

‘A poet you shall be, my son’: Robert Graves and Dylan Thomas

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Robert Graves lived during the modernist period and often wrote on themes associated with modernism. As co-author, together with Laura Riding, of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, Graves commented widely on contemporary poets and their creations. In this collaborative work Riding and Graves differentiate between ‘modern-ness’, that is, ‘keeping up in poetry with the pace of civilization and intellectual history’, and ‘modernism’.¹ Whatever the period in which he lives, an excellent poet is, according to Riding and Graves, ‘something more than a mere servant and interpreter of civilization’. He is, rather, ‘a new and original individual’.²

Modernism, an attack on so-called bourgeois values and thought, was rooted in the nineteenth century, but came to the forefront in the aftermath of the Great War. *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism* provides a useful definition: ‘it is associated with experimentation with traditional genres and styles, and a conception of the artist as creator rather than preserver of culture’, as well as being ‘unconventional, often formally complex and thematically apocalyptic’.³ Indeed, the above view of the artist as ‘creator rather than preserver of culture’ recalls Riding’s and Graves’s definition of the first-rate poet as ‘a new and original individual’.

Although in time the term Neo- (or New) Romanticism came to be applied to the writings of poets such as Dylan Thomas, conventional scholarly wisdom is not uncomfortable with viewing Thomas as part of the modernist period. Indeed, the editor of the *Sunday Referee* ‘Poet’s Corner’, Victor Neuberg, chose one of Thomas’s poems for publication in September 1933, describing it as ‘perhaps the best modernist poem that as yet he had received for Poet’s Corner’.⁴

Graves's response to Thomas's poetry was less than enthusiastic, and dates back to the 1930s, when the younger poet sent the elder some of his works. Writing after Thomas's death, Graves notes that:

I never met Thomas; but when he was sixteen, he sent me from Swansea a batch of his early poems. I wrote back that they were irreproachable, but that he would eventually learn to dislike them. [...] Young poets stumble and make a thousand clumsy errors, and though one may hope or guess that they will be something in the end, there is only promise, not performance.⁵

In the 1950s he targeted Thomas, in addition to W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and William Butler Yeats, in 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!' – the angriest of the Clark Lectures.⁶ Graves, adopting the persona of an Old Testament prophet, posited the poets as idols and their admirers from Academe as idol-worshippers. In the opening of 'These Be Your Gods' Graves contends that:

Most of my younger contemporaries have been acquiescing in an organized attempt, by critics, publicists, and educationalists, to curtail their liberty of judgment, and make them bow the knee before a row of idols, whose rites are quite incompatible with devotion to the Muse herself.

Idolatry is nothing new. The Goddess, or the God, being held too mysterious and exacting a figure for public worship, idols are set up as intermediaries – like the hero-images in Classical Greece – to focus the vague yearnings and aspirations of the unenlightened mass. [...] And once an idol is set up it cannot easily be removed; but slowly moulders down the years, as Byron's and Wordsworth's have done.⁷

Even if one takes with the proverbial grain of salt Graves's

disclaimer that 'I was never one to stroll down the street with a catapult and break windows just for the fun of hearing the tinkle of glass and seeing furious faces peering out as I scuttle away',⁸ one of the most problematic aspects of Graves, in the words of his biographer Miranda Seymour, is 'his hostility to his literary contemporaries and the unveiled contempt he showed for the younger generation of poets'. This hostility, to the extent that it existed, is especially difficult to explain when directed, as in the case of Thomas, at one with whom Graves shared both a 'sense of a loss of vision and a belief in the poet's ability to create a private mythology from ancient knowledge'.⁹ Moreover, both Graves and Thomas were steeped in the landscape and myths of Wales. Wales was Thomas's literal homeland; for Graves, a literary homeland: although Graves lived and worked in other locales, he found in Wales a prime source of poetic image.

In the 'Foreword' to *The White Goddess* Graves notes: 'My thesis is that the language of poetic myth anciently current in the Mediterranean and Northern Europe was a magical language bound up with popular religious ceremonies in honour of the Moon-goddess, or Muse, some of them dating from the Old Stone Age, and that this remains the language of true poetry.'¹⁰ In her criticism of Graves's attitude toward younger poets, Seymour contends that Graves's 'extreme hostility to both David Jones and Dylan Thomas may have stemmed from the fact that they were working in a similar field, when Graves wanted it all to himself'.¹¹ Yet in writing *The White Goddess* Robert Graves became, willy-nilly, the spokesman for such poets as Jones and Thomas.

In this paper I venture to suggest a reason for Graves's 'hostility' to Thomas, other than 'wanting to have the field all to himself'. From the 1930s, through his collaboration with Laura Riding and later with other Muses, Graves was committed to Muse-poetry, a method of composing poems via a symbiotic relationship with a specific woman. From the early 1940s Graves articulated his definition of Muse-poetry and consciously composed poetry by the process which he outlined. Since there is no reason to assume that Dylan Thomas would have committed himself to Graves's

strict, formal definition of the poetic process as the composition of Muse-poetry, my assumption is that Graves could not have accepted Thomas as a comrade-in-arms, despite the central common threads in their work and personal lives. This paper is a brief examination of these common themes, followed by a suggestion as to the main difference between the two poets. I conclude with thoughts as to future research of Graves's poetic *oeuvre*.

The common threads are, first of all, a rejection of what Dwight D. Eisenhower termed the 'military-industrial complex' of twentieth-century urban life.¹² Secondly, and seamlessly connected to the first point, there is love of the Welsh countryside and use of images whose source is Wales; and thirdly, the importance which both attached to poetic craftsmanship. Thus Thomas may easily be seen as a 'follower' of Graves; yet since Graves outlived Thomas by many years, during which he continued to write poetry, it may not be presumptuous to suggest that Graves be viewed as a follower of Thomas.

Robert Graves's decision to say good-bye to twentieth-century urban, industrial life needs no lengthy explication. As he wrote in *The White Goddess*: 'I have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is still ruled by the old agricultural cycle. Without my brush, namely my contact with urban civilization, all that I write must read perversely and irrelevantly to such of you as are still geared to the industrial machine.'¹³ In 'Midway', which appeared in *Poems 1929*, Graves gives poetic expression to his rejection of a technology-based life:

Clocks tick with our consent to our time-tables,
Trains run between our buffers. Time and Space
Amuse us merely with their rough-house turn,
Their hard head-on collision in the tunnel.
A dying superstition smiles and hums
'Abide with me' – God's evening prayer, not ours.¹⁴

Graves's rejection of urban life was the result of his experiences in the Great War. As he notes in *Good-bye to All That*, it was clear to him from as far back as his demobilisation that 'it would be years before I could face anything but a quiet country life. My disabilities were many: I could not use a telephone, I felt sick every time I travelled by train, and to see more than two new people in a single day prevented me from sleeping.'¹⁵ With the passage of time Graves concluded that being 'geared to the industrial machine' was not merely unhealthy in one's daily life, but also mitigated against being a true poet.

As noted by his biographer Paul Ferris, Dylan Thomas was perceived as 'an answer to the machine; his poems contain few images drawn from the twentieth century'. Moreover, in a description recalling Graves's working life in Deyá, much 'of Thomas's real work was done on high ground, looking down on things: usually the sea, usually in Wales'.¹⁶ Dylan Thomas was born and raised in Wales, the offspring of generations of Welshmen, and lived most of his short life in Swansea and Laugharne. As was the case with Graves, residence in England and tours of the United States resulted from the necessity of earning a living to support a growing family, whether by composing material for films and television, appearing before adoring audiences at the 92 Street YM-YWHA in New York, or on the academic lecture circuit.

The rejection of the twentieth-century industrial machine, which merges with devotion to the Welsh countryside, finds expression in one of each poet's best-known works. In the concluding stanza of Graves's 'Rocky Acres' we find:

Yet this is my country, beloved by me best,
The first land that rose from Chaos and the Flood,
Nursing no valleys for comfort or rest,
Trampled by no shod hooves, bought with no blood.
Sempiternal country whose barrows have stood
Stronghold for demigods when on earth they go,

the mining valleys with their own particular and very vivid life.¹⁹

Swansea is serendipitously reminiscent of Mallorca: the latter is a seaport; culturally it is a meeting-place of languages and cultures – Catalan and Spanish, to name but two – and a meeting-place of ancient agriculture and the twenty-first century tourism industry.

Let us note that while he saw Swansea as a backwater, the young Thomas was aware of contemporary directions and developments in literature. Although he was not a straight-A pupil, and completed his formal studies at the age of sixteen, he read widely, both in the classics of English literature and in the poetry of his day. In an article published in the newspaper of the Swansea Grammar School in 1929 shortly before his fifteenth birthday – Robert Graves, too, had sensed a vocation as a poet from the age of fifteen – Thomas notes:

What changed the course of English poetry completely was the Great War, the brutality of which failed to warp man's outlook, and caused some of the bitterest and the loveliest poetry in the language to be written. Out of the darkness came the clear light of genius: [Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke, Robert Nichols, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, Julian Grenfell] and the other heroes who built towers of beauty upon the ashes of their lives.²⁰

As a polymath, steeped in ancient cultures and languages, Graves was able to elect to base his poetic method on the Welsh bardic culture. The centrality of Wales in Dylan Thomas's poetry was probably less the result of a conscious choice made by an adult who weighs various options and then concludes that he can do his best work in his cottage in Laugharne overlooking the water; it was more the outcome of his and his family's generations-old connection to the sea, land and culture – both bardic and biblical – of their native soil.

During high summer the Gower Peninsula is almost

Mediterranean in its climate and feeling; it is reminiscent of the area of Canellun, the Graves family home in Deyá. As John Ackerman notes:

The celebration by the poet of all natural life, animal and vegetal, a celebration expressed usually in sensuous terms, is derived from specific theological concepts. The basis of this attitude is a sense of the unity of all creation, and this identity of all created forms is religious in character. The poet is aware of a sacramental universe in which the common things of life serve to illustrate profound mysteries. [. . .] There is a Hebraic element in the Welsh character – probably the result of much Bible reading.²¹

It is not, therefore, difficult to discern the connection in Thomas's poetic practice between a rejection of the 'military-industrial complex' and his celebration of the natural life and culture of his Welsh homeland. This connection indeed recalls themes which Robert Graves articulated in his poems and essays.

A third meeting-point of Graves and Thomas is the importance which both attached to poetic craftsmanship. A short reminder of Graves's approach: 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.²²

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 Two: 'The writing of good English is [...] a moral matter, as the Romans held that the writing of good Latin was.'²³ Graves viewed poetry as a craft: the artefact produced must be studied, practised, polished, revised.

The ability of the reader to follow the poet's argument is a separate issue, however. Poetic themes might be difficult for the uninitiated to grasp, but from Graves's standpoint the Muse-poet was not to be blamed for the reader's difficulty. For as Graves notes in *The White Goddess*, 'fancy played a negligible part in the development of the Greek, Latin and Palestinian myths, or of the Celtic myths until the Norman-French *trouvères* worked them up into irresponsible romances of chivalry'.²⁴ Since the poem resulted from collaboration between poet and Muse, the reader's place seems secondary; though of course the greater the reader's familiarity with the Greek, Latin, Palestinian and Celtic myths underlying the work, the greater his or her ability to find meaning in the poem.

Although there was a time when his limited output and recycling of past work were blamed almost exclusively on his drinking, immaturity and irresponsibility, Dylan Thomas was an obsessive editor and re-writer of his own poems. He was extremely careful in his composition of poems, and highly self-critical of his own writing. A word often applied to Thomas's work – especially to his earlier poems – is 'obscure'. Yet this was arguably not the result of laziness on his part, as he wrote to poet Glyn Jones in March 1934:

The fact that a good poem is obscure does mean that it is obscure to most people, and its author is therefore – contrary to his own ideas, for every poet thinks that he writes for an universal audience – appealing to a limited public. None of us today want to read poems which we can understand as easily as the front page of the Express, but we all want to get out of the poems twice as much as we ourselves put into them. [...] My own obscurity is quite an unfashionable one,

based, as it is, on a preconceived symbolism derived (I'm afraid all this sounds very woolly and pretentious) from the cosmic significance of the human anatomy.²⁵

One has the feeling that Robert Graves might have endorsed the above, had it read 'a preconceived symbolism derived from the cosmic significance of the Muse'. This lends support to the conclusion that Graves rejected Thomas as a fellow poet because Thomas was not Muse-inspired.

On the basis of an examination of two short poems it is possible to discern the central difference between the poetic approaches of Graves and Thomas. Dylan Thomas, 'In My Craft or Sullen Art' (from *Deaths and Entrances*, 1946):

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light
Not for ambition or bread
Or the strut and trade of charms
On the ivory stages
But for the common wages
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart
From the raging moon I write
On these spindrift pages
Nor for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.²⁶

Robert Graves, 'Recognition' (from *New Poems*, 1962):

When on the cliffs we met, by chance,
I startled at your quiet voice
And watched the swallows round you dance
Like children that had made a choice.

Simple it was, as I stood there,
To penetrate the mask you wore,
Your secret lineage to declare
And your lost dignities restore.

Yet thus I earned a poet's fee
So far out-distancing desire
That swallows yell in rage at me
As who would set their world on fire.²⁷

One element missing from 'Recognition' is the place of the reader. The Moon-goddess, the Muse, is the female element needed to create the poem, and the poet is the male element. The reader is presumed to be out there, of course, but more as sympathetic observer than as participant.

Dylan Thomas, too, labours not for 'bread', but rather for the sake of the lovers whom he is observing. These lovers are, moreover, not even readers; they are not aware of the poet's words, do not choose him, 'pay no heed to' his craft or art. The poet is not himself a lover, but rather serves the lovers selflessly, at a distance, in a way that would arguably not have been meaningful to Robert Graves.

'Recognition', expressing as it does the concept of the Muse-poet, can be viewed with 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice', a clear statement of Graves's poetics. 'To Juan' is steeped in both non-Christian and Christian symbolism, and may be said to encapsulate the central idea and themes of *The White Goddess*:

There is one story and one story only.

Dwell on her graciousness, dwell on her smiling,
Do not forget what flowers
The great boar trampled down in ivy time.
Her brow was creamy as the crested wave,
Her sea-grey eyes were wild
But nothing promised that is not performed.²⁸

‘To Juan’, moreover, may be seen as a companion-piece to ‘In Dedication’ from the opening of *The White Goddess*:

But I am gifted, even in November
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense
Of her nakedly worn magnificence
I forget cruelty and past betrayal,
Careless of where the next bright bolt may fall.²⁹

By the time ‘Recognition’ was composed Graves was publicly and personally committed to the methodology of Muse-poetry as he himself defined it. For Graves the poet acts as mouthpiece for the Muse. The poet meets his lady by chance out on the cliffs, as the swallows fly over; his self-imposed task is to penetrate her disguise, reveal her identity as mother, lover, layer-out, thus earning his ‘poet’s fee’ and serving the Muse who has chosen him, for as long as she chooses.

It may be argued that that the gap between Graves’s writing for his Muse and Thomas’s writing for the lovers is bridgeable. Is Thomas’s depiction of ‘the farm [. . .] / Shining, it was Adam and maiden’ that different from Graves’s depiction of ‘Green sap of Spring in the young wood a-stir’ / [which] Will celebrate the Mountain Mother’?³⁰ Considered in these terms, the symbolism employed by both poets seems closely related. But Graves would probably not have agreed that as a Muse-poet he wrote ‘for’ the Goddess/Muse. Where does servant end and mistress begin? During the period in which he is chosen by a Muse there is a synthesis between the two entities which constitutes the

underlying condition for poetic creation.³¹ It would thus have been unlikely for Graves to have acknowledged Thomas as a fellow Muse-poet, despite similarities in themes and symbolism.

This short comparison of the two poets leads to two possible directions for students of Graves's poetic *oeuvre*. There is, firstly, the question of the influence on his work of his growing commitment to 'Muse-poetry'. What changes – if any – can be discerned in his poetry as a result of his personal and public adoption of the Muse-poet methodology?

Secondly there are intriguing questions of influence. In 'The God Called Poetry' Graves quotes the eponymous two-headed god:

Then speaking from his double head
The glorious fearful monster said
'I am YES and I am NO,
Black as pitch and white as snow,
Love me, hate me, reconcile
Hate with love, perfect with vile,
So equal justice shall be done
And life shared between moon and sun.
Nature for you shall curse or smile:
A poet you shall be, my son.'³²

If poetry is the father, then Graves is the son. As a poet Graves was able to adopt the role of follower, worshipper, of a goddess. Was he able, as well, to adopt the role of son, of worshipper, of a god? If taken literally, the above verse indicates a positive answer. Thus a second direction for scholarly inquiry might be whether Graves may be seen as a son of Dylan Thomas, whom he outlived, as well as of other fellow-poets; and this despite Graves's unsought-for role as a father-figure to such poets as Thomas. In other words: Who is the son? Who is the father?

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NOTES

¹ Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (London: Heinemann), p. 178.

² *Ibid.*, p. 163.

³ *The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary and Cultural Criticism*, ed. by Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 192.

⁴ Paul Ferris, *Dylan Thomas: A Biography* (New York: Dial Press, 1977), p. 95.

⁵ Robert Graves, 'These Be Your Gods, O Israel!' [sixth Clark Lecture], *The Crowning Privilege: Collected Essays on Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955), pp. 132–160 (p. 154).

⁶ Besides the five poets on whom the lecture focuses, Graves refuses to 'dwell on' another two poets, 'the lesser idols now slowly mouldering: on sick, muddle-headed, sex-mad D. H. Lawrence who wrote sketches for poems, but nothing more; on poor, tormented Gerard Manley Hopkins' (*ibid.*, p. 157).

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁹ Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1996), pp. xvii, 309.

¹⁰ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), pp. 9–10.

¹¹ Seymour, p. 309.

¹² Dwight D. Eisenhower, *Public Papers of the Presidents, Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 1960, pp. 1035–40,
<<http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/indust.html>>
[accessed 24 September 2012]

¹³ *The White Goddess*, p. 14.

¹⁴ Robert Graves, 'The God Called Poetry', *The Complete Poems in One Volume*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2000), p. 302. All quotations of Graves's poems are from this volume.

¹⁵ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), p. 288.

¹⁶ Ferris, pp. 19, 21.

¹⁷ Graves, *Complete Poems*, p. 71. Published in *Country Sentiment* (1920).

¹⁸ Dylan Thomas, *Dylan Thomas: The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Jones (London: Dent, 1971), p. 196.

¹⁹ Constantine Fitzgibbon, *The Life of Dylan Thomas* (London: Dent, 1965), p. 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

²¹ John Ackerman, *Dylan Thomas: His Life and Work* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 16.

²² Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 33.

²³ Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* (1943) (London: Cape, 1967), p. 39.

²⁴ *The White Goddess*, p. 13

²⁵ *The Selected Letters of Dylan Thomas*, ed. by Constantine Fitzgibbon (London: J. M. Dent, 1966), pp. 96, 97.

²⁶ *Dylan Thomas: The Poems*, p. 197.

²⁷ Graves, *Complete Poems*, p. 515.

²⁸ Graves, *Complete Poems*, p. 405–06.

²⁹ *The White Goddess*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ For a discussion of poet and Muse, see Julia Simonne, ‘Dance of Words’, in this issue of *Gravesiana*.

³² Graves, *Complete Poems*, p. 71.