

# **‘A grace it had, devouring’: Apparitions of Beauty, Love and Terror in the Poetry of Robert Graves**

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I first read Graves, his poetry and *The White Goddess*, when I was sixteen or seventeen. Later I went to the lectures he gave as Professor of Poetry at Oxford. I owe him a great deal, but the debt can perhaps be summarised thus: he taught me that the language of poetry must be at least as rigorous as good prose; and he confirmed me in my own – my own kind of – devotion to the Muse.

The quotation in my title comes from Act III, Scene 3 of *The Tempest*. The line struck me – it actually enacted its own statement, sent the shudder down my spine – in a radio performance I heard, in which Ariel was played by a young woman. Prospero, employing Ariel, has delighted the shipwrecked and hungry lords of Naples and Milan with a vision of a banquet laid before them by strange and gracious Shapes. When they move towards it, to enjoy it, Ariel appears ‘like a harpy, claps his wings upon the table, and with a quaint device the banquet vanishes’. He then terrifies Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio, the ‘three men of sin’, in a speech revealing their crimes. Prospero comments approvingly: ‘Bravely the figure of this harpy hast thou / Performed, my Ariel; a grace it had, devouring’. A harpy has the fair-haired head of a woman and the body of a vulture. Always insatiably hungry, she snatches up human food and defiles what she cannot take. She was often sent by the gods as an agent of their vengeance. A good deal might be said about Prospero’s lines, or at least about them and the vision by which Alonso and the others are tormented; but all I really need do here is indicate that conjunction: a devouring grace. The sense of the half line is rather different according to whether you place a comma after ‘had’, or don’t. Either the act of devouring has grace (she devours gracefully); or the effect of grace itself is devouring. Both, no doubt.

The business of even the most secular poetry is revelation. Poetry induces things to appear, and not just to the eyes. It makes things apparent to all the senses, palpable, knowable. It realises them; and in so doing enables us, the readers, to realise them too, make them realities in our lives, have our lives materially affected by them. We live in a 'world of appearances', and often that term will be used disparagingly or regretfully. Some religions make a distinction between the appearances we deal with here, and a Reality that awaits us elsewhere. The philosopher Kant distinguished between 'phenomena', appearances, what our limited faculties enable us to know, and 'noumena', things themselves. He may well be right; but his view is not one we can live by; and poetry, in its practice, discounts or overrides the distinction. Poetry causes realities to appear – often, indeed, the reality of the beauty of the phenomenal world; and does so through an act of fiction. What Prospero and Ariel visit on the shipwrecked lords is an illusion, a mere appearance, but one that brings home a terrifying truth. That is poetry's essential deed and responsibility: it induces truth to appear.

Robert Lowell said: 'A poem is an event, not the record of an event.' I might call it an apparition. *It* appears, causing the appearance of the truth. For Robert Graves the coming of the poem, the event of it, was best imagined, indeed often it was actually experienced, as an apparition. Because the Muse herself appeared in his life incarnated in a particular woman, he imagines and experiences the poem as her arrival, a visitation. Some among his very best poems enact the event in that way. For example, 'Like Snow' (II, p. 116), 'The Door' (II, p. 144) and 'The Visitation' (III, p. 19):<sup>1</sup>

### LIKE SNOW

She, then, like snow in a dark night,  
 Fell secretly. And the world waked  
 With dazzling of the drowsy eye,  
 So that some muttered 'Too much light',  
 And drew the curtains close.

Like snow, warmer than fingers feared,  
And to soil friendly;  
Holding the histories of the night  
In yet unmelted tracks.

### THE DOOR

When she came suddenly in  
It seemed the door could never close again,  
Nor even did she close it – she, she –  
The door lay open to a visiting sea  
Which no door could restrain.

Yet when at last she smiled, tilting her head  
To take her leave of me,  
Where she had smiled, instead  
There was a dark door closing endlessly,  
The waves receded.

### THE VISITATION

Drowsing in my chair of disbelief  
I watch the door as it slowly opens –  
A trick of the night wind?

Your slender body seems a shaft of moonlight  
Against the door as it gently closes.  
Do you cast no shadow?

Your whisper is too soft for credence,  
Your tread like blossom drifting from a bough,  
Your touch even softer.

You wear that sorrowful and tender mask

Which on high mountain tops in heather-flow  
Entrances lonely shepherds;

And though a single word scatters all doubts  
I quake for wonder at your choice of me:  
Why, why and why?

In that poem the effect of her coming is to overwhelm disbelief. The poet fills with confidence. I expect all people who try to write poems will know what I mean by that; and will understand me also when I say that sometimes, perhaps even most times, the confidence may turn out to be ill-founded. What felt like inspiration was only a rush of credulity. But in these poems by Graves we are dealing with a moment of certainty, the miracle in whose unbiddable occurrence he steadfastly believed.

The imagery of those poems is decidedly erotic. Graves's understanding of the vocation and the practice of poetry was highly eroticised, and heterosexually so. Rather than lament that fact – regretting, for example, his increasingly dogmatic assertion that love poetry was the only true poetry; or worrying whether that sort of imagery – the male poet, the female Muse – is inclusive (politically correct) enough, I propose to celebrate the virtue in it, the good it did.

Graves wrote: 'No Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident.'<sup>2</sup> That seems to me not in the least far-fetched. On the contrary, I think it a wonderfully humane deed (many poets have done it) to incarnate the idea of the Muse in the flesh and blood of a beloved woman. It gives bodily presence to poetry. It couples (I don't think the pun indecent) poetry and love, marries them, makes them one flesh. And such love intensifies, and might even initiate, the love of life. Graves again: 'Indian mystics hold that to think with perfect clarity in a religious sense one must first eliminate all physical desire, even the desire to continue living; but this is not at all the case with poetic thinking, since poetry is rooted in love, and love in desire, and desire in hope of continued

existence.’<sup>3</sup> Goethe, a poet who, like Graves, was always in love, depicts inspiration as the woman literally breathing into the poet’s lungs. He writes, in the fifth of his *Roman Elegies*: ‘Und es durchglüheth ihr Hauch mir bis ins Tiefste die Brust.’ [‘And her breath warms me through, into the depths of my heart.’] She inspires and inspirits him with her own breath, brings the poem to life in him as God brought Adam to life by blowing into his wetted clay. Graves may not have read much Goethe, but he would certainly subscribe to the philosophy and practice of those poems.

The near-exclusive focusing on love poetry is not so asocial and apolitical as it might seem. Implicit in Graves throughout – and in some satirical verses, in *The White Goddess* and in his lectures, he frequently made it explicit – is the implacable opposition of poetic values (not those of an aesthete but those of a dedicated lover and writer of love poems) to the way the world more usually lives. Thus in *The White Goddess* (p.14):

‘What is the use or function of poetry nowadays?’ is a question not the less poignant for being defiantly asked by so many stupid people or apologetically answered by so many silly people. The function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites. But ‘nowadays’? Function and use remain the same; only the application has changed. This was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born, by obedience to the wishes of the lady of the house; it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down by capricious experiments in philosophy, science and industry, and brought ruin on himself and his family. ‘Nowadays’ is a civilization in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus tent; ox, salmon and boar to the cannery; racehorse and greyhound to the betting ring; and the sacred grove to the saw-mill. In which the Moon is despised as a burned-out satellite of the Earth and woman

reckoned as ‘auxiliary State personnel’. In which money will buy almost anything but truth, and almost anyone but the truth-possessed poet.

The poem itself, and especially the love poem, is an act of opposition to that world of nowadays. And, to produce such a poem, the poet himself or herself must live that opposition. Graves was insistent that you cannot write truthfully if you are not living in truth. And the rule for living is: ‘avoid loveless circumstance’: ‘A poet’s life is ruled by the principle of avoiding loveless circumstance, or of passing through it as speedily and uninvolvedly as possible. “Loveless circumstance” means the full impress of mechanarchy, functionalism, routine: methods invented by scientists and financiers to dehumanize and control life.’<sup>4</sup>

In ‘The Door’ and ‘The Visitation’ the apparition excites wonder and gratitude; but also, in ‘The Door’, a sense, perhaps an apprehension, of unbearable loss, as the door closes; and in ‘The Visitation’ there is so much wonder it feels like terror: ‘I quake for wonder at your choice of me.’ That last is the typical experience. Most characteristically, in the coming or making of the poem, in the love of the woman Muse whose gift the poem is, in conviction and bodily presence itself, there is a large admixture of terror. (‘Exaltation and horror’, mixed.) We might say: the grace is devouring. When grace manifests itself, that is the effect. Now why? Why should this longed-for apparition come with terror?

What do I mean by terror? Well, to begin with the poem itself, I mean the fact – I take it to be an experiential fact – that reading or listening to poetry you may feel something which is either akin to terror or has terror in it as one powerful ingredient. The *frisson*, the shiver down the spine, horripilation (horror = bristling). Graves was fond of quoting a passage from A. E. Housman’s *The Name and Nature of Poetry* (1933):

Poetry [...] seems to me more physical than intellectual. A year or two ago [...] I received from America a request that I would define poetry. I replied that I could no more define

poetry than a terrier can define a rat, but that I thought we both recognized the object by the symptoms which it provokes in us [...] [Then he quotes Job 4. 15: ‘A spirit passed before my face: the hair of my flesh stood up.’] Experience has taught me, when I am shaving of a morning, to keep watch over my thoughts, because, if a line of poetry strays into my memory, my skin bristles so that the razor ceases to act. This particular symptom is accompanied by a shiver down the spine; there is another which consists in a constriction of the throat and a precipitation of water to the eyes; and there is a third which I can only describe by borrowing a phrase from one of Keats’s last latters, where he says, speaking of Fanny Brawne, ‘everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear’. The seat of this sensation is the pit of the stomach.

The reference to Keats is particularly significant and I’ll come back to it; as also to the *frisson* of mixed horror and delight that lines of poetry may cause.

There was a vast reservoir of terror in Robert Graves years before the White Goddess came along. The reasons for it are not hard to find. He had, perhaps to an unusually high degree, the usual childhood terrors. These then seem to have been reinforced, as well they might be, by his time at Charterhouse. Then straight after Charterhouse came the Western Front. Beyond any doubt Graves was permanently traumatised by his experiences there. Seriously wounded on 20 July 1916, he was declared dead the next day. His name appeared in *The Times* among the dead (see ‘Escape’, I, p. 31). Twice more after that he nearly died, in 1918 of bronchitis and a year later of Spanish flu. He crawled out of the war alive, but shell-shocked and haunted. He tried – with W. H. R. Rivers’s encouragement – by the act of poetry to defend himself against the horrors; at first by the peculiar and poignantly inadequate strategy of depicting them in the imagery of the nursery, as though what he had suffered there were a sort of preview of the Somme (in poems such as ‘Nursery Memories’ (I, pp. 16–18), ‘A Child’s Nightmare’

(I, p. 58) and ‘The Picture Book’ (I, p. 103).) Publishing *The Pier Glass* (1921), he advised Edmund Blunden to view the collection as ‘half a reaction against shellshock by indulging in a sort of dementia praecox [...] of fantastic daydreams [...] half as an attempt to stand up to the damned disease & write an account of it’.<sup>5</sup> His increasingly definite exclusion of his war poetry from the ever-changing canon of his collected poems was, in part, a determination, like the writing of *Good-bye to All That* (1929), to be rid of the haunting subject once and for all. I don’t think he succeeded. The dead of the war kept coming back: see ‘Corporal Stare’ (I, p. 60), ‘Haunted’ (I, p. 105), ‘An Occasion’ (I, p. [308]). In 1940 he published a collection entitled *No More Ghosts*, but was haunted till the end of his days; and after 1943 by another visitant, his son David, killed in Burma. (See ‘A Ghost from Arakan’ (III, p. 408), written 1956–57, not published in his lifetime, the only poem on that subject?)<sup>6</sup> In old age he repeatedly confessed to having murdered more than a hundred Germans, and would not have it that killing in war is not murder. To one visitor then he said simply: ‘I am in hell.’ And I have been told that in his last years, no longer speaking, he would sit staring at things he could see and nobody else could see, in a vacant terror.

That is all understandable – childhood fears, the school, the war – but terror is a chief ingredient in his love poetry too. Why should that be? Scripture says: ‘There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear.’ Not so Robert Graves. In very many of his love poems, in most of the best – there are lovely exceptions – love and terror are indissolubly mixed. They struggle for the upper hand and neither can be rid of the other. Graves’s biography is not my concern here. I am speaking about his poems, how they work; and I am also, with reference to them, trying to clarify how poetry altogether may work on a willing reader; what demands it makes, what opportunities it offers. Nonetheless, it is a matter of biographical fact that, beginning with his mother and massively reinforced by Laura Riding, terror had a large part in Graves’s relationships with women. The White Goddess did not come from nowhere. Nor did she come out of a book. He says himself, the

reading, the scholarship, corroborated intuition. (Many of the best – most terror-ridden – love poems predate the writing of *The White Goddess*.) And his intuition into her nature and deeds came out of his life to date, as lover and poet. Myth for Graves, as for many poets, was a matter of experienced fact. He wrote: ‘An English or American woman in a nervous breakdown of sexual origin will often instinctively reproduce in faithful and disgusting detail much of the ancient Dionysiac ritual. I have witnessed it myself in helpless terror.’<sup>7</sup>

Graves came to believe that the poet’s chief, or even sole, responsibility was to keep telling, in its different manifestations, the ‘one story and one story only’ whose prime mover is the White Goddess. In any number of incarnations, in countless myths, she appears as the Goddess, Muse and woman whom the poet must love and at whose hands he is bound to suffer. Typical poems on the subject, among his best known, if not actually to be counted among his best, are: ‘The White Goddess’ (II, p. 179), last stanza; ‘Darien’ (II, p. 189); ‘To Juan at the Winter Solstice’ (II, p. 150). (See also *The White Goddess*, pp. 24 (the Theme) and 386 (her three phases)). For my subject here it is sufficient to indicate the inevitability of the betrayal, choice and power resting in the woman’s hands; and to say that if love is the force driving the poet into this relationship, terror lies at the heart of that love. So many of Graves’s love poems are fraught with terror. He composes landscapes of terror: ‘Full Moon’ (I, p. 205), for example, and ‘A Love Story’ (II, p. 125):

The full moon easterly rising, furious,  
 Against a winter sky ragged with red;  
 The hedges high in snow, and owls raving –  
 Solemnities not easy to withstand:  
 A shiver wakes the spine.

In boyhood, having encountered the scene,  
 I suffered horror: I fetched the moon home,  
 With owls and snow, to nurse in my head

Throughout the trials of a new Spring,  
Famine unassuaged.

But fell in love, and made a lodgement  
Of love on those chill ramparts.  
Her image was my ensign: snows melted,  
Hedges sprouted, the moon tenderly shone,  
The owls trilled with tongues of nightingale.

These were all lies, though they matched the time,  
And brought me less than luck: her image  
Warped in the weather, turned beldamish.  
Then back came winter on me at a bound,  
The pallid sky heaved with a moon-quake.

Dangerous it had been with love-notes  
To serenade Queen Famine.  
In tears I recomposed the former scene,  
Let the snow lie, watched the moon rise, suffered the owls,  
Paid homage to them of unevent.

There are visitations of nightmare, hauntings, dread (perhaps especially dread) in 'Vanity' (I, p. 275); 'Sick Love' (II, p. 13); 'The Foreboding' (II, p. 202); and in 'The Window Sill' (II, 224):

Presage and caveat not only seem  
To come in dream,  
But do so come in dream.

When the cock crew and phantoms floated by,  
This dreamer I  
Out of the house went I,

Down long unsteady streets to a queer square;  
And who was there,  
Or whom did I know there?

Julia, leaning on her window sill.  
'I love you still,'  
She said, 'O love me still!'

I answered: 'Julia, do you love me best?'  
'What of this breast,'  
She mourned, 'this flowery breast?'

Then a wild sobbing spread from door to door,  
And every floor  
Cried shame on every floor,

And she unlaced her bosom to disclose  
Each breast a rose,  
A white and cankered rose.

At worst, the feeling in the poems becomes an absolute baffled fear of women, as in 'Frightened Men' (II, p. 137). In *The White Goddess* (p. 448), he cites one of Solomon's misogynistic Proverbs (30. 15): 'The horseleach hath two daughters, crying, Give, give'; and paraphrases and amplifies it into a horrified confession of a man's dread of being devoured by the female: 'Women are greedy of children; they suck the vigour of their menfolk, like the Vampire; they are sexually insatiable; they resemble the horse-leech of the pond which plagues horses. And to what purpose are men born of women? Only in the end to die. The grave and woman are equally insatiable.' Though he quickly adds that in the Proverbs Solomon 'was a sour philosopher', and turns to the *Canticles*, the *Song of Solomon*, for something more agreeable, the fear remains: that a woman's grace really is devouring.

Absolutely sure of his own experience, Graves read the work of other poets always in the light of, and applying the touchstone of, his convictions. He asked: Is it Muse poetry or not? Is the Goddess riding and driving it, or only, much inferior, Apollo? Back of the mind, or front of the mind? The real thing or what you might do any

day given a certain facility with words? Is it poetry or rhetoric? Thus his approval of Skelton, Wyatt, Donne and Keats; of Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' (the vision of 'the Nightmare Life-in-Death') and 'Christabel'; and of many ballads. And his dislike of Milton and all the Augustans. He notes that Wyatt writes 'They flee from me', meaning by that, says Graves, the several incarnations of the Muse who have blessed and troubled him. And in the ballad 'The Holy Land of Walsingham', when the abandoned lover is asked:

What's the cause that she leaves you alone  
And a new way doth take,  
That sometime did you love as her own,  
And her joy did you make?

he replies:

I have loved her all my youth,  
But now am old, as you see:  
Love likes not the falling fruit,  
Nor the withered tree.

The lover ages, the Muse does not.

Graves cites Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' as one of the truest Muse and White Goddess poems, the muse being Fanny Brawne and the subject being Keats's love for her, troubled enough anyway and made hopeless by consumption. Lines found after Keats's death, which might or might not have Fanny as their addressee, carry that same charge of terror:

This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood  
So in my veins red life might stream again,

And thou be conscience-calmed. See here it is –  
I hold it towards you.

There we are back with Housman's reaching for a phrase from one of Keats's letters to describe the effect of lines of true verse: 'everything that reminds me of her goes through me like a spear.'

I must try to say a bit more about the nature of this *frisson*, and especially about the presence of terror in it. It seems to be Graves's view that only Muse poems work thus (see *The White Goddess*, p. 24). That is not my view. Housman actually cites a line from Milton ('Nymphs and shepherds, dance no more', from 'Arcades'), not a Muse poet in Graves's opinion. All poetry might have this effect. But the disposition to terror in Graves, and the particular shape it takes – his relationships with women, his elaboration of the White Goddess myth – make him so peculiarly susceptible to poems like 'La Belle Dame' that he discounts all poems not of that kind. Also, I don't believe that this shiver down the spine is the only touchstone of a true poem (any kind of true poem) or the *sine qua non* of our truly appreciating such a poem. It is a moment, not biddable; you might call it a corroborating shock.

When a poem affects us it does so by virtue of its total linguistic and rhythmical organisation; in other words, by virtue of its beauty. Beauty itself gives the shock. In our apprehension of the beautiful there is a thrill of terror. That must be, I think, because the effect of witnessing beauty is not purely aesthetic. In fact, I don't know what a 'purely aesthetic' effect would be; I can't imagine one. In the total effect of a beautiful poem there is also always something which I don't mind calling moral. This is least controversial in the old association – strong in Keats – of beauty and truth. Graves himself makes that conjunction and, typically, recalls (*The White Goddess*, p. 448) that a traditional image of Truth is a naked woman. Truth takes that form. Truth drives home into the observer with that sort of erotic shock. (Graves insisted that the poem was the way of telling the truth: 'Poetry is the profession of private truth, supported by craftsmanship in the use of words'.<sup>8</sup> The true poet 'must address only the Muse – not the King or Chief Bard or the people in general

– and tell her the truth about himself and her in his own passionate and peculiar words'.<sup>9</sup>) As I said earlier, Graves's polemic against modern living, often in his essays made explicit, is intensely there implicitly in the imagery he favours in his poems. Showing truth in the form of a naked woman is a Romantic polemic against a world in which such nakedness is commodified as pornography. Graves wrote his poem 'The Naked and the Nude' when he learned that a stanza of an early poem of his had been used as caption under 'a luscious nude' in a New York magazine he thought pornographic.

There is, I think, a further element, and again I would call it moral, in the devouring nature of the grace of Graves's apparitions. The poems are his dealings with the Muse, with the White Goddess, and in that function they have, quite unequivocally, a religious charge. This is, as already said, a very earthly religion, since the Goddess is incarnate in a particular woman and worship takes the form of loving her. Nonetheless, loving her and worshipping in that way, the poet-lover gains what all religions offer, attachment to something beyond the individual self. He is involved in the 'one story and one story only', as a chief character. Again, this does not seem to me at all strange or far-fetched. D. H. Lawrence distinguishes between the lesser life and the greater life. Mostly, and quite rightly, we live in the former, shifting the best we can among practical demands. But sometimes we get access to the greater life, live in that and feel enhanced; or perhaps it would be better to say that then we realise our best possibilities. This is what Keats means when he says: 'A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory – and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life – a life like the scriptures, figurative' (letter of 14 February–3 May, to the Georges Keatses). We all get opportunities to live like that, to touch on and participate in patterns, myths, that exceed our individual selves. All religions are metaphors; some are more favourable to life on earth than others. The White Goddess and the love of the Muse are powerful metaphors of a life more connected, more passionate, more wholly involving than that routinely offered in the world of politics and buying and selling (in which, don't get me wrong, we have to live the best we can).

All poetry, indeed all art, can enhance life like that. Graves's poetic myth, which may be attractive to some readers but – in its courting of terror, in its deriving (you might say) from its author's own psychopathology – may be distasteful to others, did, in his view, not only lend figurative, allegorical significance to his own life (and would, he believed, to the life of any convert), it also, to amplify what I have said once or twice already, gave him a way of understanding the manifest dysfunctioning of the modern western urban social order. The myth and the poetry of the White Goddess, explicitly and implicitly, amount to a critique of the way we live now as radical as any in the twentieth century. And his polemic against the trivialisation, mechanisation and commodification of modern living comes largely from a feminist standpoint. According to his myth – potent imagery of what seems to him the truth – we have been on course towards catastrophe and are now very close to it, to actual annihilation as a race, because of the usurping by the male of powers rightly the woman's. In his dedication to the White Goddess, to whom poetry gives access, with whom it makes at least a momentary connection, in his raising her above Apollo (scientific rationalism), he continues the radical Romantic critique – begun by Blake, Wordsworth, Hölderlin, Shelley, Clare – of the mechanisation and emptying of significance out of modern living. He goes back so far in time for his myths and imagery because it seemed to him – as it does also to me – that the very premises of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, their deep misogyny, their anthropocentric arrogance, make a beginning which cannot possibly be put right. We survive only by ignoring those premises or – better – by replacing them with principles more friendly to ourselves and to the rest of creation. (For more on all this see *The White Goddess*, pp. 482, 484, 486 [the conviction that we are going to perdition]; p. 157 [masculinisation of creation myth]; p. 224 [barbaric specialisation]; p. 240 [denial of women's achievements]; pp. 388 – 93 [writing her out of myth]; p. 475 [patriarchy is the problem]; p. 476 [money and science]).

Graves would sometimes say that the writing of a poem was an uncovering of what was already there to be found.<sup>10</sup> In saying this,

he was alluding to a procedure known in the old poetics as *inventio*. Invention in that sense does not mean ‘making up’; it means finding what is already there, knowing where to look, knowing how to carry through the discovery. Poetry, its composition and the reading of it, is often like remembering. Mnemosyne, mother of the Muses, was Goddess of Memory too. Keats understood the imagination as being the faculty through which we arrive at the truth, at what is there to be discovered as the truth. ‘What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth [...]. The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth’ (letter of 22 November 1817). In a poem called ‘Her Brief Withdrawal’, not a good poem, one already going into mere statement and formula, Graves has the young woman express her anger at being obliged to participate in what he ‘sees in her’. It is the old question: Have I discovered it? Have I projected and imposed it? She says (III, p. 144): ‘I well might strike you / For implicating me in your true dream’. In *The White Goddess* (p. 490) he gives as one reason why the power of falling in love absolutely might soon vanish that ‘the woman feels embarrassed by the spell she exercises over her poet-lover and repudiates it’. (Graves, to do him justice, does say that the best way of surviving dealings with the White Goddess is to have a sense of humour.) Anyway, in ‘Her Brief Withdrawal’ she reluctantly has to acknowledge that her lover’s dream is, like Adam’s, true.

Why the reluctance? Because it is more demanding to live like that. Living mythically requires more energy than living routinely. Art unsettles us; in a sense, it shames us. It makes us feel we ought to live differently. And though it may excite gaiety, hilarity, it is also more serious. Because although, living thus, the individual participates in patterns which are recurrent, archetypal and in that sense timeless, he or she is not thereby offered the comfort of a feeling of immortality. On the contrary, the experience of beauty – beauty being the form in which this access to mythic life takes place – actually brings home, to the poet at least, his own mortality. The lover ages, the Muse does not. The terror in the grace, what is devouring in it, may have something to do with that. It is a vision of

death in life and life in death. Any living that ignores the fact of death is a living lie. 'We looked, we loved, and therewith instantly / Death became terrible to you and me' ('Pure Death', I, p. 323). So there may be then in most of us a disinclination, perhaps amounting to terror, when faced with the possibility, responsibility, of living up to the best idea of life which has in it necessarily the confrontation with death. Graves actually courts that terror. He admits, in retrospective comments on earlier work to 'dwelling upon discomfort and terror'.<sup>11</sup> W. H. R. Rivers, attempting to cure Graves of shellshock, advised him that the very *source* of his poetry would be terror. Hence his gratitude for the recurrence of nightmare. He is grateful that, as he settles into routine respectability, nightmare comes and shakes him out of it: 'All's well,' I groan, and fumble for a light, / Brow bathed in sweat, heart pounding' ('Gratitude for a Nightmare', II, p. 241). Again he is given access. That relentless exposing of himself to pain, humiliation and disaster in his courting of young Muses in old age is his desperate bid to remain to the bitter end in contact with the source of his poetry. Because he felt, as many poets do, that without the gift of poetry, without its visitations in love and terror, he would be annihilated.

Aldous Huxley wrote this about his friend D. H. Lawrence: 'To be with Lawrence was a kind of adventure, a voyage of discovery into newness and otherness. For, being himself of a different order, he inhabited a different universe from that of common men – a brighter and intenser world, of which, while he spoke, he made you free.' Everyone who ever met Graves, even or especially in his reckless later years, felt what Huxley felt in the company of Lawrence. And the virtue in such people, the virtue still living in their written words, is that they induce those less bold than they are into participation in the greater life. I'll finish with a poem, 'Through Nightmare' (II, p. 144), in which Robert Graves praises the beloved woman for having the courage to travel there herself, to that place through nightmare:

Never be disenchanted of  
That place you sometimes dream yourself into,

Lying at large remove beyond all dream,  
 Or those you find there, though but seldom  
 In their company seated –

The untameable, the live, the gentle.  
 Have you not known them? Whom? They carry  
 Time looped so river-wise about their house  
 There's no way in by history's road  
 To name or number them.

In your sleepy eyes I read the journey  
 Of which disjointedly you tell; which stirs  
 My loving admiration, that you should travel  
 Through nightmare to a lost and moated land,  
 Who are timorous by nature.

*Queen's College, Oxford*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> References for Graves's poems are to *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995–1999).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 490.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>4</sup> *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 125

<sup>5</sup> *Complete Poems*, I, p. 363.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Hugh Haughton, 'Graves and Ghosts', in this issue of *Gravesiana. Ed.*

<sup>7</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 458.

<sup>8</sup> *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 444.

<sup>10</sup> See *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Foreword, *Collected Poems* (1938), in *Complete Poems*, II, p. 308.