry' is 'inaccessible' because it seems like dining in a 'private residence' where you have to 'lunch personally with the poet'.⁵ According to him, the plain reader would 'find an interior in which it should be possible to be on completely unembarrassed and impersonal terms with poetry' and 'alone with it'. Unfortunately, he goes on,

this is only theoretically possible. For the plain reader does not really want to be left all alone with poetry. The mental ghosts, which only poets are supposed to have natural commerce with, assail him. The real discomfort to the reader in modernist poetry is the absence of the poet as his protector from the imaginative terrors lurking in it.

These 'mental ghosts' mirror the so-called 'obscurity' of modernist poetry. They represent the authentic 'imaginative terrors' of new writing. It is ironic that the plain reader thinks that 'only poets are supposed to have natural commerce' with such forces, but Graves clearly thinks ghosts and 'imaginative terrors' are allied. If you are to read modernist poetry, he implies, you must be prepared to encounter 'mental ghosts'.

We are prone to forget the poet was the co-author (with Laura Riding) of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* – and that he had earlier discussed joint authorship of a book on modern poetry with T. S. Eliot, as their correspondence shows.⁶ One of the things surveyors

of modernist poetry should note is the presence in it of many ‘mental ghosts’, or ghostly minds. Pound’s *Cantos* begins with a version of the descent to the underworld, while that ghost-master Yeats in his Oxonian ‘All Souls Night’ speaks of MacGregor Mathers as a ‘ghost-lover’, and evokes the moment when ‘A ghost may come; / For it is a ghost’s right’. Yeats’s interest in the ghostly is an expression of his larger pre-occupation with Madame Blavatsky, automatic writing and spiritualism, but it also aligns him with the modernist moment, with its preoccupation with the survival and resurrection of the past, and the Freudian Uncanny. *The Waste Land* is a monument to ‘imaginative terrors’ (‘I shall show you fear in a handful of dust’) and turns contemporary London into a phantasmagoric ‘Unreal City’, where the speaker, citing Dante, gasps ‘I had not thought death had undone so many’.

I want in this essay to pursue the ways in which Graves’s own poetry is haunted by the ‘mental ghosts’ he associates with ‘Modernist Poetry’. In *Country Sentiment*, published in 1920, Graves has a poem called ‘The Haunted House’, while another, ‘Outlaws’, invokes ‘the ghosts of ghosts’. That he called a later selection of poems *No More Ghosts* suggests both his ambivalence towards them and their persistence. Though not a ‘ghost-lover’ like Mathers, one of the words he was most haunted by – for its ‘association-ghosts’ – was the word ‘ghost’ itself. This was particularly true of his post-World War I poetry, where he really found his voice. Perhaps if you are called Graves, ghosts come with the territory – and the name.

What follows takes the form of a loosely chronological critical ghost walk through that territory, as I try to track down the ‘mental ghosts’ that swarm the corridors of his lyrics.

2

In the Foreword to *Collected Poems* (1938), the poet offered a stern dismissal of his early career: ‘For the most part I wrote in a romantic vein, of wizards, monsters, ghosts and outlandish events and scenes.’⁷ Graves represents ‘ghosts’ here as simply part of the

stock-in-trade ‘romantic vein’ of immature work he later outgrew. In passing, we might remember that his father Alfred Perceval Graves, was also a specialist in the ‘romantic vein’, and had published a ‘Song of the Ghost’ about a woman visited by her lover’s spirit, which Yeats included in his *Fairy and Folk Tales of Ireland*: ‘Your true love’s body / Lies on the bier, / His faithful spirit / Is with you here’.⁸ The younger Graves’s probably didn’t want to be too ‘faithful’ to his father’s spirit, but his first collection, *Over the Brazier* (1916), included a poem entitled ‘Ghost Music’ (p. 8).⁹ It’s a patently ‘Georgian’ poem, which shows obvious traces of Hardy’s influence; it is also a poem *about* influence, about the capacity for present performance to resurrect the past. The poem describes a blind organist playing away in a gloomy organ-loft, and awakening echoes of earlier music from the rafters and pipes:

The ghosts of long-dead melodies,
Of anthems, stately, thunderous,
Of Kyries shrill and tremulous:
In melancholy drowsy-sweet
They huddled there in harmony,
Like bats at noontide rafter-hung.

‘The ghosts of long-dead melodies’ take palpable form in that final image, ‘Like bats at noontide rafter-hung’. These are daytime ghosts, and there is something dismal about the organ music that evokes them. The organist plays a music that only evokes the past (‘Innumerable, formless, dim’), the churchy, Hardy-esque world of dead ‘anthems’ and traditional English Christianity. Though the poem doesn’t quite find a new tune, it expresses dismay about these ‘ghosts of long-dead melodies’. This may be the organist’s job but that final cluster of bats suggests that the ghost music doesn’t really belong in the daylight of the twentieth-century. It represents ‘tradition’ without ‘innovation’. This seems to be confirmed by the next poem, ‘In Spite’, which takes a sprightly ironic line at the expense of ‘the right / Of classic

tradition / In writing'. Later, in 'A Boy in Church' (52), Graves's account of the Church took explicitly satirical form, portraying a bored boy at a service who can 'hardly hear the tuneful babble, / Not knowing nor much caring whether / The text is praise or exhortation'. In 'A Dialogue on Fake Poetry' in *On English Poetry*, the question 'But when is a fake not a fake?' is answered by 'When it's a Classic'. To the next question - 'And when else?' - comes the reply: 'When it's "organ-music" and all that.' This underwrites the way 'Ghost music' is not only about 'organ music and all that' but an implicit critique of tradition. Graves, like T. S. Eliot, was deeply vested in tradition, but from the outset, also like Eliot, he was leery of 'the traditional'. As we shall see, Graves's ghosts tend to be figures of ambiguity.

'Babylon' from *Goliath and David* (1916) opens with a Gravesian version of the familiar Wordsworthian romantic credo: 'The child alone a poet is: / Spring and Fairyland are his. / Truth and Reason show but dim, / And all's poetry with him' (p. 25). When he reaches 'one-and-twenty', however, wisdom banishes 'the Lords of Faery', Babylon is 'battered' to bits, and the cornucopia of childhood story-telling is destroyed. Graves catches this in a lilting triple-rhyme that yokes fairy-tales, Shakespeare and the Bible: 'Jack the Giant-Killer's gone, / Mother Goose and Oberon, / Bluebeard and King Solomon.' In his later essay on Mother Goose Graves explained that the 'Babylon' of the nursery-rhyme 'How many miles to Babylon?' was a version of 'Babyland', and the poem equates the two in much the same spirit. It ends, however, with a vision of ghostly survivors of this Edenic infantile Fairyland:

None of all the magic hosts,
None remain but a few ghosts
Of timorous heart, to linger on
Weeping for lost Babylon.

This notion of the 'ghost' as a psychological survivor of a banished past, a past that is cultural, historical and/or personal,

looms large in Graves's verse. The assured, trim, traditional music of 'Babylon', with its metrical memories of *Midsummer Night Dream*, Milton's 'L'Allegro' and Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence', suggests how deeply as well as lightly Graves invested in it. It articulates his intense commitment to protesting against its reduction to a mournful 'few ghosts' – remnants of the 'romantic vein, of wizards, monsters, ghosts and outlandish events and scenes' the later Preface disavows – and who survive ambiguously to lament its passing.

Ghosts don't often figure directly in the 'light' war poetry of *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), though they crop up powerfully in later verse recalling war, as we shall see. They do make an appearance in his playful 'Familiar Letter to Siegfried Sassoon' (p. 39), an idyllic war-time fantasia in which he elaborates on what the two poets would do in peace-time, given the chance. He imagines the two of them in Meirion in Wales:

Fairies and ghosts are here galore,
And poetry most splendid, more
Than can be written with the pen
Or understood by common men.

This may be little more than a whimsical poeticism in his father's vein, but *The White Goddess* would eventually turn his passing tribute to the 'fairies and ghosts' of Cymry into a more potent currency, as well as elaborating his devotion to a poetry that can't be 'understood by common men'.

We don't find ghosts galore in Graves at this time, but in 'The Spoilsport' (p. 40), another poem about poetry, Graves evokes 'My familiar ghost again'. Here the ghost isn't a figure from the poetic past, but an embodiment of 'Critic, son of Conscious Brain', a figment the poet wants to shut out but can't. He is a 'spoilsport', a counter of kisses and noter of gestures, who 'Listens, watches, takes no rest'. The critical ghost is not a revenant from the past but a reflex of a horribly invasive contemporary literary superego. The poem's ironic protest is

double-edged, however, since Graves, for all his desire to have uncounted kisses and Romantically unselfconscious poetry, had an extremely fruitful relationship to his self-critical ghost – as *English Poetry*, among many works about or of poetic revision, shows. The question, I suppose, is, whom does the poet's critical superego represent? Himself or others? Does it embody the poet's desire to make something that isn't phoney or derivative? Or the pressure of literary conformity to 'classic tradition' (9) on the one hand or the fashionable modernism of the 'New Age / Of Poetry' invoked in 'To an Ungentle Critic' (p. 29)? Its ghost status seems a sign of Graves's ambivalence towards both.

'Sorley's Weather' (p. 35), also from *Fairies and Fusiliers*, is a rather formulaically contrived poem about the death of fellow First World War poet Charles Sorley, and ends with a rather overblown traditional ghost: 'I'm a way to the wind-blown hill / And the ghost of Sorley' (a name that is rhymed in grotesque Hardyesque style with 'f'rely'). In contrast, the penultimate poem of the book, 'Corporal Stare' (p. 53), presents us with a much more convincing modern ghost – more aligned to fusiliers than fairies. It offers a World War I equivalent of Banquo gatecrashing the feast. It opens anecdotally: 'Back from the Line one night in June / I gave a dinner at Béthune.' It goes on to describe a 'gorgeous meal', which ends with the company drinking heavily and bawling 'Church anthems *in choro* / Of Bethlehem and Hermon snow / And drinking songs, a mighty sound'. The regimental festivities are rudely interrupted, however:

Then through the window suddenly,
 Badge, stripes and medals all complete,
 We saw him swagger up the street,
 Just like a live man – Corporal Stare!
 Stare! Killed last month at Festubert,
 Caught on patrol near the Boche wire,
 Torn horribly by machine-gun fire!
 He paused, saluted smartly, grinned,
 Then passed away like a puff of wind,

Leaving us blank astonishment.
The song broke [...].

When the festive soldiers get up to look outside, there's 'nothing there', just a 'quiver of smoke that showed / A fag-end on the silent road'. The poem is *about* a piece of masculine bravado, and in a sense *is* just that. It tells a story of post-traumatic hallucination, an instance of horrific 'war neurosis' of the kind studied by W. H. Rivers, but it's far removed from the polemical satirical style of Graves's friend Sassoon or the haunted inwardness of Owen poems like 'Strange Meeting'. Instead, in raconteur vein, it retells the incident as a classic ghost story, ending with that almost formulaic ambiguity as to whether the smoke from the 'fag-end' confirms or disconfirms the authenticity of the ghost. There is something grotesquely caricatural about 'Corporal Stare' – including his name – but this adds rather than detracts from its effect. The translinguistic rhyme of 'Stare' and 'Festubert' jars uncomfortably and gets carried through in distorted form into the next rhyme of 'wire' and 'gun-fire' which operates as an Owenlike pararyme to the previous pair, interrupting the jog-trot bravado of the poem. The effect is to change its key into something altogether less assured. The move from the soldier being 'torn horribly' on the wire to saluting 'smartly' catches the horrible automatism of the dead soldier's ghost and the grotesque mismatch between the live and dead images of the same man. Where in 'Dulce et Decorum Est' Owen is haunted by wounded casualties from the battlefield, in Graves's poem it is the banal normality of the posthumous Corporal Stare which is unnerving. He is neither mangled nor spectral, 'just like a live man'.

In *Good-bye to All That*, Graves provides the poem's biographical context:

I saw a ghost at Béthune. He was a man called Private Challoner who had been at Lancaster with me and again in F Company at Wrexham. When he went out with a draft to

join the First Battalion he shook my hand and said: 'I'll meet you again in France, sir.' He had been killed at Festubert in May and in June he passed by our C Company billet where we were just having a special dinner to celebrate our safe return from Cuinchy. There was fish, new potatoes, green peas, asparagus, mutton chops, strawberries and cream, and three bottles of Pommard. Challoner looked in at the window, saluted and passed on. There was no mistaking him or the cap-badge he was wearing. There was no Royal Welch Battalion billeted within miles of Béthune at the time. I jumped up and looked out of the window, but saw nothing except a fog-end smoking on the pavement. Ghosts were numerous in France at the time.¹⁰

The poem sticks remarkably closely to the anecdote. Changing 'Private Challoner' into 'Corporal Stare' gives the revenant a small promotion in rank but also an eerily allegorical ring. The factual tone documents the link between the ghost population of Graves's poems and his military experience in the Great War.

'Ghosts were numerous in France', Graves says briskly, and there are also innumerable ghosts in contemporary anthologies of war poetry. In E. B. Osborne's *The Muse in Arms* of 1917, for example, an anthology with entries under 'School and College' and 'Chivalry and Sport', there is also a whole section devoted to 'The Ghostly Company'. It included E. A. Mackintosh's 'Cha Tili Maccruimein', with its ballad version of 'The grey old ghosts of ancient fighters / Come back from the dark', accompanying the departing Fourth Cameron Regiment on its way to battle, as well as William Willoughby's 'Flanders, 1915', with its bevy of wistful pastoral spectres ('Around the grey spire that we knew, / We pass again, but all unknown'). Among them, we also find a Charles Hamilton Sorley poem which opens with a vision of 'millions of the mouthless dead / Across your dreams in pale battalions', and ends with a view of a particular face:

Then, scanning all the o'ercrowded mass, should you

Perceive one face that you loved heretofore,
It is a spook. None wears the face you knew.
Great death has made all his for evermore.

The anthologist speaks of the British warrior's 'singular capacity for remembering the splendour and forgetting the squalor' of his 'vocation', and 'Great death' in Sorley's poem swallows up the individual in the traditional rhetoric, lying all too readily to hand to dignify horror and squalor. Nevertheless, though a poem like this pales beside the ghost realism of Owen's 'Strange Meeting', the spokenness of 'It is a spook' momentarily captures the shock of the poet's dissociated recognition of the once-live face as it disappears into the monstrous regiment of 'great death' as well as the currency of spooks in the trenches.

George Herbert Clarke's *A Treasury of War Poetry* (1919), includes Lawrence Binyon's 'Men Of Verdun', which translates the contemporary disaster into traditional ballad terms:

[...] as if dead men were risen
And stood before me there
With a terrible fame about them blown
In beams of spectral air'.

We are told that 'history's hushed before them', and that 'Verdun, the name of thunder, / Is written on their flesh', but the heroic style is too thunderously historical, and the dead of Verdun lose their identity within the poem. In the section devoted to 'Oxford', three of the poets also speak of ghosts. One of them talks of 'this neglected ghostliness of Time'; another – 'The Ghosts of Oxford' – of the 'ghosts of those who died for her'; and a third – 'Oxford Revisited in War-Time' – of 'silent towers' where 'The young ghosts walk with the old'. In the section on 'The Fallen', G. O. Warren has a poem 'The Spectral Army' which begins

'I dream that on far heaven's steep
To-night Christ lets me stand by Him

To see the many million ghosts
Tramp up Death's highway, wide and dim'.

With echoes of the Ancient Mariner, the dead soldiers 'smile / In gallant comradeship' as they look at Christ's wounds, and are said to know 'Golgotha's terrible defile'. Such anthology pieces remind us that the ghostly afflicted the now largely obsolete verse about the conflict as well as the poetry which has survived it.

During the course of the war Graves became a kind of ghost himself. As he records in *Good-bye to All That*, in July 1916 his colonel wrote to his mother to say 'I very much regret to have to write and tell you your son has died of wounds'. He goes on to record his letter of correction in *The Times* announcing 'Captain Robert Graves, Royal Welch Fusiliers, officially reported died of wounds, wishes to inform his friends that he is recovering from his wounds at Queen Alexandra's Hospital, Highgate, N.'¹¹ The incident figures in 'Escape' (pp. 27–28) in *Goliath and David* (1916), a poem prefaced with the heading 'Officer previously reported died of wounds, now reported wounded. Graves, Captain R., Royal Welch Fusiliers':

...But I *was* dead, an hour or more.
I woke when I'd already passed the door
That Cerberus guards, half-way along the road
To Lethe, as an old Greek signpost showed.

Though he felt 'the vapours of forgetfulness' float in his nostrils, he is rescued by the Queen of the Underworld herself:

Dear Lady Proserpine, who saw me wake
And, stooping over me, for Henna's sake
Cleared my poor buzzing head and sent me back
Breathless, with leaping heart along the track.
After me roared and clattered angry hosts
Of demons, heroes, and policeman-ghosts
'Life! life! I can't be dead! I won't be dead! [...].'

The poet puts Cerberus to sleep by stuffing his mouths with ‘army biscuit smeared with ration jam’ containing suddenly-remembered morphia, and speeds on back to life. Like Herakles in *Alcestis*, and like Orpheus and Odysseus, Graves presents himself as descending to the classical Underworld and returning. The poem switches between newspaper report (complete with ‘policemen ghosts’) and classical myth, between the ‘revolver’, ‘Webley’, ‘bombs’ and ‘army biscuit’ on the one hand, and ‘Lady Proserpine’ on the other. In doing so it re-casts his near-death experience into a playfully mythopoeic mode without distracting from the life-and-death seriousness of the experience it recalls.

Graves returns to this moment subliminally in many places, not least in one of his greatest war poems, ‘Letter from Wales’, which I will return to later. ‘Escape’ presents him not only as a survivor of the war, but of death. In Hades he is haunted by the usual infernal crew of ‘heroes’ and ‘demons’ but also with what he calls ‘policeman-ghosts’, his incongruous modern addition to the surviving mythological cast of the classical underworld.

Graves’s ghosts, however, are about survival in many senses. ‘Outlaws’ (pp. 78–79), first published in *Country Sentiment* (1920), is one of the early poems that survived into later collections, as well as one of the most quick-witted of Graves’s ghost works. It is actually *about* survivals, the persistence of obsolete ‘Old gods, tamed to silence’, ‘almost dead, malign, / Starving for unpaid dues’. Though ‘creeds whirl away in dust, / Faith dies and men forget’, the poem says, the banished gods ‘Cling to life yet’. ‘Shrunk to mere bogey things’, they are finally celebrated in elegiac mode as:

Proud gods, humbled, sunk so low,
 Living with ghosts and ghouls,
 And ghosts of ghosts and last year’s snow
 And dead toadstools.

This is a modern take on Heine’s ‘twilight of the Gods’ mode – as

well as anticipating Mahon's 'The Banished Gods' – and is not unlike Hardy's, framed as it is in traditional alternately rhymed quatrains (with, predominantly, lines of four beats alternating with three-beat lines). The title 'Outlaws' offers a different slant on the superseded deities, suggesting they are not only banished but criminalised. The discarded 'gods' are alliteratively classified alongside routine 'ghosts and ghouls', but also, in a ghostly alliterative doubling that highlights the outlawing of earlier versions of the supernatural, 'ghosts of ghosts'. This is close to the logic of the Freudian *Unheimlich* – developed in an exactly contemporary text, conceived at the end of the War¹². As we shall see, in 'No More Ghosts' Graves comes back later to this idea of the extinction of the ghostly.

Freud wrote: 'To many people the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts. Indeed, we have heard that in some modern languages the German phrase *ein unheimliches Haus* ['an uncanny house'] can be rendered by the periphrasis "a haunted house".'¹³ For Freud, the *Unheimlich* ('the uncanny') is a disguised return of the *Heimlich* (or 'homely'), of the most intimate and familiar. Graves's 'The Haunted House' (originally 'Ghost Raddled') from the same volume, begins with a call for song and is song-like in form. Nevertheless the burden of its sentiment (its country sentiment) is a rehearsal of 'clouded tales of wrong / And terror' (p. 84). The hauntings take the familiar traditional form of 'spirits in the web-hung room' and 'demons in the dry well', but we know from its context that the poem is also subliminally haunted by very different 'tales of wrong/ And terror' from the Great War. It is this which gives momentum to the formulaic ballad music of the close:

A song? What laughter or what song
 Can this house remember?
 Do flowers and butterflies belong
 To a blind December?

It may be that the poem's 'country sentiment' ethos masks its

roots in contemporary sources of horror, making it less effective than it might be, but the poem's projection of haunting is intimately connected to the war-troubled poems of the time.

'Haunted' (also from *Country Sentiment*, 1920), is clearly a post-traumatic postwar poem, addressed to dead friends (p. 92):

Gulp down your wine, old friends of mine,
Roar through the darkness, stamp and sing
And lay ghost hands on everything,
But leave the noonday's warm sunshine
To living lads for mirth and wine.

I meet you suddenly down the street,
Strangers assume your phantom faces,
You grin at me from daylight places,
Dead, long dead, I'm ashamed to greet
Dead men down the morning street.

Though the poetic ethos is closer to A. E. Housman (especially those 'living lads' and 'mirth and wine'), we're not so far from T. S. Eliot's, 'so many,/ I had not thought death had undone so many' from 'The Burial of the Dead' in the nearly contemporary *The Waste Land* (1922). Though Graves's form is deeply traditional, and full of ghost melodies, the poem's hysterical puncturing of the boundary between living and dead is arrestingly modern. The 'haunting' is set in the 'noonday' scene and 'morning street'; it is in the modern city that the 'phantom faces' appear and the poet's friends (in a terrifying phrase) 'lay ghost hands on everything'. 'You grin at me from daylight places' combines the harmless grin of the living with the skeletal death's heads of former comrades, and the syntax creates a kind of hallucinatory confusion:

You grin at me from daylight places,
Dead, long dead, I'm ashamed to greet
Dead men down the morning street.

‘Dead, long dead’, applies in the first place to the ‘you’ of the previous line, but the fluid punctuation also allows it to modify the ‘I’ in the subsequent phrase, turning the poet into another kind of ghost: ‘Dead, long dead, I’m ashamed’. The fact that he’s ‘ashamed’ rather than *afraid* suggests the pressure of conventional morality on the survivor, even though the reality of his hallucinatory experience calls into question the conventional reality of the street around him. In ‘Retrospect: The Jests of the Clock’, we hear of another shell-shocked soldier, who we are told ‘met hours [...] he never guessed before’. These are the unguessed nightmare hours, ‘confused with dreams and fear’, when ‘the gods sleep and snore, / Bequeathing earth and heaven to ghosts’ (p. 92). It’s a less convincing poem, written in a more high-pitched and rhetorical key than ‘Haunted’, but again bad dreams and ghosts keep company. The ‘jests of the clock’ bequeath not only earth but *heaven* to ghosts.

Graves told Edmund Blunden that *The Pier-Glass* (1921) was ‘half a reaction against shellshock by indulging in a sort of dementia praecox (the medical name for John Clare’s ailment) of fantastic day dreams, [...] half [...] an attempt to stand up to the damned disease & write an account of it (Hence, Incubus, Gnat, “Down”, Pier-Glass, Reproach & so on)’. He said that ‘the obscurity’ of the poems ‘is not half so obscure as the original – I wrote each not less than eight times before I understood what they were to be about’.¹⁴ In *Good-bye to All That* Graves said, ‘They were poems that reflected my haunted condition; the *Country Sentiment* mood was breaking down.’¹⁵ *Good-bye to All That*, with its bluff military manner, tells us relatively little about that ‘haunted condition’, but the poems, though scarcely ever directly autobiographical, continue to reflect on haunted conditions in characteristically elliptical and coded ways.

The title poem of *The Pier-Glass* (1921), one of Graves’s finest post-war lyrics, opens by invoking ‘Lost manor, where I walk continually / A ghost’ (p. 102). It is one of his most extreme embodiments of the ‘haunted condition’. It takes the form of a

soliloquy by a speaker who imagines herself as a female ghost, transfixed by her own ghostly image in the mirror. She is haunted by ‘elder ghosts’ and ultimately yearns for some token that there ‘still abides’ somewhere ‘True life, natural breath; not this phantasma.’ We don’t know the reason for her predicament – why she haunts this particular traditional manor – but the terms of her response to landscape are strikingly modern. The windows ‘frame a prospect of cold skies / Half-merged with sea, as at the first creation – / Abstract, confusing welter’ – and this ‘abstract, confusing welter’ counts as much in the poem as the ‘attic glooms’ of the immemorial-seeming manor. The ‘cracked mirror’ recalls Stephen Dedalus’s image of Irish art as the ‘cracked looking-glass of a servant’, and the mirror-haunting ghost figures as an index of both obsessive self-consciousness and the ‘abstract, confusing welter’ of the modern world, the world mirrored in the art of Picasso, Klee, or Malevich. In his letter to Blunden Graves speaks of the poem in terms of his ‘damned disease’ of ‘shellshock’. It is striking, however, that in the poem the ‘hysterical’ reaction of the poet’s shell-shock is projected onto a female speaker, and all traces of the battlefield erased from its manorial setting. The ‘confusing welter’ viewed from the window is not Mametz Wood or the Somme but (so the poem implies) rural England. Nevertheless, in the original published version, in a paragraph later excluded, we read of ‘bee-serjeants posted at the entrance chink’, ‘the Master’s ear’ and a bed that oozes ‘blood’. We also hear the chilling words

Yet shall I answer, challenging the judgement: –
‘Kill, strike the blow again, spite what shall come.’
 ‘Kill, strike, again, again,’ the bees in chorus hum.

Graves was no doubt right to exclude these hysterical buzzing voices (reminiscent of the aural symptoms of his shell-shock), but their existence among the variants reminds us of what might have been at stake in the ‘phantasma’ that threaten the poem’s manor.

‘Down’ (p. 112) tells of a different kind of mental haunting, this

time of a 'sick man', caught up in childhood memories, 'half-riddles', 'lost bars of music tinkling with no sense', where dreams of flying give way to dreams of falling ('Falling, falling!'). The poem is finally given over to nightmares in which the man in bed sinks down through the cellars of the house into the earth, finding himself in an underworld not unlike that of Owen's 'Strange Meeting':

That he should penetrate with sliding ease
Dense earth, compound of ages, granite ribs
And groins? Consider: there was some word uttered,
Some abracadabra – then, like a stage-ghost,
Funerally, with weeping, down, drowned, lost!

The final vision is more theatrically extreme than Graves usually permits himself to be, with its infernal images of

the violent subterrene flow
Of rivers, whirling down to hiss below
On the flame-axis of this terrible earth...

The reference to the 'stage ghost' is telling, however. Graves's ghosts aren't generally theatrical, but this third-person poem, reads like a soliloquy, with the third person continually blurring into an implicitly first person subjectivity ('Oh, to renew now / That bliss of repossession, kindly sun / Forfeit for ever'). Though described as 'like a stage-ghost', the poem's protagonist is more like one of the traumatised ghost-viewers in Shakespeare's tragedies – Hamlet, Richard III, Macbeth or Brutus. Curiously, Graves's friend Siegfried Sassoon published a poem entitled 'First Night: Richard III' from March 1920 which evokes not only the 'numerous' 'casualties' of the king's wars but 'a scene of ghosts; dim, husky-voiced Shakespearean things'.¹⁶ Graves's 'Down' is such a Shakespearian thing. Sassoon's taste for ghosts has something in common with Graves, as in his psychologically searching 'Repression of War Experience', which records 'crowds

of ghosts among the trees' (l. 89), and the war-haunted 'To One Who Was With Me in the War', where he writes 'I'll go with you then, since you must play this game of ghosts' (l. 187). Most of Sassoon's ghosts, however, like the pious literary spirits of 'The Grandeur of Ghosts', are more conventional than Graves's. Graves's spooks don't suffer from 'grandeur' and are all the more disturbing because of this.

The ghosts and apparitions that flicker through Graves's poetry at this time can obviously be related to his own 'repression of war experience'. We need to read them beside his account in *Good-bye to all That* of his war neurosis in the wake of World War I, as well as the theories of multiple personality and poetry as psychotherapy developed in his trilogy of works on poetics, written under the influence of W. H. Rivers – *On English Poetry* (1922), *The Meaning of Dreams* (1924) and *Poetic Unreason* (1925). In each case, the ghost represents the continuing presence or re-appearance of the traumatic past. In some cases this is grotesque, in some whimsical, in others hallucinatory. In some poems, this is little more than a bagatelle, an almost tongue-in-cheek exercise in the 'Turnip Ghost' genre. 'The Coronation Murder' (p. 117) is one of these. It tells of the somewhat stagey Victorian ghost of 'Old Becker crawling in the night / From his grave at the stair-foot', who, having climbed the stairs, 'Quakes at his own ghostly fright'. In 'Whipperginny' we hear of 'phantom gains', but not much is gained by this phantom. 'The Bedpost' offers a more complex story in simple ballad-like form and triggers a fascinating account in Graves's critical prose of the time. 'The Sybil' (p. 151) draws on the legend of 'Gabriel's hounds, a spectral pack hunting the souls of the damned through the air at night', and tells the story of a female prophet who causes 'each spirit swan' and 'each spectral hound' to rise from 'memory's windy zones' to inspire 'one limb-strewn skeleton' in the 'valley of dry bones'. The result is a vision of 'life-restored battalions' that revives not only traditional folkloric imagery but the military nightmare of the war. A ghost is always a sign of when, as this poem puts it, 'Succession flags and Time goes maimed in flight.'

Whipperginny (1923) ends with one of the most luminous ghosts in all of Graves's work. It figures in a poem called 'A Valentine' (p. 161) and picks up from the spectral hunt of 'Sybil.' 'The hunter to the husbandman / Pays tribute since our love began', it begins, and both the tribute-paying 'hunter' and the 'husbandman' have a punning range. In the first place they suggest an anthropologically early hunter and husbandman, a hunter-gatherer and agriculturalist; in the second place, an erotic 'hunter' and a husband. The poet imagines 'the phantom hunt he meditates', and goes on to pray

Let me pursue, pursuing you,
Beauty of other shape and hue,
Retreating graces of which none
Shone more than candle to your sun...

The lyric has something of the tough shapeliness and erotic wit of Ben Jonson or Thomas Wyatt (say, 'Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hound'), as the modern poet's hunt pursues his 'graces' into the lyric past as Thomas Wyatt did into the texts of Petrarch and Ben Jonson into the classical legacy of Horace. The poem imagines the beloved's 'well loved shadow' beckoning him in 'unfamiliar imagery', and then suddenly lights up the 'phantom' hunt alongside the 'candle' and 'sun' imagery by way of the following swerving intensification:

each bright ghost
Dives in love's glory and is lost,
Yielding your comprehensive pride
A homage, even to suicide.

There is a disturbing ambiguity in the final image. It suggests that, like moths in a flame, the bright ghosts commit suicide in homage to love's brighter light. However, it also raises the idea of their paying 'homage, even to suicide', as if paying tribute to the beloved's suicide. The idea of ghosts committing suicide is

inherently paradoxical because they are already dead, but it gives a new twist to the love-poet's traditional trope that past beauties are merely allusions to the poet's beloved.

The title poem of *Mock Beggar Hall* (1924), 'Mock Beggar Hall: A Progression' (p. 201), is a particularly knotty, wittily allegorical, poem-cum-prose-poem in dialogue form published in 1924, the same year as *The Meaning of Dreams*. It is both a sustained meditation on the subject of Tradition and Innovation, and simultaneously, a poetic treatise on ghosts and dreams. It opens with a dream 'about a haunted house', where lepers, a parson and other ghosts 'quarrel for turns to haunt the present occupants'. The poet initially interprets this dream, telling the philosopher that 'the ghosts represent the antisocial impulses in the individual'. However, on a later day, after other dreams, he imagines that 'the surly vicar strove to exorcize / Ghosts of the lepers, but they stayed to plague him'. He finds indeed that 'these lepers when they lived in flesh / Saw phantoms too', including a Jewish rabbi, who in turn had called down vengeance on 'ghost defilers of God's chosen place, / The Venus-worshippers'. As the receding progress of ghosts following ghosts continues, Graves imagines the Romans with 'strange incursions at their shrine' by 'Druid knives', founding their temple to 'mask / The lopped oakgrove of aboriginal gods'. The text evolves into an allegorical exploration of authority, playing with the way that any regime, any form of order, is built on the suppression of earlier ghostlier forms. In fact it envisages 'a lawyer recognizing ghosts', and driven to consider 'a commercial and a legal question / Bound up with hauntings'. This leads to a discussion of the Roman and British Empires, and a dialogue between the Lawyer and the Other which recasts imperialist politics and the legalities of ghostliness in these striking forms (p. 211):

In a most real sense we become the house,
A house that's continuity of the tenants
Through whom by slow accretion it evolved [...].
We being the house then, a house whole and free,

Become the continuity of these ghosts,
 And there can be no question of annoyance
 Or hauntings in the former vicious mode.
 No one will claim possession; if ghosts come
 They'll come as guests laughing at ancient frays
 And what new conflicts rise in future years
 Between my heirs, or my heirs' assignees
 Those we can leave trustfully to their fate:
 That man's a monument of discontent
 Who grieves beyond the next millennium's promise.

'The continuity of these ghosts' remembers a related contemporary meditation on history called 'Essay on Continuity' (p. 197). The poem is built around the metaphor of wine-making, which sets the idea of 'true continuity', 'From vineyard, press, tun, bin, / To throats of church or inn', against 'Discontinuity' which 'Havocks' its 'central claim.' The poem eventually affirms the dialectical way 'continuity / Appears awhile and is, / And again perishes', so that 'no smallest rags remain / Of its past history', and we are left at the end with the realisation that 'New knowledge comes, new shapes, / New wine, new lips, new grapes'.

Innovatory Modernism is committed to 'new knowledge, new shapes', but in 'Mock Beggar Hall', as in so many other Graves poems of this period, the new knowledge and new shapes call up new ghosts. The poem distinguishes between two modes of haunting. In the first place, there are 'hauntings in the former vicious mode', where there is an unresolved or unacknowledged conflict between the new and ancient regimes. Against this, however, 'The Other' imagines a different and more benign kind of haunting, in which 'ghosts' can be 'guests'. The pun is generous and generative, imagining a very different relationship between past and present than the parricidal one often associated with modernism. That said, 'Mock Beggar Hall' doesn't really find a convincingly new shape, and is haunted by a kind of mock-antiquarianism that makes it look a tad anachronistic in the wake

of *The Waste Land*.

In 'From Our Ghostly Enemy' (p. 219) in *Welchman's Hose* (1925), Graves imagines a different kind of ghostly negotiation between living and dead. The poem begins with the image of a man in a chair holding his breath 'as if Death were about', and goes on to present him as persecuted by a particular kind of ghost:

'I know of an attic ghost,
Of a cellar ghost,
And of one that stalks in the meadows,
But here's the spirit I dread,'
He said, 'the most;

'Who, without voice or body,
Distresses me much,
Twists the ill to holy, holy to ill,
Confuses me, out of reach
Of speech or touch;

Who works by moon or by noon,
Threatening my life.
I am sick and needy indeed.'

There's a lot of doubling here, with the rhyme-scheme complicated by other patterns of assonance, 'dread' / 'said', 'body' / 'holy', 'reach' / 'speech', 'moon' / 'noon', 'needy' / 'indeed'. The ghost in question is not from the attic or cellar but a spirit of confusion – of twisting and alienation, a source of 'despairs' and psychic disintegration. The man's wife, however, tells him bracingly, 'That who you fear the most, / This ghost, fears you'. She then gives him the following piece of practical advice in ghost-management:

'Speak to the ghost and tell him,
"Whoever you be,
Ghost, my anguish equals yours,

Let our cruelties therefore end.
Your friend let me be.”

The husband does so, and the ghost, who we are told ‘knew not / How he plagued that man’, ceased, so that ‘the dumb clock ticked again, / And the reign of peace began’.

‘From Our Ghostly Enemy’ transposes the multiple and communal ghostly accommodation of ‘Mock Beggar Hall’ to the individual case. It translates what we might think of as mental illness or depression into the image of a ghost, and imagines the sufferer, or husband, acknowledging that his fear of the ghost is matched by the ghost’s fear of him. It’s about war and peace in a domestic context. The recognition of their mutual or reciprocal anguish lessens the agony of both, and turns the ghost from persecutor into something like friend; from ghost to guest again, or from ghost to fellow-sufferer. Though the poem, as so often in Graves, adopts a cryptic, indeterminate narrative style, it is hard not to read this as in some way autobiographical, offering a mirror of the poet’s struggle with shell-shock at the war’s end, as described in *Good-bye to All That*, published a couple of years later in 1929. Ghosts seem to be figurative embodiments of peculiarly modern, peculiarly anguished psychic pressures – uncannily contemporaneous with Freud’s essay on ‘The Uncanny’ of 1919.

Welchman’s Hose is one of Graves’s most haunted books, and includes ‘A Letter from Wales’ (pp. 232–37), one of his finest poems about ‘mental ghosts’. It is a dramatic monologue (spoken by ‘Richard Rolls to his friend, Captain Abel Wright’), built around wartime memories by two combatants, both of whom are in some sense both dead and alive. It opens with the assertion that ‘This is a question of identity / Which I can’t answer’, and then recounts reminiscences of war and peace, and a number of epistemologically uncertain ‘deaths’ suffered by Abel Wright. At one point, the writer says ‘They felt a sense of unreality/ In the proceedings – stop! that’s good, *proceedings*, / It suggests ghosts’ (p. 234). And this is true of the whole poem, with its baffling

sense of heightened circumstantial reality as well as ‘sense of unreality’ as he recalls both the horrors of the trenches –

the nightly rocket-shooting, varied
With red and green, and livened with gun-fire
And the loud single-bursting overgrown squib

– and of peaceful Wales where

We were eating blackberries
By a wide field of tumbled boulderstones
Heged with oaks and nut-trees.

It is about

Something we guessed
Arising from the War, and yet the War
Was a forbidden ground of conversation.

Its dizzying play on the multiple, interchangeable identities of the two soldiers generates a sense of multiple haunting. We could attribute this to Graves’s ‘war neurosis’ (or that of ‘Richard Rolls’ the letter-writer), but also to a larger post-traumatic sense of identity after the war. This is writ large in the lines (p. 236):

What happened after to that *you* and *me*?
I have thought lately that they too got lost.
My representative went out once more
To France, and so did yours, and yours got killed,
Shot through the throat while bombing up a trench
At Bullecourt; if not there, then at least
On the thirteenth of July, nineteen eighteen,
Somewhere in the neighbourhood of Albert,
Where you took a rifle bullet through the skull
Just after breakfast on a mad patrol.
But still you kept up the same stale pretence

As children do in nursery battle-games,
'No, I'm not dead. Look, I'm not even wounded.'
And I admit I followed your example,
Though nothing much happened that time in France.
I died at Hove after the Armistice,
Pneumonia, with the doctor's full consent.

Just as Graves was reported dead, the imagined writer of this 'Letter from Wales', is either literally dead – and therefore a literary ghost – or metaphorically dead, and therefore a kind of psychological ghost of himself. In 'My Ghost' (p. 653), a much later poem, the poet imagines himself

haunted

By my own ghost whom, much to my disquiet,
All would-be friends and open enemies
Boldly identified and certified
As me, including him in anecdotal
Autobiographies.

In this case, the ghost is more like an unrecognisable image of himself in others' eyes, a travesty of the self he can identify with. Both this poem, however, and 'Letter from Wales' use ghosts as ways of mirroring the complex double 'identity' of the poet, torn between life and death, and between survival and his identification with fallen fellow-soldiers.

3

There is a 1930s poem, first published in *Collected Poems* (1938), when Graves was reviewing his poetic output to date, which is called simply 'No More Ghosts' (p. 385). This is clearly related to the Preface quoted earlier. I also see it as related to these multiply haunted earlier poems that he must have been re-reading and revising at the time. Graves went on in 1941 to publish a book called *No More Ghosts: Selected Poems*, which starts with 'The

Haunted House’ and ends with ‘No More Ghosts’.¹⁷ The title poem relates how a ‘patriarchal bed with four posts’, which had been ‘a harbourage of ghosts’, is hauled out of an attic and converted into ‘wholesome furniture for wholesome rooms’. As a result, Graves says, the ghosts are ‘confused, abused, thinned’; ‘Forgetful how they sighed and sinned’, they can no longer ‘disturb our ordered ease’ so that we – the poet and his lover or all of us, it’s not clear which – are ‘restored to simple days’:

No new ghosts can appear. Their poor cause
Was that time freezes, and time thaws;
But here only such loves can last
As do not ride upon the weathers of the past.

It seems a triumphant story, a parable perhaps, of lovers throwing off the ‘weathers of the past’, with its ‘patriarchal’ lumber and ‘dark necessity’, and living instead in the immediate present of each other’s eyes. It is hard, though, to know whether this emancipation is ironic - a triumphant liberation or a diminution. It would certainly be possible to read the poem as describing a loss of history, sheer obliviousness to the ‘weathers of the past’. The replacement of an ancestral four-poster by ‘wholesome furniture for wholesome rooms’ doesn’t really seem Graves’s bag. In other words, the claim that ‘no new ghosts can appear’ might read as a bland refusal of the past, a deliberate closing of the door upon the possibly of being haunted. I am not sure which way the traumatically haunted Graves intends us to read it, but it feels like a forked parable which could be read either way.

Certainly ‘new ghosts’ appear all over the place in Graves’s lyrics, often linked to the idea of the double, and always to the troubling relationship between the present and past. ‘On Dwelling’ (p. 329), also included in *No More Ghosts*, is one of Graves’s typical gnomic parable poems, and opens:

Courtesies of good-morning and good-evening
From rustic lips fail as the town encroaches:

Soon nothing passes but the cold quick stare
Of eyes that see ghosts, yet too many for fear.

The poet walks in what he calls ‘a town coextensive / With mine’, but insists that he dwells elsewhere in another dimension, saying ‘In mine I dwell, in theirs like them I haunt’. Wondering whether to return to the country, he replies that ‘My bumpkin neighbours loom even ghostlier’. ‘Around the Mountain’ (from *Steps*, 1958) is also a poem about dwelling, or at least returning to a dwelling (p. 484). It gives an account of ‘How it is to walk all night through summer rain [...], / To circle a mountain, and then limp home again.’ It imagines an archetypal traveller (‘The experience varies with a traveller’s age / And bodily strength, and strength of the love affair’) travelling away from and back to home through an archetypal landscape. At the poem’s – and journey’s – midpoint, the fourth of seven stanzas, the place is described as follows:

Add: the sub-human, black tree-silhouettes
Against a featureless pale pall of sky;
Unseen, gurgling water; the bulk and menace
Of entranced houses; a wraith wandering by.

Milestones, each one witness of a new mood [...].

At the journey’s (and poem’s) end, we are given a sight of his house looming up: ‘The windows blaze to a resolute sunrise’. Before then, however, we have had to travel past ‘sub-human, black tree-silhouettes’, through a world of the ‘featureless’ and ‘unseen’, past the menace of ‘entranced houses’ (a description that subliminally makes the entrances to houses menacing). It is during this part of the journey that we are told of ‘a wraith wandering by’ – an unexplained figure, and apparently of no different status or significance than the trees and houses. However, the casual ‘wraith’ gives a momentary supernatural dimension to the nocturnal ramble. It may be the poet’s Heine-esque double, or a specific person (comparable to ‘Her too-familiar face that whirls

and totters / In memory'), or perhaps a spectral revenant, returning from First World War battlefields (inevitably echoed in the 'sub-human, black tree-silhouettes') or from infernal regions. The ghost, I suggest, is one of the 'milestones' the returning poet – or lover – passes on his way home.

A late poem to a lover speaks of her as 'housed among phantoms', and Graves's *œuvre* is a house of phantoms of many kinds, benign and malign. There's a poem called 'The Ghost and the Clock' (p. 434) and I would suggest that the figure of the ghost always figures as a new incarnation of pastness, a version of the past that interrupts the clock. It is always an invasive embodiment of the present's tie to the historical past, whether this is personal and biographical or cultural. Given the impact of the First World War on Graves, it is often its historic shadow which falls across his developing ghost repertoire. 'Ghosts were numerous in France at that time', we recall that he wrote in *Good-bye to All That*, but it was in his postwar poems that these spectres gained their most powerful currency as reflexes of what he calls his 'haunted condition'. 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.

'A Ghost from Arakan' (p. 828), a poem from the 1950s, deals with a different war and war trauma, the loss of his son David, killed in Burma in World War II. There's nothing in the poem itself to tell us whose ghost it is, or his kinship with the poet. Indeed the poem has something of the anonymous remoteness of a lyric from the Greek Anthology. It begins with the italicised announcement '*He was not killed*', a 'dream surprise' that 'sets tears of joy' in the sleeping poet's eyes, causing him to wake. With stiff-upper-lip masculinity, the poet admits he had kept 'dry-eyed, for honour's sake' for the twelve years since the boy's death. The dream he reports represents a form of 'castigation' for this spurious 'honour' and enables him to give vent to postponed grief for his son's death.

The second and final stanza offers a spectral correlative of the

dream:

His ghost, be sure, is watching here
 To count each liberated tear
 And smile a crooked smile:
 Still proud, still only twenty-four,
 Stranded in his green jungle-war
 That's lasted all this while.

Graves himself had been pronounced dead and returned in the way he dreams for his son, but the poem registers the difference by offering the un-named, un-specified figure a limbo-like military after-life 'stranded in his green jungle-war', like the enemy Japanese soldiers who emerged years later from the jungle, not knowing it had ended. Calling each tear 'liberated' calls up the liberation of occupied countries in 1945 even as the ghost remains locked in 'his green jungle-war'. If this image is comforting because it allows the father to imagine his son watching him finally weep, it is also disquieting. While it imagines ghostly immortality for the son, it also 'strands' him in a war that hasn't ended, keeping him petrified in a futile military posture for a quarter of a century. The poem's expressively weak end – 'That's lasted all this while' – is about something that hasn't ended, a life interrupted at 24, unable to move on. In their note to *Complete Poems*, Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward quote a 1961 letter from Graves to Tom Matthews, saying 'I have never really got over David's death'.¹⁸ The poem's stiff, old-fashioned idiom ('Still proud, still only twenty-four') is paradoxically crucial to this study of grief withheld, or grieving postponed. The 'be sure' is a sign the poet isn't, setting up an assured but not ultimately re-assuring rhyme with the key words 'here', 'tear', 'twenty-four' and 'war'. The poem establishes a ghostly fiction that is as desolating as it is consoling. It imagines that the ghost 'counts' each tear, and the poem itself counts the years of the dead son's short life ('twenty-four') as well as the 'twelve years' he had been dry-eyed. The poem has twelve lines, a line for each of those tearless years, or

half a line for each year of his son's life. Counting is a dry but complex word, especially in poems. It is also here a way of counting the cost.

David Graves had written a forward-looking poem called 'In Conclusion' which began 'It will be small loss, never to return.'¹⁹ The reference to 'stranded' at the conclusion of his father's retrospective poem tells a different story. Though the poem makes room for the poet's refused grief, it also distances it, holding it at arm's length in the detached lyric code characteristic of Graves. Cast in the second rather than the first person, the 'you' he addresses is his own dreaming and waking self, while David Graves is referred to in the third person ('*his* ghost'). The only name in the poem, 'Arakan', is a remote Asian toponym which conceals the intimate family particulars of the poem, disguising the filial ghost in anonymity while capturing a poignant sense of posthumous military service at the other side of the world.

4

In drawing to a close, I would like to recall his 1930s poem, 'To Bring the Dead to Life' (p. 363):

To bring the dead to life
 Is no great magic.
 Few are wholly dead:
 Blow on a dead man's embers
 And a live flame will start.

Opening with this general, rather bland proposition, the poem, as it develops, brings it back to disturbing life. He goes on to instruct the reader to 'Let his forgotten griefs be now', to subdue his hand to the dead man's handwriting, and 'Assemble tokens intimate of him – / A seal, a cloak, a pen', around which to 'build / A home familiar to / The greedy revenant'. The result, he tells us, will be to 'grant him life', but may also, at the same time, result in the resurrectionist's replacing him in his 'spotted garments' in his

grave.

It is another of Graves's forked parables about the dead. Whether it is about a modern Lazarus, a poet looking back on a past self, a reader or writer subdued to a dead master, a biographer or historian or novelist dealing with people from the past, it suggests that devotion to the dead by the living is potentially a deathly business. Something comparable is at work in the last poem I want to consider, 'Historical Particulars' (p. 822), a poem about Graves's future literary and biographical reputation. In it he imagines he will be remembered as 'English poet and miscellaneous writer, / Eccentric of the Later Christian Era', who lived at 'the time / Of the World War' and 'Of airships and top-hats and communism, / Passports and gangsters'. He says:

My alibi's the future: there I went
 And in the idle records found my record,
 And left my spectre fast between the pages
 As a memorial and a mockery
 Where they shall find it when they come to be.
 And as I am, I am, the visit over.
 What name, what truth? Unbiographical.
 The fixity of one who has no spectre.
 I learn slowly, but I may not wander.

'The fixity of one who has no spectre' is an arresting account of Graves's future authorial identity. It asserts something akin to 'No More Ghosts', suggesting that, beside the 'spectre' on the page, there is a kind of biographical blank where a living ghost might have been. I don't really know how to read this. Is this a secularist protest against a Yeatsian dream of spectral survival? Graves's version of the 'death of the author'? Or an acknowledgement of the failure of biography – of 'historical particulars' on the scholarly page – to capture a lyric reality that is fundamentally 'unbiographical'? Leaving the 'spectre fast between the pages' is ambiguous, however. It may suggest the ghost is stuck fast within the leaves of the book, hidden within the text, or that the ghost is

left to 'fast' within the book, starved of nourishment. And is it his past self or future one who is the ghost here? Calling himself 'unbiographical' might assert defiantly that biography is finally irrelevant to poetry, and what matters are the poems themselves without any presumed spectre of subjectivity about them. Or, on the other hand, it could measure the unbridgeable gap between the authorial self embodied in the poems on the page and the historical and physical body of the poet. In asserting 'the fixity of one who has no spectre', the poet inevitably raises the ghost of that spectre.

The poem, like 'No More Ghosts', treats the business of spectral poetic survival with scepticism. Nevertheless the continuing presence of ghosts in Graves's poetry is a token of the persistence of the traumatic past, as well as a sign of the terrors and 'mental ghosts' he saw lurking within 'modernist' poetry. In his later life Graves violently dissociated himself from Yeats and Pound, while aligning himself with Hardy. I would suggest, however, that his profound, though also profoundly ambivalent, investment in new forms of poetic ghostliness places him squarely in the company of other tradition-haunted modern poets. These include Hardy, Pound, Yeats, Edward Thomas and Eliot. 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. I hope this ghost walk will go some way to draw attention to the idiosyncratic and psychologically complex life of Graves's cryptic modern take on 'Ghost Music'.

University of York

NOTES

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber, 1933), p. 69.

² Robert Graves, *On English Poetry: Being an Irregular Approach to the Psychology of the Art from Evidence mainly Subjective* (London: William Heinemann, 1922), p. 71.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴ *On Modern Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1922), pp. 129–30.

⁵ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet against Anthologies*, ed. by Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), p. 65.

⁶ See *The Letters of T. S. Eliot Volume 2: 1923–25*, ed. by Valerie Eliot and Hugh Haughton (London: Faber, 2009), p. 764.

⁷ ‘Foreword’, *Collected Poems* (1938), in *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, II, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 302.

⁸ Alfred Perceval Graves, ‘Song of the Ghost’, in *Fairy and Foil Tales of Ireland*, ed. by W. B. Yeats (1888, repr. Colin Smythe, 1973), p. 123.

⁹ Page references for Graves’s poems are to *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).

¹⁰ *Good-bye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929), p. 161.

¹¹ *Good-bye to All That*, p. 282.

¹² See ‘The Uncanny’ (1919) in Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McClintock, Introduction by Hugh Haughton (London: Penguin, 2003).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁴ Robert Graves to Edmund Blunden, 10 March 1921, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, Vol. I (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), pp. 363–64; *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 123–24.

¹⁵ *Good-bye To All That*, p. 371.

¹⁶ Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems 1908–1956* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 155.

¹⁷ Robert Graves, *No More Ghosts: Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1941). William Graves has drawn my attention to an essay by Graves of this time on the subject of ghosts which appeared in *Lilliput* in 1941.

¹⁸ *Complete Poems*, III, p. 537. William Graves has suggested that the poem also draws on his own supposed death in a travel expedition at the time of its composition – when he too was declared dead in an accident. In which case, the poem is ‘over-determined’ in the way that, according to Freud, dreams are, and it may be that another son’s near-death experience brought back the earlier unmentioned death of his half-brother.

¹⁹ David Graves, ‘In Conclusion’, in *For Your Tomorrow: An Anthology of Poetry Written by Young Men from English Public Schools who Fell in the World War 1939–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 29.