

The Ultimate Trench: Poetic Consciousness and the Experience of War

Maria Palaska

This essay will concentrate on particular experiences of Robert Graves in the trenches during the First World War and their significance in the formation and articulation of the White Goddess as a poetic discourse and a personal poetic experience, as illustrated in Graves's essays and lectures and in his book *The White Goddess*.

More particularly, the essay will discuss how specific incidents and experiences in the trenches exercised a strong impact on Graves and most importantly on the formation of his theory concerning the liminality of the White Goddess and the dialectical engagement of the poet with her. My argument is that Graves reversed the negative effect of these experiences and in fact transformed them into the creative discourse that is the White Goddess.

For the purposes of my discussion, I will consider Graves's memoirs of the war *Good-bye to All That* as well as some of his poetry written during the war, and then I will show how particular experiences rendered in these works are reflected in the White Goddess.

One of the fundamental theses in the notion of the White Goddess, and indeed a point of departure for Graves's poetic discourse, is the distinction between what he terms Apollonian and Muse poetry, a distinction which owes an essential part of its existence to some of his own experiences during the war and the manner in which they were apprehended and assimilated by him.

The first encounter of the young Robert Graves with the reality of war occurred upon his arrival in France, while travelling to the trenches with the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

We marched through the unlit suburbs of the town. We were

all intensely excited at the noise and flashes of the guns in the distance. The men of the draft had none of them been out before, except the sergeant in charge. They began singing. Instead of the usual music-hall songs they sang Welsh hymns, each man taking a part. The Welsh always sang when they were a bit frightened and pretending that they were not; it kept them steady. They never sang out of tune. We marched towards the flashes and could soon see the flare-lights curving over the trenches in the distance. The noise of the guns grew louder and louder. Then we were among the batteries. From behind us on the left of the road a salvo of four shells came suddenly over our heads. The battery was only about two hundred yards away. This broke up *Aberystwyth* in the middle of a verse and set us off our balance for a few seconds; the column of fours tangled up. The shells went hissing away eastward; we could see the red flash and hear the hollow bang where they landed in German territory. The men picked up their step again and began chaffing.¹

While this incident encapsulates the absurdity of war, it more importantly signifies the antithetical relationship between creativity and warfare, a reminder of which lies in the very title of Graves's collection of poems *Fairies and Fusiliers*, published during the war. The inexperienced soldiers are at first excited by the 'noise and flashes of the guns in the distance', yet their initial thrill is abruptly substituted by shock and awe as they find themselves in the middle of combat and hence faced with the reality of war. The interruption of the hymn by the noise of the guns as well as the loss of equilibrium by the soldiers signify the military violation and desecration of creativity, vigour and essentially of life itself. The substitution of the melodious tune of the hymn by the loud, disturbing noise of the shells flying over the men's heads enhances the metaphoricity of this scene. Warfare is thus demystified by being stripped of its exoticised and romanticised quality and by manifesting itself as a crude reality.

This introduction of the young Graves to the reality of war is pivotal in his apprehension of it and attitude towards it and constitutes a significant influence on him, not only emotionally and psychologically but especially intellectually, inspiring his view that poetry is not exhausted in versification and communication of ideas but it is a *modus vivendi* and an existential condition. For Graves, war is not only a barbaric, absurd and monstrous project but is by nature antithetical to true inspiration and creativity. War is in fact the opposite of poetry as Graves understood poetry to be.

Another important war experience recounted in *Good-bye to All That* is that of encountering a dying soldier whose brains have been blown out. This encounter takes place while the young Robert Graves is walking around and cheerfully whistling a tune reminiscent of the peaceful life back home.

To-day, at one part, which was only twenty yards away from an occupied German sap, I came along whistling *The Farmer's Boy* to keep up my spirits, when suddenly I saw a group bending over a man lying at the bottom of the trench, He was making a snoring noise mixed with animal groans. At my feet was the cap he had worn, splashed with his brains. I had never seen human brains before; I had somehow regarded them as a poetical figment. One can joke with a badly-wounded man and congratulate him on being out of it. One can disregard a dead man. But even a miner can't make a joke that sounds like a joke over a man who take three hours to die after the top part of his head has been taken off by a bullet fired at twenty yards' range. (p.155)

This very powerful description further conveys the sharp contrast between vitality and creative expression (both typified in the act of whistling a musical tune) and raw warfare. The sight of the dying soldier, highly emblematic of the monstrosity of warfare, surpasses in shock and cruelty even the most well-composed literary figment, suggesting not only the diametrical opposition of

war and poetry but also the powerful impact of the former upon the latter and the latter's inability to register its crudity. For Robert Graves the experience of war in its totality had been an assertion of this contradiction which eventually gave rise to his unwavering belief in the catalytic effect of poetry on every facet of his life and existence.

The title *Fairies and Fusiliers* articulates the dichotomy which during the war years preoccupied and frustrated Robert Graves: on the one hand the Fusiliers: the realistic, the mundane, the cruel and monstrous; on the other, the Fairies: the abstract, the imaginative, the intangible, the liminal. This contraposition between war and creativity, and the impact it had on the young poet, are very well illustrated in the poem 'The Assault Heroic', which is permeated by the desire to reverse the dynamics of this relationship: the poet wishes not simply to escape warfare but to find himself in a position where he will be able through his poetic craft to transform the atrocities of the battle into a positive experience. The alchemy of thought which transmutes the stones into 'lumps of gold' and the boiling oil into a 'shower of dew' maintains its power only in the poet's dream in which the barbaric medieval battle assumes the form of a childish game. In the dream – a literary topos perennially favoured by fairies and other imagined creatures – poetry interferes with the battle and disturbs the atrocities, whereas in the real world, in which the poet finds himself upon waking up, it is the Fusiliers, the guns, the shells that disturb and violate the world of creativity, inspiration and true life. Despite the strong element of irony, which renders Graves's own frustration regarding the power of poetry over war and which aims at mocking the notion of heroism and heroic poetry, the poem is still a manifestation of the latent yet fervent belief in the ability of poetry to alter the perception of reality (this particular dream is of considerable psychoanalytic significance), and therefore in the apprehension of poetry as an experiential and existential condition. The particular choice of the verb 'alchemized' suggests the catalytic, almost mystical power of poetry over trivial or harsh experiences and its ability to recast them, to resynthesise reality

and thus transcend it.

This binary opposition of Fairies and Fusiliers, war and poetry, reality and imagination, rawness and creativity, which during the war seems to shock, perplex and frustrate Graves, is later manifested in the distinction between Apollonian and Muse poetry, a distinction which aims at asserting the significance and superiority of the White Goddess. It is in fact in the first lines of the poem 'In Dedication'² – a type of 'manifesto' for the White Goddess tradition³ – that the Gravesian contraposition to the classical idea of poetry as an Apollonian and therefore rational activity is introduced. The poet scorns the 'saints' and the 'sober men' who are 'Ruled by the God Apollo's golden mean' and embarks on a search 'In distant regions' to find the true source of inspiration and creativity.

According to Robert Graves, 'Apollonian poetry is an arrangement of reasonable opinions in a memorizable verse form, with carefully chosen semi-archaic diction lending them authority: in fact a form of rhetoric, which meets society's demand for the god of rational enlightenment rather than for the impractical Muse.'⁴ In other words, Apollonian poetry is a seemingly creative but in essence sterile rhetoric which emulates socio-political and cultural decorum and authority. On the other hand,

Muse poetry is composed at the back of the mind: an unaccountable product of a trance in which the emotions of love, fear, anger, or grief are profoundly engaged though at the same time powerfully disciplined; in which intuitive thought reigns supralogically, and personal rhythm subdues metre to its purposes.⁵

Muse poetry is the opposite of Apollonian poetry in the sense that it is 'composed at the back of the mind' and is not the product of cold rationality, yet it is not an anarchic, arbitrary form of expression but a combination of intuition and craft, a 'supralogical' process which does not merely contradict conventional logic and rationality but transcends it.

In the first chapter of *The White Goddess* Graves makes a substantive distinction between poets and gleemen (ancient Welsh court-bards who recited a certain type of poem that complied with the wishes of the King and later of the Church), suggesting that a true poet possesses a free, creative spirit which enables him not only to produce verses but to encounter and communicate the so-called 'Theme' which is the mystery of life. Graves therefore clearly distinguishes between rigid, sterile, rationally-orientated versification, and inspired poetry, which is composed supralogically; between, in fact, two modes of thinking: the rational, identified with authority and aggression, and the 'supralogical', identified with imagination, quiescence, creativity. While this opposition causes Graves tremendous frustration during the war years, it is eventually transformed into the conviction that true poetry which is 'composed at the back of the mind' is indeed powerful and ultimately superior to the rigid rationality which is inspired by the Apollonian manner of thinking.⁶ From Graves's perspective it was this Apollonian thinking which encouraged the war and condoned its cruelty. A true poet himself and not a gleeman who flatters authority and the status quo and echoes its rhetoric, he depicts war in all its monstrosity. Though an exemplary soldier who demonstrated valour and determination at the front, he was ideologically opposed to the war and to the British government and Establishment that encouraged it.

In one of his interviews he states: 'A poet is a person who lives and thinks in a certain way. A poet doesn't necessarily write poems. It is simply an attitude, and there are a great many more poets around than meet the eye.'⁷ Similarly, in *Poetic Craft and Principle* he writes that

poetry – even *Beowulf* – is not a department of literature as studied in the English School, but a way of being and thinking: as it were the power of walking down a familiar corridor and suddenly disappearing through a stone wall at the end. (p. 155)

Poetry is a particular outlook on life and a constant search for truth and knowledge. It is a profound and esoteric experience which penetrates and acts as a catalyst in every aspect of a person's life, and Graves actually practised this belief and took his role as a poet very seriously.⁸

Another war experience that is resonant in the theory of the White Goddess is the experience of trench warfare itself. Inherent in the trench both as a location and a concept is the notion of liminality. It is a locus of engagement with the enemy, but without actual confrontation with the enemy, who remains unknown and unidentified.

From a spatial point of view the trench is a liminal, in-between space, a threshold of victory and conquest. It is a fixed and geographically designated territory and at the same time the arena of the continuous struggle for conquest. The soldiers do not fight in the traditional manner, which involves a linear progressive movement towards the enemy and his territory, but are restricted to a minimal space where they are engaged in a process of a distant exchange of fire which in turn metaphorises the semantics of trench warfare. Fighting in the trenches is therefore not a clash in the traditional form of a confrontational, territorial fight but a peculiar form of warfare based on distant fighting and in that sense a precursor of the modern virtual war that we have been witnessing during the last few decades. This absence of linear movement combined with territorial restriction results in a transcendence of space, since the soldiers are physically in the trench but at the same time the impact of their military activity is on the other side of the wire where their shells and bullets conclude their deadly journey. Consequently the 'here' and the 'there' lose their fixed definitions and signification, they merge and are transformed into a liminal *Überspace* where boundaries and territorial demarcations are blurred. This *Überspace* signifies the spatial liminality inherent in the experience of trench fighting and which in turn suggests a temporal liminality where time is suspended precisely because of the absence of the traditional soldier-to-soldier confrontation. As a consequence of the distance,

exchange of fire can last from a few hours to days, resulting thus in an annulment of time. The 'now' and the 'then', the 'before' and the 'after' merge in the same manner that the 'here' and the 'there' do. Time as a linear process ceases to exist and instead it is transformed into a circular movement.

At the surface of the trench system the images of barbarization implicit in the image of the soldier as troglodyte codify the sense that trench warfare reduces men, pollutes them, and pushes them outside of the temporal and spatial fringes of civilization.⁹

For the soldiers who fight in the trenches liminality becomes a mode of existence. The enemy is not only unknown and unidentified but also liminal; the soldiers can occasionally capture several enemy soldiers or they can occupy a territory previously occupied by the enemy but the enemy as such transcends locality, personification, numeration. In the case of Graves and his fellow trench fighters the notion of enemy is typified in the name 'Fritz', which signifies individual German soldiers, a whole regiment or battalion, the German army in general, Germany itself. 'The invisibility of the enemy put a premium upon auditory signals and seemed to make the war experience peculiarly subjective and intangible'.¹⁰

This same notion of interaction with an unknown, unidentified and liminal other is at the heart of the discourse of the Goddess. The White Goddess does not actually correspond to a mythical or fictitious deity (though Graves uses mythical references when discussing her); she actually corresponds to this 'abstract concept' that lies behind poetic creativity. The very notion of liminality suggests a lack of a clear definition or rather the defiance of definition, perhaps even a transcendence of all definitions. In *The White Goddess* we are informed, 'A poet cannot continue to be a poet if he feels that he has made a permanent conquest of the Muse, that she is always his for the asking' (p. 442). It is therefore in the very nature of the Goddess to be intangible, unattainable,

and evanescent though immanent. She defies possession, locality and definition. Her existence can only be affirmed through poetic articulation; yet her existence may also depend on poetic consciousness. Whether she exists or not is completely irrelevant, in the same way that whether ‘Fritz’ exists beyond the trench wire is irrelevant. The importance lies in the soldier’s belief in the other side of the wire and his belief in the fight itself. Similarly, what is important in the White Goddess experience is the faith in the processes within the poetic mind while pursuing her and in the result of this pursuit. The ‘distant regions likeliest to hold her’ are the deepest and most latent layers of poetic consciousness and this paradox of the immanent yet distant nature of the White Goddess constitutes the Gravesian poetic activity. What Graves is actually suggesting here is the ultimate poetic challenge which consists of the inner, continuous and persistent pursuit of the unattainable.

The true Gravesian poet is first and foremost a celebrant of the White Goddess and more particularly of her most fundamental aspect and essential quality, which is her liminality. The poet’s personal quest for the Goddess is in fact the encounter and experience of her liminal nature which in turn determines this very quest and his poetic activity. Her remoteness is not a physical but a mental and psychological one. ‘The “distant regions” are primarily psychic, not geographic.’¹¹ She is a *terra incognita* located

at the volcano’s head,
Among pack ice, or where the track had faded
Beyond the cavern of the seven sleepers [...].¹²

‘There is even a bold emphasis laid on the paradox of wanting *knowledge* of what may be a mirage.’¹³ In other words, there is the desire of wanting a chimerical knowledge. The significance of the White Goddess for Graves is her catalytic role in his poetic activity and her tremendous appeal to his mental creativity and literary articulation.

The liminality of the White Goddess is in fact the liminality of

truth and knowledge. The Muse is not some other woman but the 'perpetual other woman', a constant reinvention of the poet which instigates and invigorates his creativity, and she is the touchstone for the poet's authenticity and talent. Consequently she is never fixed but evanescent and intangible. The terms 'unknown Muse' and 'perpetual other woman' suggest her a priori existence – defiant of a fixed identity – and the continuity inherent in the poet's quest. The word 'perpetual' clearly indicates the continuous and infinite search of the poet for her. This search, which is a manifestation of the desire for truth and knowledge and which characterises and distinguishes the poet, is in fact the pursuit of knowledge, of knowing the unknown, obtaining the unobtainable. She is the 'Sister of the mirage and echo'; she therefore possesses the qualities of impalpability and delusion which in turn suggests that she is perhaps imaginary and chimerical.

Robert Graves clearly suggests that the Goddess is a property and a product of the poetic mind and that she is as immanent and intangible as poetic thought and inspiration are. In fact he has argued that

writing a poem is rather like finding the top of a statue buried in sand. You gradually take the sand away and you find the thing, whole – that is what poetry is, rather than building something up. It's rediscovering what you've known inside yourself the whole time, what you've foreseen.¹⁴

Graves himself is so firm and positive about the chimerical nature of what he has named the Goddess that he leaves no room for scepticism and interrogation – 'despite the possibility that she is illusory the poet's tone is perversely confident, even jubilant'.¹⁵ Indeed, Graves seems to rejoice in the liminality of the Goddess and the perpetual pursuit for her and furthermore to consider them an essential quality of poetic activity. This paradox, namely the joy of the chase of the illusory, which characterises the White Goddess discourse is the main reason for the poet's attraction to

her. Graves is attracted to the liminal, which he sees as a female quality par excellence, and to the pursuit of it. It is liminality per se that fascinates him and invigorates his poetic activity. He does not see the quest for the chimerical Goddess as a vain Sisyphean toil or as a punishment of the kind that was inflicted upon Tantalus. On the contrary, he sees the liminality of the Goddess as a great challenge for the poetic mind and as an instigation of creative activity. Unlike the toil of Sisyphus and Tantalus, the poetic task is not condemned to a sterile and meaningless repetition but the search for the Goddess is itself a rewarding and progressive experience. In the last five lines of the poem 'In Dedication' he justifies his perilous quest:

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.

The poet acknowledges the role of the Goddess in his poetic and creative activity and feels girded with the inspiration and creativity that is granted to him as a reward for his quest and as a result of his will and bold determination to scorn 'the God Apollo's golden mean' and seek her 'at the volcano's head'. This pursuit of liminality is in fact the endless dialectical process of the poetic mind and constitutes the ultimate trench for the true poet.

University of Winchester, UK

NOTES

¹ Robert Graves, *Good-bye to All That: An Autobiography* (London Jonathan Cape, 1929), p. 131.

² *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, revised edition, ed. by Grevel Lindop (Manchester and London: Carcanet and Faber, 1997), p. 3.

³ Rikky Rooksby, 'A Graves Revision', *English Language Notes*, 21, 3 (1984), 53–57 (p. 54).

⁴ Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 97.

⁵ Robert Graves, *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (London: Cassell, 1962), p. 10.

⁶ It is noteworthy that in mythological as well as literary sources from antiquity some of the many symbolic qualities of Apollo are those of the god of rationality and poetry, but also the god of warfare and military activities. It is also interesting and perhaps inevitable to think of the Gravesian binary distinction between Apollonian and Muse poetry in relation to the Nietzschean binary opposition of the Apollonian and Dionysian elements.

⁷ 'Where the crakeberries grow – Robert Graves gives an account of himself to Leslie Norris', *Listener*, 28 May 1970
<<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~english/wwI/influence/graves.html>>
[accessed 3 March 2014]

⁸ Paul O'Prey, 'Out of Time: Robert Graves in Perspective', *PN Review*, November–December 2001, 42–45 (p. 43).

⁹ Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 139.

¹⁰ Leed, p. 19.

¹¹ Rooksby, p. 55.

¹² 'In Dedication', ll. 9–11.

¹³ Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (London: Athlone Press, 1969), p. 206.

¹⁴ 'Where the crakeberries grow', op. cit.

¹⁵ Kirkham, p. 206.