

Pitiless Opportunism

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The White Goddess: An Encounter by Simon Gough

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Reading this book I am put in mind of two quotations. The first is from Yeats's 'Dialogue of Self and Soul', where he reflects upon the humiliating myopia of human existence, in particular

A blind man battering blind men;
Or into that most fecund ditch of all,
The folly that man does
Or must suffer, if he woos
A proud woman not kindred of his soul.¹

For here, in Simon Gough's *The White Goddess: An Encounter*, there is fecundity and to spare, with folly and suffering in equal measure. A large part of this has its origin in the Promethean desires of Gough's grand-uncle Robert Graves, and his concept of the poet-muse bond. Readers of the various standard biographies of Robert Graves – those by Martin Seymour-Smith, Richard Perceval Graves, Miranda Seymour – as well as of his selected letters – Paul O'Prey's *Between Moon and Moon* in particular – will be familiar with Graves's dealings with his four muses (we exclude Laura Riding), following a repeated cycle of enthrallment, heightened poetic powers, inevitable betrayal, and ensuing desolation – 'until the real thing comes along' (one could do worse than study the lyrics of that Billie Holiday song, particularly when it comes to 'With all the words, dear, at my command, / I just can't make you understand').² And those same biographies have told us as much as we hitherto could, if not should, know about his relationship with the second of those four muses, Margot Callas, and certainly enough to provide an unnecessary prose gloss to the poems she inspired, to be found mainly in *More*

Poems 1961 and *New Poems 1962*. Pushed to her limit by the supposedly subservient poet's importunate demands, the muse-woman defects, abandoning the poet for another, leaving him distraught, family and friends dismayed, loyalties put to the bitter test. But poems are forthcoming – which was the not-so-subliminal aim all along. It is a sleight-of-hand, one which distributes misery all round, but allows the poet to go on writing. As de Rougemont observed: 'Happy love has no history'.

But while Robert Graves is clearly the drawcard for this book's commercial success, the protagonist is the author, Simon Gough. 'Who he?' the general reader might be forgiven for wondering. The most he gets in any of the standard biographies is an acknowledgement that he is Graves's grand-nephew, and the person who designed and constructed the outdoor theatre in Graves's Mallorcan garden. Otherwise he is totally eclipsed by the drama of which his grand-uncle Robert is producer, author and male lead. In this book, however, he finally makes himself heard, and what we hear is alternately gripping, embarrassing, painful, fascinating, urgent, depressing. The seventeen-year-old Simon visits Deyá for the second time in his life, where he falls passionately in silent, forbidden love with Graves's second muse, Margot. His grand-uncle binds him, as one of the family, to watch over her when the two are in Madrid, where Simon is studying at the university, and report to him concerning her welfare. She in turn binds Simon, as one completely enthralled by her, to say nothing concerning her plan to defect with 'the real thing', Graves's trusted friend and collaborator Alistair Reid. The balloon eventually goes up and the luckless Simon is both betrayed and excoriated on all sides, thrust out of the Mallorcan paradise he considers his spiritual home, and left for years nursing a festering wound until he attempts his own cure by writing it all out – a process strongly reminiscent of his grand-uncle's perception of the cathartic nature of poetry: 'The poem is either a practical answer to his problem, or else it is a clear statement of it; and a problem clearly stated is half-way to solution.'³

Which brings me to the second quotation, from Tom Mac

Intyre's poem 'Appalachia': 'I'm talking of the hurt mind, / hurt mind in wait and knowing / as the hurt mind knows'.⁴ What happened to the young Gough was little short of atrocious, subjected by each of the principal parties to emotional blackmail, physical threat, and an injunction to observe fidelity, loyalty, honesty when the values those same parties were displaying were infidelity, disloyalty and dishonesty. The situation as Gough presents it, though he does not judge it in these terms, is strongly reminiscent of the evil proceedings in 35A St Peter's Square, London, in 1929, and later, in 1939, in New Hope, Pennsylvania, where relatively innocent individuals were persecuted, and in one case driven clinically insane, in the interests of a pitiless opportunism masquerading as an aesthetic.

The purpose of Gough's book is to somehow come to terms with that 'hurt' by reliving it, which gives to his work an unusual degree of intensity. An erstwhile actor himself, his method is reminiscent of the Stanislavskian technique of 'sense memory', whereby in preparing for his part the actor describes a scene from his past in as minute a detail as possible, so that out of the painstaking accumulation of multiple sense data suddenly flowers forth the feeling that once accompanied them. Helping Gough in this is his use of the *speculum* – 'a surgical instrument for dilating orifices of the body so as to facilitate examination' (*OED*) – employed by Graves himself in such early poems as 'Lost Love' and 'Down'. For the book is dense with precise and vivid description – witness his Goya-esque first night in Madrid – but not so as to put a brake on its pace. Just over 600 pages long, it can nevertheless be read at an extended sitting – in that sense an 'easy' read, though by no means a facile one. Gough writes very well indeed. Here he is, making mayonnaise for his supper with Margot in one brilliantly negotiated sentence:

Garlic peeled, crushed, finely diced, added with a splash of vinegar, whisked fiercely to help evaporate the sinal tears of the vinegar, a squeeze of lemon, blanching and slightly thinning the emulsion, then a

draught of the cold white wine – for me – biting its way like a rabid dog down my throat, bringing cold tears to my eyes, strengthening my arm as I thrashed the sauce again, then finger-stripped the thyme leaves against the grain, chopped them coarse, chucked them in with a pinch of sugar to counteract the garlic, then salt and ground pepper to release the taste, tasted it, beat it, added more salt to sting the blandness of the chicken into life, and left it to infuse in the heat of the kitchen. (pp. 469–70)

This passage is in a certain way a culinary equivalent of what Gough has done to himself in writing his book. As he says in the seven-minute documentary *Nunc Dimittis*: ‘I come here every day of my life – except Christmas Day and the occasional Sunday – and rip myself open’.⁵ This seemingly extravagant statement settles somewhat into sobriety when we learn from the same film that Gough started this book in 1988 under threat of an incurable cancer. The work, then, has been the product of nearly a quarter of a century, time enough for it to attain its present level of linguistic precision and syntactical balance, the energy behind the writing keeping at bay the physical disease while it seeks to identify the more deep-rooted malady set on foot some thirty years earlier. As Mac Intyre observed in an unpublished interview: ‘If you can’t deal with the hurt mind you’re into violence of whatever mode.’ Clearly Gough considers that he *has* now dealt with it, concluding *Nunc Dimittis* with the words ‘Lady, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.’

At this point I must needs introduce my ‘however’s’. Firstly, while the accuracy and vividness with which an author describes the external scene might dispose us favourably towards his description of the internal scene, there is a limit to our patience with reiterations of love and beauty, and in some cases, as with certain scenes in films, we can only avert our eyes:

I buried my face in the hot sheen of her neck, beneath

her dark hair, the trail of her indescribable scent dragging my lips upwards to the smooth secret place behind her ear where she hid it, the delicate cartilage of her ear pressing back like a kiss against my lips as I slid from there to her eyebrows, to her closed eyes, to the hollow of her cheek, to her full soft lips at last opening to the urgency of mine, into the deepest mystery of my life as the storm raged around us, jolting her body with every deafening peal of thunder, the palms of my hands huge with passion, kneading her back, pressing her to me, sliding downwards over her nakedness beneath the thin smooth silk of her kaftan, drawing her hips towards me . . . (p. 479)

Here I break off, before the lady becomes mayonnaise.

Secondly, the book is planted with signposts, often unobtrusive but nevertheless persistent, pointing towards the magical, the weird, the unexpected, the fated, to do with the strange timelessness of Deyá, which then extends to include the people (not the Mallorcans, of course, but the susceptible foreigners). Here is Juan Graves talking to Simon about Margot:

But the point is, it's Deyá that made her happen, that brought her here, just as it brought Father here. And you, maybe. Father says these mountains are magnetic, which is why we're all dragged back, even against our will [. . .]. But the thing is, we can't stop it. No one can, unless they anger this place, and then the rocks here break anyone who doesn't show respect. Either they kill them or banish them – a bit like Father. (p. 349)

If this seems a little extreme, listen to the measured tones of Beryl Graves comforting the luckless Simon with her Greek Chorus interpretation of the deplorable events:

‘Everything that’s happened has been a self-fulfilling prophecy,’ she said at last. ‘By which I mean that no one could have done anything of their own free will, try as they might – not Robert, not Margot, not you, not even Alistair, though I hate to admit it . . . The vision – and it *was a vision* – was Robert’s, and everyone has played their part in it, as he foresaw they would . . . I just can’t believe I could have been so blind not to have seen it while it was happening – but perhaps that was *meant*, too. As I say, you were as helpless as the others, and if I’m to believe you – which I *do* – then you were as blind as I was until the end. Everyone was blind in their way – except Alistair of course – the Twin, the betrayer – but then his part was to see his chance and take it . . .’ (p. 609)

These words – which may or may not have been Beryl’s (the Foreword to the book begs its own question: ‘who, after so many years, could possibly describe every conversation and event of so long ago?’) – are words that Gough vehemently repeats in his *Nunc Dimittis*, which makes me wonder about the peace he prays to depart in. He seems to me to have embraced as a cordial the very draught that poisoned him originally. The ill, I would maintain, stems from Graves’s poetic, and infects all those close enough to his undeniably powerful, Prospero-like personality into succumbing to a Goddess-inspired determinism, when the plain truth is that the muse-poetic was devised to produce poems, which it did, and most of them of indifferent quality. Whatever one might think about Alistair Reid’s running off with Margot, it is refreshing to find, as Martin Seymour-Smith reports him saying, ‘that he and Margot had been “far too busy screwing” to worry much about the Gravesian mythology’.⁶

In his Foreword Gough promises a sequel to this first book: ‘the second, the aftermath, has yet to be finished’. Personally I’d rather read the twelve-page account ‘of everything that had happened,

from beginning to end' (p. 597) that the seventeen-year-old wrote tempestuously *in medias res* and then hid in a secret place where he recovered it some thirty years later – possibly a first edition of his own *Goodbye to All That*.

To end on a technical note, I should add that as a physical object the book is a pleasure both to hold and read. Galley Beggar Press is to be congratulated on the quality of its work

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NOTES

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1950), p. 267.

² <<http://www.metrolyrics.com/until-the-real-thing-comes-along-lyrics-billie-holiday.html>> [accessed 23 August 2013]

³ Robert Graves, *The Crowning Privilege* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 214.

⁴ T. Mac Intyre, *I bailed out at Ardee* (Dublin: Dedalus Press, 1987), p. 67.

⁵ <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j63fe8x87jI>> [accessed 23 August 2013]

⁶ M. Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 494.