

‘There is no “unless” for poets’: **Robert Graves and Postmodern Thought** *Nancy Rosenfeld*

Robert Graves’s place in twentieth century literature and thought is much more central than the relatively marginal status accorded him in standard critical accounts. Graves is best known as the author of historical novels. His *I, Claudius*, produced as a BBC television series in the 1970s, and its sequel *Claudius the God and his Wife Messalina* made his name a household word. Yet Graves was a twentieth century Renaissance man: his body of work includes poetry – Graves viewed himself as a poet first and foremost – more than a dozen historical novels, autobiography, studies of mythology and ethnography, writing guides, translation, social commentary, literary criticism. Graves’s autobiography *Good-bye to All That* is one of the most influential memoirs to come out of the First World War. His *Greek Myths* remains a basic text in comparative literature studies. Generations of aspiring poets have sought guidance in *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*.

Poetry, Graves argued in Lecture One of the Oxford Chair of Poetry series delivered in 1964, ‘is a way of life, a vocation or a profession’, even though it is not ‘operationally organized’ as are the professions of medicine, law, architecture, pedagogy.¹ This and more: the imperative of questioning ‘every word and sound and implication in a poem either read or written’ stands in direct opposition to ‘present trends in politics, economics and ethics which are wholly inimical to the appearance of new poets, or the honourable survival of those who may have already appeared.’ The true poets are always/already tempered by poetic principle, which is ‘a simple, obstinate belief in miracle: an asseveration of

* Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 147.

personal independence against all collective codifications of thought and behaviour'.²

In his public lectures, in *The White Goddess*, as well as in his poetic *œuvre* itself, Graves both predicts and critiques central themes in postmodern thought: the blurring of boundaries between the humanities and what have come to be called the social sciences; the questioning of the validity of the traditional literary canon; the questioning of strict separation between high and low culture. This essay calls attention to ways in which Graves – most of whose artistic, scholarly and critical work predates the development of postmodernism – relates to a number of issues central to later twentieth century letters. Even more startling, perhaps, are signs that Graves predicts elements of early twenty-first century criticism of postmodern thought which is beginning to make itself heard in public scholarly discourse. In this essay Graves's prediction of major aspects of postmodernism in his critical writings is followed by a discussion of his poem 'Hippopotamus's Address to the Freudians'; lastly, an overview of ways in which Graves predicted current criticism of certain postmodern concepts is suggested.

In the words of Roger Scruton:

Humanity has often entered periods like ours, in which the discipline of judgment and the pursuit of intrinsic value have declined or disappeared. When this happened in the past, however, no record was left of it, since a society without culture loses its memory and loses also the desire to immortalize itself in lasting monuments. Very soon barbarism takes over, and the society is swept from the face of the earth. What is interesting about our situation is that we have the technical means to sustain our society in being beyond the moment when it might lose all inner sense of its value.³

Postmodernism is of course a development of what is called modernism; and in the Oxford lectures Graves shoots a number of well-sharpened arrows at what he termed ‘the foul tidal basin of modernism’:⁴ in a discussion of a Skelton poem he describes the latter as ‘cut wholly from native cloth, in native fashion, and makes perfect sense to the informed reader – none of which things can be said of twentieth-century Anglo-American modernism’.⁵

Scholarly rigour calls for the adoption of an agreed-upon definition of the term ‘postmodernism’. As noted by Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, the editors of *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, the very meaning of the term is highly disputed. After all, what, asks the postmodern thinker, is meaning? The definition posited in the *Columbia Dictionary* has proved useful: The postmodern era ‘corresponds to the use of atomic weapons and the rapid development of technology that followed’. [...] ‘[R]ather than follow the modernist attempt to fashion a unified, coherent world view from the fragmentation that defines existence, the postmodernist accepts, whether indifferently or with celebration, the indeterminacy of meaning and the decentredness of existence.’ Postmodernity is thus a descriptor of the post-World War II cultures of the advanced capitalist societies. This culture ‘is composed of disparate fragmentary experiences and images that constantly bombard the individual in music, video, television, advertising and other forms of electronic media’.⁶ Postmodernism pays tribute to Influence with a capital ‘I’; neither artists nor cultural artefacts exist in a vacuum, either temporally or spatially. Cultural artefacts are viewed as reflecting power relationships within the society. ‘High’ culture is the culture of the more powerful groups in a given society: men, Europeans, dominant ethnic groups, those controlling the economy, heterosexuals. Traditionally weaker groups have their own cultures, but special efforts are needed in order to rescue these cultures from their marginalised, fragmented, even abject state.

Robert Graves lived much of his adult life in what he famously depicts as ‘the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic

but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle.’ Since the poet lacked regular contact with modern urban civilisation, all that he wrote ‘must read perversely and irrelevantly to such of you as are still geared to the industrial machine’.⁷ Yet Graves was in touch with events not merely local, but international as well; and as an author financially dependent upon the success of his writing, he was aware of various trends in cultural thought which were being debated at Oxford, Harvard, the University of Chicago, the Sorbonne.

In the first of the *Oxford Addresses*, whose title ‘The Dedicated Poet’ clearly bears a double meaning, Graves defines such a poet:

Dedicated poets cannot exist in a vacuum, discarding all tradition, all knowledge, rejecting society. [. . .] I believe that every poet should read our English Classics, master the main grammatic rules before daring to bend or break them; should travel abroad, be at ease among all sorts and conditions of men, and experience not only the horrors of thwarted passion but, if he is fortunate, the tranquil love of an honest woman. [...] Good manners demand that visitors should respect the laws of whatever society has courteously entertained them – court, university, public house or gipsy camp; and poets, by their nature, are perpetual visitors.⁸

The above may be read as a celebration of the equal value of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture, of the pub and gipsy camp, the university and the court. Yet for Graves, respect for a high level of achievement was a value so central as to be termed moral; as he notes in *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, composed, together with Alan Hodge, during the darkest period of World War II:

The writing of good English is thus a moral matter, as the Romans held that the writing of good Latin was. And the British people, though at times it recognizes and applauds the first-rate in art, literature, statesmanship, technical achievement, social conduct and so on, is always

overindulgent of the second-, third- or fourth-rate and often taken in by the simply bad. [...] [A] leading trait of the British character is [...] to suspend judgement on values.⁹

Or in the words of T. S. Eliot, 'Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius.' (2170).¹⁰

It may be argued, of course, that 'low' culture is, in its own way, just as 'first-rate' as 'high' culture, that Sir Elton John and Sir Paul McCartney are first-rate exemplars of their art no less than were Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir John Gielgud. Indeed, Graves opens his *White Goddess* by drawing a 'clear distinction' between the court-bards and the wandering minstrels of ancient Wales. The former were well dressed and big-bellied, and thus might parallel more recent denizens of court and university, while the lean and ragged young people hang out in the pub or Internet café. The minstrels were 'at liberty to use whatever diction, themes and metres they pleased'; yet this exemption was earned by years of hard work: 'The Welsh bards, or master-poets, like the Irish, had a professional tradition, embodied in a corpus of poems which, literally memorized and carefully weighed, they passed on to the pupils who came to study under them'.¹¹ Since literature, religion and history were not separate disciplines, but rather merged into one another seamlessly, the wandering minstrel was highly educated in the learning which preceded him.

Graves may be said to have enunciated the following central assumptions of postmodernism:

1) The modern urban, technological lifestyle involves processes of fragmentation; these processes, Graves added, may work against the creation of what for him was 'true poetry'.

2) The traditional, i.e. twentieth-century divisions between East and West, 'high' and 'low' culture, educated and uneducated, are worth re-examining.

3) The role of the poet/artist in society is worth rethinking.

Let us now look at Graves's delightful 'Hippopotamus's Address to the Freudians',¹² whose composition predates the arrival of postmodernist thought in Academe:¹³

HIPPOPOTAMUS'S ADDRESS TO THE FREUDIANS

(He quotes Plutarch's OF ISIS AND OSIRIS 32, pleading for the revision of the misnomer 'Oedipus Complex', which should be 'Hippopotamus Complex'. His own acts, unlike those of the Theban King Oedipus, were not committed in error, he asserts, but prompted by a genuine infantile libido.)¹⁴

Deep in Nile mire,

Jam etiam:

'I slew my sire,

I forced my dam.

Plutarch's *Of Isis*

Dwells on my vices,

Shameless I am:

Free from repression

Or urge to confession,

Freud's little lamb.

I slew my sire,

In frantic desire

I forced my dam –

I and not Oedipus,'

Roars Hippopotamus,

'You have confounded us

Jam etiam!'

It is common knowledge that by the last decades of the twentieth century Freudian terminology for the structure of the human soul (*ego, id, libido*) and concepts defining the stages of development of the human personality (*Oedipus complex, oral stage, latency*

period) had been ejected from the lexicon of practitioners treating serious mental disorders. Simultaneously, Freud's thought, as well as that of Carl Gustav Jung and Jacques Lacan, found a warm welcome in the study of literature. This and more: the central terms of Freudian thought have entered both public and private discourse, both 'high' and 'low' culture. The term 'Oedipus complex' as an explication of the little boy's announcement that he plans to marry his mommy is used by young parents who may be unfamiliar with the mythology of ancient Greece and/or the writings of Sigmund Freud.

In 'Hippopotamus's Address' Graves is clearly poking fun at the way the term 'Oedipus complex' is bandied about. Yet he makes an even more serious point in his criticism of Freud's metaphor: in Plutarch's version of a myth in which a son (Hippo, Jr) kills his father and procreates with his mother, the son knows whom he is murdering and whom he subsequently takes to bed. This is of course the case with the little boy who knows who his mother is, loves her, and wishes he could have her all to himself. For the student of psychology, therefore, Oedipus is not a successful parallel here: he did not know that the man whom he killed in an ancient version of road rage was his biological father, and surely would not have married Jocasta had he known her to be his mother. 'Hippopotamus complex' is thus much more appropriate than 'Oedipus complex'.

Unfortunately, the construction of an inappropriate metaphor may lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of the concept being defined and explained. In his discussions of the writings of other poets, Graves did not spare those guilty of what he saw as carelessness in the construction of metaphor. The need for correctness in constructing metaphors is especially important in postmodern literary and historical criticism, since in postmodern practice metaphor is a central tool of analysis. Indeed, postmodern criticism itself may be seen as a form of metaphorising: a situation/issue/problem is understood by metaphorising it. Examples are numerous: for the scholar of literature a text is a piece of cloth in which different-coloured threads are located and

teased out. One who studies events which took place in the past is no longer a historian, but rather a historiographer, he/she who writes texts in which the events through which a people or ethnic group or community has lived constitute a story, a narrative. Critical approaches to works of art may be explained via geometrical forms: Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutic circle, for example, is a metaphor for the way in which a reader is both part of a community of interpreters and him/herself created as a reader by the community. For Harold Bloom writing is a duel, a struggle with one's predecessors.

Graves's point vis-à-vis the hippopotamus is that it is not acceptable merely to locate a familiar or interesting noun and use it to construct a metaphor; noun and referent must be an exact fit – otherwise the metaphor may, in the best case, enter the wider culture as a meaningless cliché; or in the worst case may be seriously misleading.

Robert Graves not only a raised number of the concerns which have come to be associated with postmodernism; he may also be said to have predicted much of that criticism which began to be voiced at the turn of the twenty-first century as to the central contradiction of postmodern thought: if 'the postmodernist accepts, whether indifferently or with celebration, the indeterminacy of meaning and the decentredness of existence', what is the purpose of the whole scholarly endeavour? If we say that meaning is indeterminate, are we not dangerously close to saying that it does not exist? Then why devote one's intellectual life to searching for a Holy Grail which one claims, *a priori*, cannot exist?

To be sure, various threads constituting postmodernism have been subjected to fierce criticism. David H. Hirsch, writing during and after the breakup of the Soviet Union, gives strong, even fearless expression to this criticism:

What has emerged from this mixing of ideas [which is postmodernism] is a plethora of contradictions: for example,

there is no absolute truth, except the absolute truth that there is no absolute truth; consciousness (the subject) is historically determined, but, at the same time, there is no subject; the subject (read individual self) does not exist, but the deconstructionists must speak and act as if they were individual subjects; the post-structuralists-deconstructionists are opposed to all forms of authority (the authority of the text), except that they claim authority for their own writings.¹⁵

Or in the words of Scruton:

We have museums, universities, and archives devoted to maintaining the relics of our culture. But that does not guarantee that this culture will survive; for it survives, if at all, *in us*, the observers and users of these things. And if the relics have no effect on us, what remains of their meaning? Should we not compare them to the votive offerings of some dead religion, whose last devotees have disappeared, and whose artifacts gather dust in unvisited cellars?¹⁶

Yet, Scruton argues, there are ‘people who engage with Western culture in a spirit of affirmation’:

The interesting thing about this revival of theological and philosophical thinking is that it has, for the most part, taken place outside the university. In the communist countries, the universities were mere instruments for Party indoctrination, in which all intellectual inquiry had been extinguished, so that the transmission of culture depended upon those ‘underground’ universities in private apartments [...]. But it has been equally true in the free countries of Europe and North America that *engaged thinking* has moved out of the universities into private research institutions, literary circles, and small magazines.¹⁷

Surely Robert Graves would have been an enthusiastic participant in these ‘underground’ groups. For Graves truth existed: various fields of endeavour have their own ways of seeking and articulating truth; these ways must be learned from authorities. The mixing of ideas, the blurring of boundaries between areas of artistic and intellectual endeavour, is not automatically beneficial. Back in 1937 Graves, together with Laura Riding, Alan Hodge and Harry Kemp contended that:

The combining of political with poetic ends is a wilful falsification of the nature of poetry, which can have no special interest in the moral mechanics of life at a particular time, in a particular place. It is a transference of poetic seriousness to the practical urgencies, the use of poetry as an art of persuasion. Politics are concerned, and can only be concerned, with civic order; their definitions resolve into statutes of good-neighbourliness. [. . .] In poetry there are no opinions, because its order is not experimentally imposed; there are no ‘how’s’ in poetry. The order of poetry is the order with which being itself is instinct; poetry is the discovery of the values by which there is being, not the creation of external patterns of order.¹⁸

Meaning, in other words, exists, and certain kinds of meaning, such as poetic meaning, are universal. While approaches to political issues have a national component – ‘English left wing writers are almost without exception *déclassé* aristocrats or bourgeois,’ as Graves and his collaborators somewhat gleefully note¹⁹ – poetry can genuinely stake a claim for universality: ‘The problems which now occupy politics are problems which should all have been settled long ago [. . .] or problems, at least, which are properly the subject of instinctive local intelligence – which, when generalized into universal causes, remain unsolved under the weight of speculative thought brought to bear on them.’ On the other hand, ‘The immediacy of poetry is dateless, self-sustaining, not dependent on historical interest’;²⁰ and Graves has nothing but

scorn for those poets who are ‘the arbiter / Of what shall stand’, as he suggests in ‘Prosperity of Poets’:²¹

The world, noting
A harmless literary renaissance,
Snatches up certain poems (as a sample)
Where the indulgence has been strained
To exclude poetry and include world,
And flutes them under academic escort
To that Glass Palace where the Great consort.

To sum up: Graves’s practice as poet and scholar includes certain central elements of what has come to be called postmodernism, while simultaneously criticising, i.e. pointing out the weaknesses, of some of its underlying assumptions.

1. Understanding, assigning meaning to poetry, is often culture-specific, yet poetry is universal in meaning.

2. Poetry belongs to the denizens of the army encampment and the gypsy camp, yet the poet must be highly educated in the literary tradition from which he springs; by having the works of his literary tradition ‘by heart’ he literally embodies the tradition.

3. The poet, the artist, may choose to involve himself in the political debates of his time; yet whether or not, as is currently claimed, ‘The political is the personal’, it certainly is not the poetical.

4. The blurring of boundaries between the ways in which practitioners of various disciplines define meaning is acknowledged; but so are the dangers inherent in such blurring. Or in the words of the authors of ‘Politics and Poetry’:²²

The central question, in this matter of the practical effectiveness of poetry and poets, is on the subject of generalization and specialization. Assuming that a poet has an end of doing good: what kind of good? But the poets are specialists only in the sense that they must specialize in the

general work of clarifying the values of the good – in which no other class of persons specializes (is pledged to specialize) so indefatigably and uncompromisingly. This is not merely a specialization in the values of good behaviour, or of good economics, or of good social efficiency. It is the definition of a notion of good that shall be uniform for every department of existence: real, literal moral consistency is poetic consistency.

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NOTES

¹ *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (New York: Greenwood, 1968), p. 7.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

³ Roger Scruton, *Culture Counts: Faith and Feeling in a World Besieged* (New York: Encounter Books, 2007), p. 107.

⁴ *Oxford Addresses on Poetry*, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ pp. 234–35.

⁷ *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001 (1948)), p. 14. Graves's love for the agrarian way of life of his neighbours in Mallorca was profound. Yet by the 1950s he noted in the Epilogue to a new edition of *Good-bye to All That*: 'Rural Majorca [...] is now billed as Europe's most favourite holiday place: it boasts ninety tourist planes flying in daily throughout the summer and a new first-class hotel completed every week' (p. 346).

⁸ *Oxford Addresses on Poetry*, p. 33.

⁹ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* (London: Cape, 1967 (1943)), p. 39.

¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th edn, II, pp. 2170–76.

¹¹ *The White Goddess*, pp. 19, 18.

¹² Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, III (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 349.

¹³ The editors of the *OED* (2nd edn) locate the first use of the term *post modern* in 1914: '1914 J. M. THOMPSON in *Hibbert Jnl.* July 744 The *raison d'être* of Post-Modernism is to escape from the double-mindedness of Modernism by being thorough in its criticism – by extending it to religion as well as theology, to Catholic feeling as well as to Catholic tradition.'

¹⁴ See the note in *Complete Poems*, III, p. 529: ‘Plutarch records that for the Egyptians the hippopotamus symbolises “impudence, because (as they say) he killeth his sire and forceth his dam”. *Plutarch’s Miscellanies and Essays*, sixth edition, revised by William W. Goodwin, 5 vols (Boston: Little, Brown, 1889), IV, p.93 (in Graves’s library).’

¹⁵ David H. Hirsch, *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz* (Hanover, Mass.: Brown University Press, 1991) pp. 18–19.

¹⁶ *Culture Counts*, pp. 86–87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 88–89.

¹⁸ Robert Graves et al., ‘Politics and Poetry’, *Epilogue*, 3 (1937), repr. in *The Left Heresy in Literature and Life* (London: Methuen, 1939), pp. 217–18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

²¹ *Complete Poems*, p. 824, ll. 11–17.

²² p. 270.