The Great War and Graves's Memory

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> We five looked out over the moor
> At rough hills blurred with haze, and a still sea:
> Our tragic day, bountiful from the first.
>
> We would spend it by the lily lake
> (High in a fold beyond the farthest ridge),
> Following the cart-track till it faded out.
>
> The time of berries and bell-heather;
> Yet all that morning nobody went by
> But shepherds and one old man carting turfs.
>
> We were in love: he with her, she with him,
> And I, the youngest one, the odd man out,
> As deep in love with a yet nameless muse.[1]

I quote these opening stanzas from 'The Last Day of Leave' by way of introducing what I want to do in this essay, and why. I want to consider poetry rather than prose, and this for the simple reason that poetry is what we remember. It is, to adapt a phrase from 'A Love Story', our lodgement of love on the cold ramparts of eternity.[2] It is the form we instinctively turn to in order to record what matters to us most, because everything about poetry is designed to strengthen that faculty which is the only means we have of resisting time – memory. If we remember poems, it is not necessarily because they are shorter, or because we were made to do so at school, but because they conspire through rhyme, rhythm, metre, assonance, alliteration, imagery – indeed, the whole prosodic armoury – to draw us into them, so that when we emerge we discover that they have become part of our being. *Goodbye to All That* is a remarkable book, but it does not live with me in the

same way as does 'The Last Day of Leave'. Likewise in 400 years' time, when Graves is as old as Shakespeare is now, *The White Goddess* may well be relegated to the 'also wrote' section, but his love will still shine bright in such lines as these:

> Have you not read
> The words in my head,
> And I made part
> Of your own heart?
> We have been such as draw
> The losing straw –
> You of your gentleness
> I of my rashness,
> Both of despair –
> Yet still might share
> This happy will:
> To love despite and still.[3]

And in considering poetry rather than prose I am placing the emphasis where, as we know, Graves himself would have it. The sacred book opens famously:

> Since the age of fifteen poetry has been my ruling passion and I have never intentionally undertaken any task or formed any relationship that seemed inconsistent with poetic principles […]. Prose has been my livelihood, but I have used it as a means of sharpening my sense of the altogether different nature of poetry […].[4]

A disinterested observer might wonder at those poetic principles, given some of the tasks Graves undertook, some of the relationships he formed, but no one can challenge the fact that if the twentieth century had a champion of poetry, it was Graves, so that when we read 'The Last Day of Leave', whose self-contained stanza-images are not unlike the leaves of a photograph album, it is inevitable that we should pause upon the group photo that

shows us 'the youngest one, the odd man out, / As deep in love with a yet nameless muse'. Nowhere in his work, I might remark, do we find so attractive a portrait of the young Graves as in this poem, just as nowhere else do we find the promise of that devastated generation so poignantly evoked. And had he shared the fate of so many of his contemporaries Graves would now be remembered but as one of the 'war poets', one of those 'promising' ones who might have for epitaph Ivor Gurney's lines:

> With all that power he died, having done his nothing …
> And none of us are safe against such terrible proving
> That time puts on men – Such power shown; so little done …
> Then the earth shut him out from the light of the sun.[5]

Fortunately he lived, and lived to fulfil Roger Ingpen's prophecy, made in 1919: 'Graves, I think, has the most perfect technique of any of his generation. He will survive most of them.'[6]

For Graves's championship of poetry was not simply a matter of what he wrote in his prose or pronounced in his lectures: it was based on the excellence of his poems. I recall the effect of those poems on me when I first encountered them in the 1959 collection, knowing nothing of Graves except what that volume contained. The rhetoric of Milton and Yeats I could get drunk on in those years, to the point where in dream I found myself, somewhat like Ancient Pistol, composing vast tracts of high-sounding verse – signifying nothing. But Graves's poems filled me with mingled wonder and perplexity. They were wonderful in their freshness, their variety of theme and tone, their many-faceted strategies, their power equally to excite and disconcert, to make you laugh and make you shiver, to occupy the mind alone – to borrow Yeats's phrase – or to strike to the marrowbone.[7] And for someone hopelessly in love as I was then, they provided an invaluable map of the Badlands.

But they were perplexing too: *Collected Poems 1959* was a bit

like entering some out-of-the-way curiosity shop, full of a brilliant diversity of objects, some recognisable, but many strange, puzzling, of the sort that would send you to the shopkeeper asking 'What was this for?' Many of the pieces, it seemed, required a key, not simply to what they meant individually but to how they related to one another – a key which I didn't have, then. True, the Foreword stated how the opening poem, 'In the Wilderness', shows 'where [he] stood at the age of nineteen before getting caught up by the First World War, which permanently changed [his] outlook on life', but the volume contained only two poems that established an explicit connection with the historical event. The majority of the poems contained violence and trauma enough, but seemed to relate to every kind of subject and situation except war: poems about nightmares, sexual problems, children's vulnerability, betrayal, isolation, irrational terrors, the hazards of love, the *Unheimlichkeit* of the modern age – to take only the dark side – all themes which peace itself is well able to provide. Only later did I come to realise that these seemingly disparate, discrete poems were all – web-like – intricately interconnected, and what linked them together was a sensibility working with mole-like energy to reconstruct a world in place of the one destroyed by the Great War – the one glimpsed on the brink of disaster in 'The Last Day of Leave'.

Looking at Graves's life as a whole, that was, I think, unarguably the main effect of the war upon him. Yeats writes in 'An Acre of Grass':

> Grant me an old man's frenzy,
> Myself must I remake
> Till I am Timon and Lear
> Or that William Blake
> Who beat upon the wall
> Till Truth obeyed his call […].[8]

Thanks to war, such frenzy was granted Graves when he was

young, and in remaking himself he found he had to remake the whole of western civilisation, whose course had culminated in the catastrophe of 1914–18. The Cloth Hall at Ypres, destroyed by bombardment, was piously restored to its original state. The ruins Graves emerged from, he left behind him to fend for themselves, and set about quarrying for older materials to restore civilisation to what it should have been. Chief tool in this quarrying was poetry itself. There is a real sense, then, in which the war is everywhere present in Graves's poems, even though very few refer to it explicitly. War was, if I can say so without seeming flippant, a kind of Big Bang that sent Graves on a quest for a new universe, a quest which was undeniably heroic, achieved remarkable discoveries on the way, established, indeed, a whole *Weltanschauung* which one could accept as, if not historically true, then at least, to use his own distinction, philosophically so. It ended, I think, unhappily, in a monothematic solipsism which only once does he appear to call into question:

> Tell me, love, are you sick too
> And plagued like me with a great hole in the mind
> Where all those towers we built, and not on sand,
> Have been sucked in and lost; so that it seems
> No dove, and no black cat, nor puff of smoke
> Can cause a shift of scene and fetch us back
> To where we lie as one, in the same bed?[9]

So concludes 'A Shift of Scene', one of the innumerable muse poems Graves wrote in his later years, yet unique in its despairing realisation – again in neo-astronomical terms, this time of the black hole – that the whole magnificent structure of the White Goddess has, like the cloud-capp'd towers of Prospero's vision which these lines recall, dissolved and left not a rack behind. For the twentieth century, which opened in nightmare, for Graves ended so. When visited by a Spanish journalist in his extreme old age he was troubled by three things: he did not know where his

passport was; he was afraid that mechanical diggers were coming to destroy his garden; he was tormented by remorse for the men he had killed in the war, regarding himself as a murderer. The facelessness, mechanisation, and violence of our age could scarcely be more succinctly emblematised.

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Having taken so broad a survey of Graves's development and the war's part in it, I seem to have left myself with an alarmingly free hand, for it would seem that there is nothing in his poetry that could not be found in some way, direct or indirect, to be related to war, either by way of reaction, reinforcement, or original contribution. Indeed, a veritable Pandora's Box of biographical and psychological complications opens up when one attempts to determine the precise part war played in forming the essential ingredients of Graves's aesthetic. Terror, isolation, betrayal, hope, humour – Graves did not have to wait until 1914 to experience these, however much war may have confirmed them. (I should point out here the immense debt of gratitude we owe Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward for their masterly edition of Graves's *Complete Poems*. We have again Graves's 'war poems' which, while they contain nothing comparable in stature to, say, Rosenberg's 'Dead Man's Dump' or Owen's 'Insensibility', no satire equivalent to those hand-grenades of savage indignation which are Sassoon's proper claim to fame, are nevertheless invaluable in showing us not simply what Graves was to become after the war, but what he was before and how he tried to contain it.) Again, if the experience of war and its vocabulary enters Graves's poems about love – to an extent that one sometimes wonders whether love is not the pursuit of war by other means – it is because only war could provide an analogy suitably fundamental to his needs, just as only the terrors of childhood were adequate to measure the nightmares of neurasthenia. In short, we find ourselves considering not simply the effect of the war upon Graves but the effect of Graves, so to speak, upon the war. Humour, for example,

of which Graves has a highly developed sense, is a constant presence in his poetry. It is, he wrote in *The White Goddess*, 'one gift that helps men and women to survive the stress of city life'.[10] We know that the war strengthened Graves's determination to survive it, but it hardly caused the sense of humour that helped him to do so. To escape this mare's nest of conjecture, then, I have decided instead to concentrate on three cardinal aspects of his poetry – a vision of despair, a code of survival, and a sense of the holiness of the created world – that give his work its defining characteristics of authority, distinction, and poignancy. I do not say that Graves's poetry would not have had these characteristics had the war not occurred, but it is significant that the poems that best reflect them have to do with that war.

A vision of despair. Graves's abiding preoccupation is with time, with history as a meaningless cycle of phenomenal events bereft of the noumenal. One stanza from his poem "Knowledge of God", written in the twenties, is eloquent of Graves's increasing dismay at a Godless universe:

> The caterpillar years-to-come
> March head to tail with years-that-were
> Round and around the cosmic drum;
> To time and space they add their sum,
> But how is Godhead there?[11]

Emerging from the war, Graves confronted every kind of difficulty that neurasthenia, marriage, and economic survival could throw up, not to mention the condition of the world at large, but the problem underlying all was how to attain to some form of existence, some spiritual orientation, that would make sense of time. Certainly every poet is conscious of time, and some, like Hardy, Edward Thomas, Eliot, or Larkin, more explicitly conscious of it than most. But they do not struggle in its net in the way Graves does. Where they tend to acquiesce, in various degrees of dignity, weariness, querulousness or dread, Graves

wrestles like Jacob. For while more fortunate generations become aware of the true meaning of time only after a great deal of it has passed, Graves's generation had its nose thrust into it very early on, and so he fights it with all the energy and determination to survive that went into his wartime poetry, believing that a poet should have a spirit not only above wars, as he wrote to Owen,[12] but above time as well.

A brief anecdote: on the one occasion I met Graves I asked him, with a callow earnestness that still makes me blush, whether the most important event in his life was not in fact the war. 'No, no!' – eyes brightening and that rather disconcerting Rigaudian smile – 'it was my death! I am, you know, one of the *deuteropotmoi*, the second-fated.' I confess I was a bit thrown by this, just as I was thrown later on when, while we were weeding in his garden, he informed me that he was going to rebuild Claudius's shrine at Colchester. I took that as metaphor for some essay or article he was going to write, or a reference to the forthcoming BBC series, until he fixed my eye, looking down at me from his height: 'Claudius is a god, you know.' I stood corrected, albeit somewhat unsure of my ground. I mean, which world were we in? Likewise I thought at the time that this mention of the *deuteropotmoi* – Graves had recently aired the word in *Poetic Craft and Principle* – was but the pinning-on of another badge of distinction to prove he was not as other men are. But reconsidering Graves's work I find myself again standing corrected. For this consciousness of mortality, this awareness of the significance of time at an age when normally it is regarded as endless, brutally thrust upon Graves by the war, emblematically stamped upon his life by his officially reported death, runs throughout his poetry, determining its course, just as it determined the kind of tasks he undertook and the kind of relationships he formed. Laura Riding, for example, had many holds upon Graves, but one of her strongest was her premise that 'historic Time had effectively come to an end'.[13]

Time, I would hazard, even more than love, is the abiding preoccupation of Graves's poetry, and its action –

> Time is Time's lapse, the emulsive element coaxing
> All obstinate locks and rusty hinges
> To loving-kindness.[14]

– is central to the poem 'Recalling War'. The war made contrary claims on its survivors, demanding simultaneously that they forget and remember. On the one hand it implanted in their minds images they could not bear to live with, as in Ivor Gurney's 'To His Love', a poem that seems to be leading us towards a pathetic Housmanesque conclusion, only to reveal an awful horror:

> Cover him, cover him soon!
> And with thick-set
> Masses of memoried flowers –
> Hide that red wet
> Thing I must somehow forget.[15]

On the other hand it demanded to be remembered, whether publicly, as in the formal Armistice Day commemoration, or privately, as in Sassoon's impassioned 'Aftermath' and its reiterated refrain:

> *Have you forgotten yet?. . .*
> *Look up, and swear by the green of the spring that you'll never forget.*[16]

That was in 1919. In 1933, however, we find Sassoon writing this:

> Not much remains, twelve winters later, of the hater
> Of purgatorial pains. And somewhat softly booms
> A Somme bombardment: almost unbelieved-in looms
> The day-break sentry staring over Kiel Trench crater.[17]

Pain gone – and with it, meaning. Graves, however, confronting the same phenomenon, refuses to be plomossed – nice Irish word, plomossed: it means soft-soaped – and in 'Recalling War' sets about analysing the Janus face of time, healer and destroyer both, for in enabling us to forget the past it sets us on the course to

future disaster.

'Recalling War' – I am going to use a word Graves disliked but one cannot help that – is a great poem, for no other poetic utterance of Graves's brings so much of his experience as a man and as a practising poet to bear upon so fundamental a theme, attaining in the process to a substance and authority that are – to use a word he does like – ungainsayable. I shall not subject the reader to a detailed practical criticism, but I must say something to justify my enthusiasm. Firstly, its structure, which is determined by the 'recalling' of its title. Five stanzas long, it resembles a kind of triptych, much in the manner, curiously enough, of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', which also records a creative journey out of the quotidian into imaginative recreation. The flanking panels – stanzas one and five – view the war as it appears in sepia-tinted retrospect, while the central panel plunges us into the highly-charged world of the moment. So we are taken from the present into a vividly recreated past which we eventually emerge from but, like Coleridge's wedding guest, no longer the same.

Secondly, its medium, blank verse. 'To break the pentameter', wrote Ezra Pound famously, 'that was the first heave'.[18] Except that he didn't. Graves, in his lifelong preoccupation with the physical side of poetry, was, like Yeats, well aware of the benefits of rhyme, the gnomic intensity of trimeters and tetrameters. Yet for this poem he chooses the iambic pentameter, the line best capable of simultaneously describing, arguing, and reflecting upon argument, and, in its humane flexibility, a kind of prosodic emblem for civilisation itself – and he is a master of it. This is how it enacts the imperturbable inevitability of time the healer:

> Their war was fought these twenty years ago
> And now assumes the nature-look of time,
> As when the morning traveller turns and views
> His wild night-stumbling carved into a hill.

– or the Guernican violence of the instant moment:

> Down pressed the sky, and we, oppressed, thrust out
> Boastful tongue, clenched fist and valiant yard.

– or the Wagnerian delirium of the body given full licence:

> Never was such antiqueness of romance,
> Such tasty honey oozing from the heart.
> And old importances came swimming back –
> Wine, meat, log-fires, a roof over the head […].

Finally, note the superb manner in which the fifth stanza, returning us to the present, makes us feel that the way we look back on the past is not simply inevitable, but culpable:

> And we recall the merry ways of guns –
> Nibbling the walls of factory and church
> Like a child, piecrust; felling groves of trees
> Like a child, dandelions with a switch.
> Machine-guns rattle toy-like from a hill,
> Down in a row the brave tin-soldiers fall:

One can hardly underestimate the effect of that pivotal 'And we recall': we should remember, and we cannot, a paradox that dooms us:

> A sight to be recalled in elder days
> When learnedly the future we devote
> To yet more boastful visions of despair.

Thirdly, language and imagery. Originally this poem was entitled 'Remembering War', but before publishing it Graves changed it to its present 'Recalling War'. Why he should have done so the poem itself makes clear: the war cannot be remembered as it was, precisely because time has rendered it innocuous. The problem confronting him, then, is what language to use in order to answer the question that introduces the central three stanzas: 'What, then,

was war?' The first and last stanzas are littered with the paraphernalia of World War I – wooden limbs, polished scars, artillery, machine-guns, suicidal attacks – which are presented with varying degrees of irony, but are historically recognisable. For that very reason they have become infected by time, and cannot be used to answer the question, the less so for the fact that Graves is not interested in the war as an historian, but as someone who was caught up in it, Walt Whitman's 'I am the man, I suffered, I was there'.[19] In these central stanzas, then, while retaining a regular syntax, he nevertheless exchanges the realistic mode for the surrealistic, Paul Nash for Salvador Dali. And indeed, what is remarkable about these central stanzas is how pictorially vivid they are:

> What, then, was war? No mere discord of flags
> But an infection of the common sky
> That sagged ominously upon the earth
> Even when the season was the airiest May.
> Down pressed the sky, and we, oppressed, thrust out
> Boastful tongue, clenched fist and valiant yard.
> Natural infirmities were out of mode
> For Death was young again […].

Graves was always accomplished in the art of the emblematic – I think of poems like 'Love Without Hope' or 'The Furious Voyage' – but whereas in those examples the stage is occupied by human figures, here the *dramatis personae* are in the main abstractions, personifications, allegorical figures. Phrases vary between the archaic – 'valiant yard' – and the contemporary – 'out of mode', or between the quasi-clinical – 'premature fate-spasm' – and the literary – 'Fear made fine bed-fellows'. The effect of this mingling of modes – less self-conscious in Graves than in, say, Eliot or David Jones – is to elude time, break through the linearity of history to reach the timelessness that underlies all historical progression, the primeval 'ugly earth' to which we all belong, and

all return.

Finally, the tone of the poem. In 1949, in *The Common Asphodel*, Graves wrote:

> My whole-hearted devotion to poetry has not changed in the interval, but I no longer use psychological or philosophical terms when writing about it, and for the last twenty-two years have abandoned the view that the poet is a public servant ministering to the caprices of a world in perpetual flux. I now regard him as independent of fashion and public service, a servant only of the true Muse, committed on her behalf to continuous personal variations on a single pre-historic, or post-historic, poetic theme; and have thus ceased to feel the frantic strain of swimming against the stream of time.[20]

It was a not position he would change, as we discover in his Foreword to *Collected Poems 1965* where he observes, as if *sub specie aeternitatis*: 'I cannot deny my place in the late Christian epoch of two world wars and their horror-comic aftermaths.' If there is detachment in 'Recalling War', however, it is not of this order, the world well lost, but the bitter detachment of one who gazes unflinchingly upon the tragic, like Yeats in his 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen':

> We, who seven years ago
> Talked of honour and of truth,
> Shriek with pleasure if we show
> The weasel's twist, the weasel's tooth.[21]

And if we cannot remain unmoved by the resonant generalities of the poem's climactic fourth stanza, it is because Graves himself, Prospero contemplating the unregenerate Caliban, is not unmoved:

> War was return of earth to ugly earth,
> War was foundering of sublimities,
> Extinction of each happy art and faith

> By which the world had still kept head in air,
> Protesting logic or protesting love,
> Until the unendurable moment struck –
> The inward scream, the duty to run mad.

For frankly as he claims to dislike its present phase Graves nevertheless believes, as Lionel Trilling observed, in the concept of civilisation. He has a feeling for courtesy, wit, good manners, honesty, domesticity, friendship, trust, order, stability, hard work - all civilised virtues, without which society would collapse into barbarism. It is not inappropriate, then, that what I would consider his greatest poem should have as its occasion the Great War for Civilisation.

Graves eventually suppressed 'Recalling War', as he did 'The Last Day of Leave', presumably because its involvement in the common fate of mankind was at odds with his allegiance to the timeless Muse. It is the more to be regretted, not solely because no other poem quite explains, as does 'Recalling War', exactly why Graves should seek out the Goddess, but also because that very involvement in the common fate of man – the 'we' of the poem are not the hieratic poets of 'The Fallen Tower of Siloam', but the people who went through World War I and are about to go through World War II – causes Graves to emerge the finer, man and poet.

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'Recalling War', in the context of Graves's poetry as a whole, is a kind of signpost pointing in two directions – one leading out of time, the other back into it. It is the former I am concerned with now, in considering the second cardinal aspect of his poetry, a code of survival.

> Though most of my comrades were content, after the War, to relax, find a safe job, marry 'the only girl in the world', and become respectable members of the British Legion, I swore a poetic oath never again to be anyone's servant but my own; and gradually grew more and more obsessed by

> poetic principle. Its sorrows and distresses proved in their way as acute as my war-time ones.[22]

Graves is a case of someone who, born different, had difference further thrust upon him, and then set out resolutely to consolidate difference. And this is proclaimed throughout his poetry, whether in its tone, the subjects he chooses to treat, or straightforward pronouncement. In fact, I can think of few poets who hold out such a natural fascination for themselves, for what it is that makes them unlike others. Yet this celebration of his uniqueness is not simple narcissism: it is a way of defending values he will not relinquish and so, by implication, a way of naming the enemy. Chief among those values is poetic truth, and its chief enemy what he came to call the 'mechanarchy'. And given that Graves notoriously makes no distinction between a poet's life and his work, it is inevitable that not only what he writes, but what he does and is, are all part of his Defence of Poesie.

> A poet cannot afford to identify himself with any organization formed for political, financial or ecclesiastic ends. There is no fixed rule for his social behaviour except to be himself and live in the company of those like-minded.[23]

So one of the hallmarks of Graves's poetry is the number and diversity of personae inhabiting it: a gardener, a butterfly, a china plate, legs, a great grandmother, a rocky landscape, Hannibal, a housewife – the list is apparently endless without even mentioning the poems in which he makes a frank personal appearance – all of whom, or which, are pressed into the service of distinguishing the true from the false, of defining the nature of integrity, of celebrating the probity of isolation in the defence of moral, and therefore poetic, excellence. Consequently another hallmark of the poetry, to say nothing of Graves's explicit pronouncements in prose, is a strong sense of 'them and us', which at times requires a certain agility on the part of the *hypocrite lecteur* if he is not to be caught in the wrong camp. Indeed, one of Graves's specialities is the 'trick' poem where the reader finds himself uncomfortably the

target rather than the complacent observer. Again, we had thought that a poet was a man speaking to men. 'Front Door Soliloquy' should cure us of that delusion:

> But you, you bog-rat-whiskered, you psalm-griddling,
> Lame, rotten-livered, which and what canaille,
> You, when twin lackeys, with armorial shovels,
> Unbolt the bossy gates and bend to the task,
> Be off, work out your heads from between the railings,
> Lest we unkennel the mastiff and the Dane –
> This house is jealous of its nastiness.[24]

We must needs become acclimatised to an atmosphere of *hauteur*, of an almost pharisaic *noli me tangere*, whose first successful expression in his poetry is probably 'Rocky Acres', with its 'Stronghold for demigods when on earth they go, / Terror for fat burghers on far plains below', and which continues throughout his verse to end in the contemptuous dismissal of the howling 'crowd of almost-men and almost-women' ('The Wedding') who are locked out of the truth enjoyed by the poet and his muse.

Personally I cannot pretend to like this climate in Graves in all its manifestations, any more than in Eliot or Lawrence. True, Graves did come to alter the dismissive assertion 'To write poetry for other than poets is wasteful'[25] by extending the word 'poets' to mean 'those like-minded, whether practising poets or not'[26] – which lets us squeeze in through the railings. But if the public world really does not matter, it is strange that it should so often be summoned in print to be informed of the fact. Part of the problem – and it is a problem when on occasion we feel ourselves in the presence not of the timeless but of a time warp – lies in the fact that after leaving England for Mallorca, the symbolic action of his life, Graves exchanged mongrel community for eclectic group. I wrote once about the sense of place, the customs and community presupposed by the work of any poet, whether obviously rooted like Graves's admired Thomas Hardy, or seemingly rootless like his one-time muse, Laura Riding. Graves himself lived most of his

life in Mallorca, but in no sense may he be called the poet of Mallorca. The island and its inhabitants figure in his poems – as do Wales and the Welsh – but by no means markedly. Rather the furniture of Graves's poetry, so to speak, the implied social background, is not Spanish but English, and not the contemporary England of Larkin, say, but Edwardian England, the society of his pre-war youth. The late poem 'Not at Home' is a perfect instance of this. That is to say, in this regard Graves presents himself as a colonial, for his position is pre-eminently the colonial's – he who refuses to be integrated fully into the country of his adoption, and yet will not return home because home is going to the dogs. The Queen is revered, her government detested. So he stays on in comparative isolation, defending abroad the values and standards that have been betrayed at home.

In short, Graves's plight is that of those other colonials, of whom he too was one, namely the trench-soldiers, condemned to defend at the front what at home was continually being traduced by politicians, priests, war-mongers, journalists, profiteers, munition-workers, pacifists, scabs, malingerers and white-feather-bearing young ladies. The only real community Graves knew, I suspect, was the community of the front line, the regiment, and he clung to it as to nothing else except poetry. Indeed, Graves was well-nigh unique among the war poets, in that while others celebrated their comrades he was the only one who saw fit, in his wartime verse, to celebrate the regiment and the regimental tradition. Of all those poems, then, written *nel mezzo del cammin della sua vita*, in which we find Graves seeking to define and justify his new position, the one that carries most gravity and conviction is 'The Cuirassiers of the Frontier'[27] and its remote world of changeless values:

> Goths, Vandals, Huns, Isaurian mountaineers,
> Made Roman by our Roman sacrament,
> We can know little (as we care little)
> Of the Metropolis: her candled churches,
> Her white-gowned pederastic senators,

> The cut-throat factions of her Hippodrome,
> The eunuchs of her draped saloons.
>
> Here is the frontier, here our camp and place –
> Beans for the pot, fodder for horses,
> And Roman arms. Enough. He who among us
> At full gallop, the bowstring to his ear,
> Lets drive his heavy arrows, to sink
> Stinging through Persian corslets damascened
> Then follows with the lance – he has our love.

The poem would seem to be a by-product of Graves's researches for Count Belisarius. But the verse, with its sinewy, resilient rhythms and trenchant vocabulary, is of such vigour and conviction as to make it more than the product of scholarly study. We are, in fact, in the presence of the Twenty-third Regiment of Foot, and the poem's true gloss lies in such a passage as this:

> […] ordinary civilised virtues had given place to heroic ones. We remained free because we were volunteers and bound to one another by a suicidal sacrament. Holding a trench to the last round of ammunition and the last man, taking a one-in-three chance of life when rescuing a badly wounded comrade from no-man's-land, keeping up a defiant pride in our soldierly appearance: these were poetic virtues. Our reward lay in their practice, with possible survival as a small bright light seen at the end of a long tunnel. We despised all civilians. […] The pride of 'bearing it out even to the edge of doom' that sustains a soldier in the field, governs a poet's service to the Muse.[28]

We all need some form of justification for the way we live, some external reference to underwrite the beliefs we hold, some bedrock upon which to build our towers: Graves was fortunate in not having to invent them, but to have lived them. Nor did he ever forget that he had been a captain in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. I remember asking him a question about what he meant by a certain

line in one of his poems – 'Recalling War', in fact. He took the book wearily, and gave a weary answer – as I probably deserved. Later on, though, when all had turned to singing and laughter, and he was doing a kind of soft-shoe shuffle, his face suddenly lit up and he observed to his youngest son, who was present: 'Your father was a captain, you know!'

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Thirdly, the holiness of the created world. We hear much, and rightly so, about Graves's wit, his humour, his playfulness indeed, as also about that toughness and cultivated exclusivity I have just been referring to. These are qualities we respond to in delight, admiration, and respect. I want here, however, to lay the emphasis on another quality, in the presence of which our response goes beyond delight, admiration, respect, and becomes something like warmth, fellow-feeling. We find it very early on in the war poem 'Dead Cow Farm':

> An ancient saga tells us how
> In the beginning the First Cow
> (For nothing living yet had birth
> But elemental Cow on Earth)
> Began to lick cold stones and mud:
> Under her warm tongue flesh and blood
> Blossomed, a miracle to believe;
> And so was Adam born, and Eve.[29]

Graves is a religious man, and like his great contemporaries Yeats and Eliot cannot conceive of life except in religious terms. War put an end to the faith of his fathers, and Graves wrote several satires to this effect – in this war Goliath kills David. But in 'Dead Cow Farm' he attempted something else, something that would locate heaven not there in the patriarchal sky, but here on mother earth, and for the sin of male pride that destroyed it, as he came to see it eventually, there is no forgiveness. For the Queendom Graves believes in would still be of this world. As his heroine in *Homer's Daughter* asserts: 'Of this I am certain: that no true life

exists beyond the life we know, namely the life beneath the sun, moon and stars'.[30]

After the war the naturally sanguine temperament of his youth went underground: 'Tenderness and pity the heart will deny' Graves the survivor wrote of the land he then annexed for himself, 'Rocky Acres', and in remaking himself developed a protective carapace compounded of wit, irony, arrogance and reserve. But that sanguine temperament was, under the influence of love, to emerge later in poems where Graves drops his guard, becomes vulnerable, and cares not who knows it. It manifests itself in the empathy that characterises the best of his love poetry, like 'Despite and Still' or 'The Straw', where Graves is not choreographing the relationship to serve his own interests, but is concerned for the other:

> Requited love; but better unrequited
> If this chance instrument gives warning
> Of cataclysmic anguish far away.
>
> Were she at ease, warmed by the thought of me,
> Would not my hand stay steady as this rock?
> Have I undone her by my vehemence?[31]

And under the influence of memory it emerges, too, in poems like 'Advocates', which go some way to righting the wrong done by the ruthlessness of *Goodbye to All That*:

> Green things, you are already there enrolled.
> And should a new resentment gnaw in me
> Against my dear companions of that journey
> (Strangers already then, in thought and deed)
> You shall be advocates, charged to deny
> That all the good I lived with them is lost.[32]

Memory, the direction leading back into time:

> What is a man,

If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? a beast, no more.
Sure he that made us with such large discourse
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god-like reason
To fust in us unused.[33]

Graves had a remarkable capacity for endurance, but he is not to be reckoned with the miller's man, in his poem of that title, whose imperviousness is less stoical than bovine.[34] He looks before and after. And if one of his greatest gifts is his readiness to start afresh, it is sobered by another, equally great: not to forget. As he puts it in 'A Lost World':

'Yet for that would I weep,
Kindly, before we kiss:
Love has a faith to keep
With past felicities
That weep for this.'[35]

'Remember / What you have suffered here'; so run the instructions to the Orphic adept.[36] Memory is the custodian of loyalty, and therefore of value, of integrity, a way out of the wheel of caterpillar years. 'The way to live is not to dissect existence' – so wrote Blunden in a most moving poem, 'In My Time', where he asks forgiveness for his abstraction as he revisits the past:

When I am silent, when a distance
Dims my response, forgive;
Accept that when the past has beckoned,
There is no help; all else comes second;
Agree, the way to live
Is not to dissect existence.

All the more waive common reason
If the passion when revealed
Seem of poor blood; if the silver hour

Be nothing but an uncouth, shot-torn tower,
And a column crossing a field,
Bowed men, to a dead horizon.[37]

Blunden's 'silver hour' is familiar to us now through photographs and dust-jackets. Graves's is different – a scene from peace, not war. 'The Last Day of Leave', Graves's finest evocation, substantiation indeed, of the holiness of the visible world and its creatures, needs no explication beyond the fact that it is a perfect example of what Alun Lewis meant by 'the *single* poetic theme of Life and Death … the question of what survives of the beloved'.[38] It is the lament, so the poem's preoccupation with nature would urge, for all that is unnatural in young life ruined, and it develops through sentence-stanzas that recreate the process of memory as the images float up from the past to present themselves, like the lilies of the lake, bright and distinct; the rhythm is flexible to any action, condition or observation, yet retaining an elegiac, spondaic gravity throughout; the movement of the poem as a whole making us aware of what is central to the 'tragic day' it commemorates – the passing of time, made more ominous by the thought of the morrow:

The basket had been nobly filled:
Wine and fresh rolls, chicken and pineapple –
Our braggadocio under threat of war.

The fire on which we boiled our kettle
We fed with ling and rotten blackthorn root;
And the coffee tasted memorably of peat.

Two of us might stray off together
But never less than three kept by the fire,
Focus of our uncertain destinies.

We spoke little, our minds in tune –
A sigh or laugh would settle any theme;

The sun so hot it made the rocks quiver.

But when it rolled down level with us,
Four pairs of eyes sought mine as if appealing
For a blind-fate-aversive afterword: –

'Do you remember the lily lake?
We were all there, all five of us in love,
Not one yet killed, widowed or broken-hearted.'

We all live in time. That is our common element, the context for all poetry and the occasion for most of it, if not its main theme. So Virgil wrote: *Sunt lacrimae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt*;[39] so too Owen, nearly 2000 years later:

Whatever grieves
When many leave these shores
Whatever shares
The eternal reciprocity of tears.[40]

Why are we so moved by such lines? I think of Emilia and her searing reaction to innocence and youth needlessly destroyed:

Thou hast not half the power to do me harm
As I have to be hurt. O gull! O dolt!
As ignorant as dirt! Thou hast done a deed, –
I care not for thy sword; I'll make thee known,
Though I lost twenty lives.[41]

It is, I think, this 'power to be hurt' – and *pace* Yeats and his passive suffering, because it is a power, and it manifests itself in truth-telling, 'I'll make thee known' – that we instinctively respond to in each of these excerpts, and if a poet does not possess it, his verse will penetrate no further than the anterooms of our consciousness. Graves, whom news of the Armistice caused not to 'burst out singing', but sent out 'walking alone along the dyke above the marshes of Rhuddlan […] cursing and sobbing and

thinking of the dead', possessed it.[42] And so he pronounces the 'blind-fate-aversive afterword' they look to him, as the poet, to utter, which is the only one he, as survivor, can utter – the poem itself.

The first Muse of the Greek triad was named Mnemosyne, 'Memory'.

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NOTES

[1] Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), pp. 161–62.
[2] Ibid., pp. 125–26.
[3] Ibid., pp. 135–36.
[4] *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 17.
[5] Ivor Gurney, 'Christopher Marlowe', *Collected Poems*, ed. by P. J. Kavanagh (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004), p. 227.
[6] Richard Church, *Eight for Immortality* (London: Dent, 1941), p. 99.
[7] W. B. Yeats, 'A Prayer for Old Age', *Collected Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 326.
[8] W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, p. 347.
[9] *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, p. 122.
[10] *The White Goddess*, p. 456.
[11] *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, p. 228–29.
[12] *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 596.
[13] Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-end: A Social History of Great Britain 1918–1939* (London: Faber, (1940), p. 200.
[14] 'Time', *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, pp. 54–55.
[15] Ivor Gurney, *Collected Poems*, p. 21.
[16] Siegfried Sassoon, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1947), pp. 118–19.
[17] 'War Experience', ibid., p. 216.

[18] Canto LXXXI, l. 53, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* ((London: Faber, 1954), p. 553.
[19] Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself', *Leaves of Grass*, New American Library (New York: Signet Classic, 1960), p. 78.
[20] *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), p. x.
[21] W. B. Yeats, *Collected Poems*, pp. 235–36.
[22] Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 109.
[23] *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 108.
[24] *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, p. 24.
[25] Foreword, *Poems (1938 –1945)* (London: Cassell, 1945).
[26] Robert Graves, *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (London: Cassell, 1965), p. 88.
[27] *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, pp. 80–81.
[28] *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 108–09.
[29] *Complete Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 38–39.
[30] Robert Graves, *Homer's Daughter* (London: Cassell, 1955), pp. ix–x.
[31] *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, pp. 201–02.
[32] Ibid., p. 111.
[33] *Hamlet*, IV. iv. 33–39, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, ed. by W. J. Craig (London: Oxford University Press, 1907).
[34] *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, p. 39.
[35] *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, p. 27.
[36] 'Instructions to the Orphic Adept', ll. 2–3, *Collected Poems*, vol. 2, pp. 146–48.
[37] *Georgian Poetry*, ed. by James Reeves (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 152–53.
[38] *The White Goddess*, p. 17.
[39] *Aeneid*, I. 462.
[40] 'Insensibility', Wilfred Owen, *Poems*, ed. by Edmund Blunden (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), p. 65.
[41] *Othello*, V. ii. 158–62.
[42] *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cassell, 1957), p. 246.