

Allegories of Love in Robert Graves, C. S. Lewis and Peter Russell

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1

Robert Graves, C. S. Lewis and Peter Russell share more than one significant feature in their lives and works, not least the experience of war, the dramatic events of the First and Second World Wars which interrupted and – in a very significant sense – transformed their lives, visions and education.

The present essay offers some points of reflection concerning what might be called a common theme of their work: the quest for freedom and truth, the taste for experiment and exploration in a world that they perceive as in decay, deprived of a centre, deprived of Love, falling into the pieces of its values all relative to one another.

All of them share a common ground of immense learning and Modernism enthralled by Classicism; all of them are polyglots, translating from several ancient and modern languages, and yet all are in love with their modern tongue. All of them stand out as admirable experimentalists, in love with strict traditional forms – but always questioning the *form*; committed to clarity and truth, and yet continually questioning them; outrageously conscious of the fantastic *other* world, the dream and the vision which they always try to project onto the pages of their works of art. All of them, in a sense, outsiders, even if Lewis hardly ever moved out of his beloved Oxford.

The three of them are highly disciplined scholars whose greatest ambition is to keep faith with inspirational magic, with the emotional mode of thought which can be identified as primitive, fantastic, childish, imaginary,

knowing that, as Graves says, ‘the emotional mode may find its images in intellectual abstractions as easily as the intellectual mode may form abstractions from emotional images. Both modes are of equal importance since we could not do without either of them.’¹

If Graves admits that ‘in poetry one is continually straying into the bounds of a Thessaly like the land Apuleius celebrated, where magic is supreme and where therefore things happen which realistically minded strangers find difficult to understand’,² Russell seems to echo him when he declares:

My life as a poet has been a quest for vision, prophecy and the imagination, that is the whole Self, my own soul, the soul of the world, the Spirit – *Atmanàbrahman*. [...] All higher poetry is a revelation or Apocalyptic. [...] Apocalypse involves vision: seeing things one does not normally see; but it also involves going places one does not normally go – Ulysses to the Elysian field, Plato’s Er to the last Judgement, Mohammed and his followers Sana’ Ibn Arabi, and Dante (as well as the still existent Shamans of Siberia), through the heavenly Spheres to the presence of the One and in our modern literature, fragmentary but revealing like Black Elk Speaks, Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*, or C. S. Lewis’ *Narnia*. If tales like George MacDonald’s *Phantastes* and *Back of the North Wind* or Frank Baum’s delightful *Wizard of Oz* are fantasy, they frequently border on Vision, as Blake says the Greek and Latin fables in Ovid and Apuleius do. If I were a novelist and not a poet, today I would write Science fiction, a kind in which the space/time traveller visits those Intermediary Worlds of the Soul and Spirit, so beautifully described by Henry Corbin, in which the material is

spiritualised and the spiritual materialises, and the real is revealed, that is – Apocalypse.’³

From his own field, Lewis answers and confirms: ‘No merely physical strangeness or merely spatial distance will realise that idea of otherness which is what we are always trying to grasp in a story about voyaging through space; you must go into another dimension. To construct plausible and moving *other worlds* you must draw on the only real “other world” we know, that of the spirit’.⁴

Common to the three of them is the profound sense of loss that was investing the world between the 1940s and the 1950s, and their passionate attempt to save, as on a novel Noah’s Ark, the most precious species: humanity and its poetry. In more or less the same years Graves was publishing *The White Goddess* (1948), Lewis had already published *The Allegory of Love* (1936), Russell was editing the influential literary monthly *Nine* (1947–1958), which published work by T. S. Eliot, Basil Bunting, Robert Graves, Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, Borges, Roy Campbell, and especially Ezra Pound, giving recognition to the genius and importance of these pioneers of Modernism. In his manifesto-like ‘Editorial Statement’ published in *Nine*, Russell and his Editorial Board (D. S. Carne-Ross, Iain Fletcher, G. S. Fraser, Ian Scott-Kilvers) pronounced the magazine’s intention to maintain critical standards by establishing a new relation to the past, replotting the traditions of European culture with the publication of critical articles on a wide range of historically important writers and new translations of their works. *Nine* wanted ‘to help the contemporary writer to escape from a long confinement in the prison of the Zeitgeist by re-evaluating the great writers of the past’.⁵

From 1936 to 1945 Lewis completed his interplanetary trilogy, something that also helped him stride out of the

realism of the time, fiercely counterattacking those who charged him with escapism: “[T]hat perhaps is why people are so ready with the charge of “escape”. I never fully understood it till my friend Professor Tolkien asked me the very simple question: “What class of men would you expect to be most preoccupied with, and most hostile to, the idea of escape?” and gave the obvious answer “jailers!”.’⁶

In translating *The Golden Ass* (1950), that masterpiece of classical decay that has been defined as the greatest and most daring mystic text in European literature, Graves deliberately aimed at focusing on an age which in many ways had significant resemblances with his own, with its predominant sense of a mobile society in rapid transformation, completely absorbed in reconstructing new religions, myths and stories out of the old ones that had broken into pieces. It is not by chance that, writing ‘The Shout’, a masterpiece of *otherness*, Graves used his *Golden Ass* as the thread for the construction of this ‘moonstruck story, worthy of being placed alongside his best poetry’.⁷ He was one of the first to see what Modernism was pointing to, underlying in a special way ‘the shift to which poets are driven in trying to cope with civilization and in rejecting or keeping up with the social requirements which seem to be laid upon poetry’.⁸

In their own idiosyncratic ways, Graves, Lewis and Russell perceived far more than others perhaps, and Graves the first, the mutation of our civilisation, the decreasing importance of the book (in Apuleius the book had been the dream of Lucius transformed into an ass!), and the advent of a new culture – a culture of cinema, television and popular manipulation – which made urgent the necessity for a rediscovery and a reappropriation of our cross-cultural identity and our common heritage. This raised the problem of a new way – a new wave – of reception, something that had to do with the ever changing

and differently graded combination of two or more systems. In the three of them in fact the problem of language is a central issue and the way they face it is of enormous interest to our contemporary studies. Common to them is the practice of the ancient and noble ‘desultory science’, the Apuleian and Shandean ability to go through and cross over the diachronic and synchronic levels of the *langue* in order to recapture their original and idiosyncratic *parole*: the best way to rewrite and translate the past into the present and this into the future.

One of Peter Russell’s great mentors, Thomas Taylor, starts his Introduction to Plotinus’ *Concerning the Beautiful* (1797) with a remark that Russell says is very relevant for us today:

It may seem wonderful that language, which is the only method of conveying our conceptions, should, at the same time, be a hindrance to our advancement in Philosophy: but the wonder ceases when we consider, that it is seldom studied as the vehicle of Truth, but is too frequently esteemed for its own sake, independent of its connection with things.⁹

2

This remark takes us straight into Robert Graves’s ‘The Cool Web’ and the poem’s declared search for the difficult connection with things, the heat of the day, the summer rose, the dreadful black of the evening sky, the dreadful soldiers drumming by.¹⁰

The protective web here very much resembles a sort of screen, like a ‘schermo’ which protects from madness and death while forcing to create and construct and then reveal *the other scene of the tragedy*. In Russell’s words, language ‘acts as a screen between individual mind or

soul and the Spirit, both concealing and revealing that unknown essence we recognize as the poetry itself, the unique experience we momentarily have of the presence of an unknown life'.¹¹ Language, itself partly mental and partly physical, stands between the poem itself and the 'poetry' essential to it, like a barrier or screen: 'I suppose that the quality of the divine most universally recognized is light, or illumination. But light is invisible till reflected, refracted or scattered by a solid surface or obstacle. On a purely material level we might take as an analogy the cinematographic screen [...]'.¹²

The Gravesian image of the father piecing together a picture-block puzzle for his children, raises the problem of reception as an asymmetrical relation and at the same time as an argumentative circuit, a kind of negotiation between poet and reader aimed at making what is latent and implicit emerge as explicit and manifest, a process which implies an effort of mutual understanding and a pact of complicity. Only this ideal unity towards a common goal can assure the 'delivery' of the poem which will take shape as revelation, dependent on the cause-and-effect relationship set up between scattered parts, discursive fragments, expressive features. The emotive function, continually obliterated from the text, re-emerges through the modes of reception of the text itself. It is like the impatience which, after being carefully hidden by a lover in writing a letter to his beloved, is revealed and displayed by the express letter surcharge applied to the letter itself when it is sent off.

Half way between dialogical staging and conversation, between a 'poetic of suggestion' and a 'poetic of statement', the reception of Graves's poetry relies, to a great extent, upon an overdetermination and hypersemanticisation of the unlimited resources of oral culture and spoken language, the essential resources of the *other*. The tyranny of the Cool Web, which Graves

perceives in all its necessity and at the same time in all its paralysing insidiousness for the individual, leads to a shift in his wish for freedom and for life onto another subject. In this search for *otherness* it chooses a woman, an everyday or mythological *woman-daimon*. Through her he interprets and gives voice to the otherwise ineffable relationship with the mystery of life and death.

As a metaphor of the Subject's constant desire for transference into the place of the Other, Graves's discourse of love defers its feelings on to its idea – its linguistic representation – the *mise-en-scène* of the dialectic between Identity and Alterity on the boundless stage of the Imaginary.

Like allegories of love, the figures¹³ of Absence and Waiting, Enchantment and Ecstasy, Loss and Excess, Cursing and Dedication, Silence and Speech, the Obscene and the Sublime all converge into the language of his poetry which, out of a paralysing, mortal web, will allow the weaving of a beautiful tapestry – the allegorical infinite story of life and death entwined together. The great old Man, Logos, must once again face the challenge of the ever-youthful Eros and the Imaginary.

3

As a poet and admirer of Graves's work, Peter Russell picks up the gauntlet that Graves has thrown down. Echoes of Graves are scattered throughout his work, starting from the common policy of almost total isolation from 'all that is untrue, pretentious, dull, anti-poetic: from the main stream of social life'¹⁴ to end with the common conviction that 'Poetry for us [...] is a practical, humorous, reasonable way of being ourselves.'¹⁵

In 1933 Russell gave three lectures on Ezra Pound, Robert Graves and Kathleen Raine to a group of Swiss high school teachers of English literature. He pointed out

that the central thing in all three of these admirable poets is the vision of Beauty, and came to the conclusion that Robert Graves, ‘for all his miraculous eccentricities [...], gets closer to the “metaphysical” insight into the nature of men’s inability to understand woman than any poet of our time’.¹⁶ *Metaphysical* is a key word in Russell’s poetics: ‘For over a century now we have been suffering from precisely that, a metaphysical unease; and I believe that it is the ultimate cause of all our problems. It seems as if the greater part of the human race is insensible to metaphysics. And not only in our time.’¹⁷ Metaphysics to Russell represents the human conscious at the spiritual level (the Platonic *Nous*, or Universal Mind).

He recognises himself perfectly at home in the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, in the Hermetic or alchemic domain, in the Augustinian tradition, in the theosophical tradition of Boheme or in the esoteric worlds of Islam. The poet’s field, for Russell, is unlimited: ‘He is a nomad who has an inalienable right to wander over every field he can visit. In this sense the poet’s subject matter is everything.’¹⁸ Paradoxically, Graves’s *one theme* here corresponds to the poet’s *everything*. This literally boundless cultural background allows and almost obliges Russell’s poetry to be extremely inclusive: ‘Poetry, to be worthy the name, must include both the true and the false, reality and unreality, the natural and the supernatural, the possible and the impossible, being and not-being, life and death [...]. It must have a metaphysical dimension, or better a metaphysical ground’.¹⁹ In Russell’s work, in fact, poetry is first of all contemplation:

The root of the word is connected with *templum*, a sacred space cut out (Greek *temnein* = to cut) by an augur for taking observations (cf *temenos*, in Greek, also a sacred enclosure). I intend the poems as sacred spaces cut out of the chaos of the profane

consciousness, spaces in which to consider and observe, to concentrate the mind and to come nearer to an understanding of the realities of existence.²⁰

The greater part of Russell's work is concerned explicitly with the problems and experience of the soul and the body, the physical and emotional domain, but everything is drawn into a single coherent thread by the not infrequent interpolations of the intellect, whether rational or intuitive:

It was not for nothing that I dedicated my long poem, *Paysages Légendaires*, to the memory of C. G. Jung, and in a sense I think that P. L. might be thought of as the centre-piece of my contemplations. During the period 1964–1973 Jung, more than any other author or thinker, opened my mind to the *ghaib*, the invisible world, the secret world within. Jung provided the bridge or isthmus between the world of the personal soul and the metaphysical intellect.²¹

Paysages Légendaires, written between 1962 and 1968, around Venice and Padua, literally embodies Russell's poetic faith in the poetic text and in its reader. As Kathleen Raine says, in fact, 'Response to this kind of poetry [...] depends altogether on the quality of the reader's own culture.'²² *Paysages Légendaires* concerns the desire, the attempt, the possibility for the poet to *correspond* to the invisible, the mysterious movement which corresponds to the act of *making* poetry. Like Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, the landscapes of *Paysages Légendaires* are outside of space. They are analogies of the invisible cities, the cities built by Marco Polo to recreate in his mind his forever lost and beloved city of Venice, in a supreme act of love. Marco says:

It is true of Cities and of dreams: all that is imaginable can be dreamed, yet even the most unexpected dream is a riddle within which lies a hidden desire, or its opposite, a fear. Cities and dreams are built alike of desires and fears, even if the thread of their words is secret, their rules absurd, expectations deceitful, and everything hides something else.²³

But *Paysages Légendaires* is also the poet's response to the hardest years of his life, when everything seemed close to total destruction. It stands for an act of will that is dramatically involved with the suffering of life, with the passionate pursuit of the 'sense' that is hidden from our senses, and the acceptance of it. 'The soul is born to a definite work', we read in *Paysages Légendaires*, and in another beautiful long poem, *Agamemnon in Hades*, Russell writes:

Mortal life is destined to be imperfect,
But each man has a central aim to fulfil.
This is his Fate and he cannot struggle against it.
Whether in war or peace he must walk with his Fate
Fulfilling the tasks that are set him with loving
care.²⁴

Loving care, one of Graves's favourite keywords, is an essential expression in Russell's work: it looks at the mystery of the world, at the mother who welcomed the angel's news with trusting love; as she became God's will, the destiny of being, the very end of love: *Telos ton Erotikon*. This is a truly central point in Russell's work which returns in *Paysages Imaginaires* as a semantic, symbolic chain of themes linked to the mystery and yet to the simplicity of creation:

Sweet bones are growing in the earthly night
Slow maturations in the endless dark
Of subterranean galleries, telluric force
That broods whole centuries upon a single grain
That crumbles or coagulates.²⁵

From the womb of mother earth, the thread of a legendary arabesque is produced to form the gardens of a childhood that never really was, to give voice to an accusation questioning the entire history of our civilisation; a history dominated by the law of the sword, war and violence, with no eyes for the feminine soul, the children's soul.

It has been often observed that the overabundance of the production of writers like Graves and Russell is often an obstacle to the real comprehension of their works. That may be true, and for once we are really grateful to technology if we can access them in all their abundance and complexity. But it is my opinion that, in these authors, such an overabundance is a precise function of the text. On the one hand it reveals the multiple 'correspondences', the innumerable sensitive forms and ways in which the entity may be incarnated; and on the other it has the function of staging the *asymmetrical relation* that exists between man and the divine, the disproportion between the opposite terms of Being and Appearing, the tragic contradiction of being in the light and having to work in darkness. Such a necessity develops in both poets a poetics of *divergence*, a language that often enacts a blocked feeling, looking about in opposite directions, but it has no alternatives if it wants to make possible the impossible tale. The result is the sense of a journey which, like all the great journeys, ancient and modern, finds its place in the heroic space somewhere between the desperate and the initiatory, in the rhythm of the infinite, a rhythm almost lost in our own time which, losing its temples, has also lost its speculative dimension.

As in Graves and Yeats, in Russell's poetry there's always a mysterious *presence*, something like a Platonic idea, a word firmly anchored in tradition: 'At this stage of my life I think of presence in my poetry as a mysterious atmosphere – there's the presence of something *other*. You present a situation and it immediately creates a kind of numinous atmosphere, which is what I would call a "presence" in this particular sense.'²⁶

Openly arguing against the postmodernist ideas of Absence and Defamiliarisation, Russell is convinced that '

every poem that's any good in it represents an absolutely unique emotion. This, I think, is precisely what presence is [...]. You see, one might almost say that poetry traditionally aims at the 'divine'. Now in modern terms most people will dismiss the term 'divine'. They say 'there are no gods', 'god is dead' – all that shit. It's very easy to cope with this; you simply say 'the Other'. Now, Post-Modernism is very concerned with [...] *defamiliarisation*. Well, you see, this is a very reduced, aesthetically small version of the finding of the Other. If you read Novalis, you get the amazing statement in one of his aphorisms, that it is only through illusions that we can perceive truths. *That's* the greatest key I know to understanding Plato's problem with the arts [...]. Illusions and myths – surely the real myths are the supreme illusions – all absolute illusions – lies, stupidities, childish things. But in some miraculous way they seem to lead us to extraordinary truths [...]; something beyond reason and logic, but also beyond words and language. It's something in our intuition – it's leading us on to a holistic view of things, and the word intuition – the 'tu' part of the word 'intuition' represents 'wholeness', making things

salve or *whole* as in Latin *tutus*, ‘safe’ and *totus*, ‘whole’.²⁷

With Graves and Lewis, Russell shares this extreme involvement with the vital process of the formation of words. ‘It is the task of poetry’, Graves wrote in *Steps*, ‘to treat words as if they were *living beings*, coupling them and making them breathe new life’.²⁸

Russell’s inexhaustible interest in etymology calls for the recovery

of an associative view of the language, seeing no ultimate discontinuities between languages, whether viewed synchronically or diachronically. Just as he sees the conscious life of the present as continuous with that of the past, so he believes that words have their own unstated mode of being, which goes on living or can be resuscitated in poetry through the genetic stratifications of language diachrony’.²⁹

Like Graves, Peter Russell had a creative knowledge of Sufism and the same profound admiration for the Eastern literary tradition (think of the Islamic idea of *Baraka*, variously translated as blessedness, holiness, inspiration or virtue), which incorporates a wealth of poetic images and metaphysical ideas: his own poem ‘*Albae Meditatio*’ seems to be modelled on the most famous work of the Egyptian poet Ibn al-Farid (1181–1235) called ‘*Nazm al-Suluk*’ (*The Poem of Way*, or *The Mystic’s Progress*), a meditation on Divine Love and the mystic’s progress towards eventual union with the beloved.³⁰ Writing elsewhere about the figure of Beatrice in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, Russell observes that ‘the highest grade of love is pure contemplation, which in mystical terms is *ek-stasis*, or *mentis excessus*, that is being or stepping out of the earthly mind’.³¹

During a lecture given at the C. G. Jung Institute, Zurich, in October 1991, complaining the fact that post-Renaissance Western Man – as C. S. Lewis would say – has erased from his consciousness the ancient songs and sweet voices of the Muses, he paid Graves his most genuine tribute, quoting the whole poem ‘In Dedication’ and almost echoing Graves’s warning against a civilisation in which the prime emblems of poetry are dishonoured:

For 3 millennia the image of the Muse has dominated all Western culture and it is only in our lifetimes that this image has withered away to less than a wraith. If fifty years ago and more, we first heard of the Industrial Muse, the Scientific Muse, the ‘Muse of Commerce’, and very many poets wrote of their all-too-human sweethearts or wives as ‘the Muse’, we should remember that at least one important poet, dead only a few years ago, namely Robert Graves, fully equated in all seriousness the Muse with the archaic or prehistoric Great Mother [...]. If his poem [In Dedication] has a vehement effect on us, I ask myself what the poet’s own reaction to this *violent invasion* must have been.³²

Not without reason Kathleen Raine has defined Russell: ‘an ecstatic whose commitment (through Graves’s Goddess) is to the beautiful’.³³

4

Russell declared that if he had been a novelist and not a poet he would have written Science Fiction.³⁴ This must also have been C. S. Lewis’s thought when, as a famous scholar and critic, he said to Tolkien: ‘Tollers, there is too little of what we really like in stories – I am afraid we

shall have to write some ourselves.’³⁵ What he really liked in stories, he was to explain some years later in 1940 in an essay first read to a Merton College undergraduate literary society, whose title was: ‘The Kappa Element in Romance’, where Kappa is taken from κρυπτόν and means the ‘hidden element.’

What qualifies the story, for Lewis, is simply its poetry. It has to do with the hushing spell on the imagination, with the ‘something else’, the atmosphere a whole context, a whole world, can give. In the case of giants and pirates, for example, ‘It is not the mere increase of danger that does the trick. It is the whole image of the utterly lawless enemy, the men who have cut adrift from all human society and become, as it were, a species of their own.’³⁶ Part of the secret is that the author is recording a lived dialectic – regions of the spirit – by means of giantship, pirates, the desolation of space, otherness. Also here, as in Graves and Russell, there is the terror and tremor of an invasion: ‘Let us suppose that this everyday world were, at some one point, invaded by the marvellous. Let us, in fact, suppose a violation of frontier.’³⁷

In the stories he likes,

the marvellous is in the grain of the whole work. We are, throughout, in another world. What makes the world valuable is not, of course, mere multiplication of the marvellous either for comic effect [...] or for mere astonishment [...], but its quality, its flavour. If good novels are comments on life, good stories of this sort (which are very much rarer) are actual additions to life; they give, like certain rare dreams, sensations we never had before, and enlarge our conception of the range of possible experience. [...] Specimens of this kind, at its best, will never be common. I would include part of the *Odyssey*, the *Hymn to Aphrodite*, much of the *Kalevala* and *The*

Faerie Queen, some of Malory (but none of Malory's best work) and more of *Huon*, part of Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel*, Beckford's *Vathek*, Morris's *Jason* and the *Prologue* (little else) of the *Earthly Paradise*, MacDonald's *Phantastes*, *Lilith* and *The Golden Key*, Eddison's *Worm Ouroboros*, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and that shattering, intolerable, and irresistible work, David Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus*.³⁸

Lewis's completion of *The Allegory of Love* (1935) coincided almost exactly with his discovery of Lindsay's *Voyage to Arcturus* (1920): 'From Lindsay I first learned what other planets in fiction are really good for; for *spiritual* adventures. Only they can satisfy the craving which sends our imaginations off the earth.'³⁹ The experimentalist in him saw in *Voyage to Arcturus* the terrific result produced by the union of kinds of fiction hitherto kept apart: the Novalis, B. MacDonald, S. Stephens sort and the H. G. Wells, Jules Vernes sort.

He put the fairy tale at the centre of his interest in fantasy because, as he said quoting Tolkien: 'Man there most fully exercises his function as a "subcreator", [...] making, as far as possible, a subordinate world of his own.'⁴⁰ The fairy tale in fact not only liberates, as Jung says, archetypes which dwell in the collective unconscious, but also and above all, offers the ideal context to the

presence of beings other than human which yet behave, in varying degrees, humanly, the giants and dwarfs and talking beasts. I believe these to be at least (for they may have many other sources of power and beauty) an admirable hieroglyphic which conveys psychology, types of character, more

briefly than novelistic presentation and to readers whom novelistic presentation could not yet reach.⁴¹

The great allegorist in him saw how stories of this kind could steal past certain inhibitions and in a somewhat epic or heroic way were also able to face and defeat the fears and terrors of our age: 'For in the fairy tales, side by side with the terrible figures, we find the immemorial comforters and protectors, the radiant ones; and the terrible figures are not merely terrible, but sublime.'⁴² In the *Allegory* he said: 'It needs the long road and mountain prospects of the fable to match the *Apeiron* within',⁴³ and he seems to echo Graves when he says: 'For poetry to spread its wings fully, there must be, besides the believed religion, a marvellous that knows itself as a myth. For this to come about, the old marvellous, which once was taken as fact, must be stored up somewhere, not wholly dead, but in winter sleep, waiting its time.'⁴⁴

No wonder his stories take us back to the ancient world, his beloved Middle Ages, the Platonism of the school of Chartres, Bernardus Silvestris and his *De Mundi Universitate sive Megacosmus et Microcosmus*, down to the Italian epic and the Romantic Movement through his beloved *Faerie Queen*. There, in the world of popular imagination and of popular mythology *par excellence*, the poet is free to transcend, mix, innovate traditions, even transform his Christian God into the immemorial Goddess:

Mutability's appeal, it should be noticed, is not in the first instance to Nature at all, but

to the highest him, that is behight
 Father of Gods and men of equall might,
 To weete the God of Nature.

Yet when this appeal is answered it is the goddess
Natura who appears, as in Claudian, Bernardus,
 Alanus and Jean de Meun,

This great Grandmother of all creatures bred,
 Great Nature, ever young, yet full of eld;
 Still mooving, yet unmoved from her sted,
 Unseene of any, yet of all beheld.

[...] It is, for most poets and in most poems, by far
 the best method of writing poetry which is religious
 without being devotional [...].⁴⁵

And Lewis recommends Spenser, because in him the great golden chain of Concord unites the whole of his world: 'There is a place for everything and everything is in its place. Nothing is repressed; nothing is unsubordinate. To read him is to grow in mental health'.⁴⁶ In our own troubled and inquiring age the complete integration, the harmony of Spenser's mind may really appear as a treasure to be recovered.

In his extremely learned essay 'Courtly Love, Bourgeois Love, Discourteous Love,' Peter Russell paid his homage to Lewis, clearly continuing his discussion of his *Four Types of Love*, dwelling upon the nature of allegory, the Platonic tradition and the school of Chartres, the aesthetic appreciation of perfect beauty, the eternal feminine, the absolute Other and the Divine. The idea of Love is reiterated as a central necessity for our age and, quoting Iris Murdoch's splendid study *The Fire and the Sun*, he highlights the connection of Love with morality: 'Plato's Eros is a principle which connects the commonest human desire to the highest morality and to the pattern of the divine creativity in the universe'.⁴⁷

Like Lewis, Russell is in love with Tolkien: 'After Ariosto, Tasso, Camoes and Milton such works have been

largely absent. We do, however, have in our own century, Tolkien's priceless *Lord of the Rings*, an epic novel on the quest for Beauty and Truth on a very high spiritual plane (i.e. the Sublime). [...] For me, it remains one of the masterpieces of the century. It is very significant that all in the book is motivated by Love [...], universal Caritas'.⁴⁸ Lewis, soon after its publication, had compared this book to

lightning from a clear sky; as sharply different, as unpredictable in our age as *Songs of Innocence* were in theirs. To say that in it heroic romance, gorgeous, eloquent and unashamed, has suddenly returned at a period almost pathological in its anti-romanticism is inadequate. To us, who live in that odd period, the return – and the sheer relief of it – is doubtless the important thing. But in the history of Romance itself – a history which stretches back to the *Odyssey* and beyond – it makes not a return but an advance or revolution; the conquest of new territory.⁴⁹

Connected by clear lines of common intellectual descent, the works of Graves, Lewis and Russell work stand out in the twentieth century literature as a long quest and a conquest of new territories, a progress towards an increasing creative use of the past and awareness of a language which, through the language of the individual or collective *other* – be that a myth, a rhyme, a fable, or a fairy tale – acquires its original *parole* and gives sense to individual experience. This adds up to a way of writing poetry and prose that, in recovering the old wisdoms, the dances and the songs of the Muses, becomes a critical operation, a re-creation that inevitably leads to a peculiar but coherent decanting of poetic language into everyday language, and the reverse.

Their common consciousness of a language that is always determined by the language of the *other* through the centuries, in the infinite story of exclusion and integration, contamination and rejection, gives their work the substance and the form of a unique exploration into the multifaced aspects of our universe: a journey through memory, reformulating lines and landscapes of the past, suggesting simulacra, acknowledging the complexity of ultimate truths, raising the fundamental question: how far is the past only the past?

Their work is an exploration and a long experiment in the process of communication which intermingles knowledge and belief, fiction and reality, transcending them both. It is the celebration of the power of words and yet it refers to another power, a masterful orchestration of strategies that celebrate man's faculties to transform and create:

It was a virtue not to stay,
To go our headstrong and heroic way
Seeking her out at the volcano's head,
Among pack ice, or where the track had faded
Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers:
Whose broad high brow was white as any leper's,
Whose eyes were blue, with rowan-berry lips,
With hair curled honey-coloured to white hips.

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NOTES

¹ Robert Graves, 'A theory of consciousness', in *Poetic Unreason and Other Studies* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1925; repr. New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1968), p. 56.

² *Poetic Unreason*, p. 125.

- ³ Peter Russell, *Language and the Spirit* (London: Themenos Academy, 1977), pp. 21–22.
- ⁴ C. S. Lewis, *On Stories and Other Essays on Literature*, ed. by Walter Hooper (New York and London: Harvest, 1982), p. 12.
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