

Heroic Death: Robert Graves's War Experience in *The Golden Fleece*

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The following essay is an examination of Robert Graves's war experience as it appears in *The Golden Fleece*, written in 1944. In this same year both Graves's eldest son David and his fellow poet and correspondent Alun Lewis were killed.

Having witnessed the horror of the First World War twenty-five years previously, and now having to suffer the loss of his son and others as a result of the Second, it seemed to Graves that for two such disastrous events to occur within such a short period was an irrefutable demonstration of the complete failure of the patriarchal Judaic-Christian tradition. On revisiting humanity's earliest origins in *The Golden Fleece* and then in *King Jesus*, Graves proposes the case for a pre-Christian civilisation; for a return to the older religion whose followers accepted worship of the Goddess beyond the limitations of all patriarchal religious fundamentalism.

The Golden Fleece is the beginning of a poetic ideology concerning the Goddess, yet to a great extent the novel has been overlooked in Graves criticism. Although it has been argued by several critics that *The Golden Fleece* is significant only in so far as Graves was made aware of the 'ubiquity of the White Goddess',¹ scholars have ignored an important aspect concerning the genesis of the Goddess as a source of poetic inspiration. Graves did not view the Argos story as one of mere entertainment. In the introduction to *The Golden Fleece*, he maintains that the word 'myth' for the ancient Greeks 'had no connotation of untruth, as the adjective "mythical" has in modern English'.² It can be argued that Graves viewed literature as a means of extending and reinterpreting mythology towards a new understanding of life – 'mythopoeia' becoming the key to this new

interpretation of his world.³ Therefore, for Graves, the story of the Golden Fleece is one not necessarily based on fact but on a fundamental truth and a reason for the way things are.

Within the framework of the recovery of the fleece, Graves took the idea of the original concept of the Goddess and her many manifestations and reinvented the origins of the decline of civilisation. He perceives the struggle between the Gods and Goddesses as a battle of matriarchy versus patriarchy. The Goddess's sacred shrine is replaced by that of Zeus and covered by his holy relic, the Fleece. Out of revenge the Goddess has the fleece stolen and her shrine replaced. The Goddess explains that she has had 'to contrive a tortuous plot and pretend compliance with [the] religious innovations' (p. 71).

In *The Golden Fleece* Graves depicts the beginning of Zeus's supremacy. By doing so, he emphasises the catastrophic implications of the religious and political conflict. For Graves, the poet's place within this context of 'the old religion' is clear. In an essay from *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (1962) entitled 'The Personal Muse' he argues that the poet is wholeheartedly 'against the patriarchal system'.⁴ Graves objected that the feminine principle had been overshadowed and undermined by a hierarchy with a sun god as its centre. Matriarchal values, which existed before a time of patriarchal dominance, consisted of living in harmony and co-operation without competition. The replacement of matriarchy by patriarchy had caused the destruction of the world through chaos and war.

During the First World War Graves had difficulties in reconciling his life as a poet with his life as a soldier,⁵ and in understanding and rationalising the rapid changes in the world. The problem of not knowing where he stood philosophically – the decision, after all, to fight in a war had more to do with escaping from undergraduate life at Oxford than with any noble cause⁶ – was exacerbated by fighting in a war that to him and many others destroyed the concept of human progress. On 22 July 1916 Graves was so severely injured when an eight-inch shell exploded behind

him during the Battle of the Somme that he was reported dead.⁷ The fact that he survived must have seemed like a form of resurrection and this experience heightened his awareness of ‘Life-in-Death’ and ‘Death-in-Life’.⁸ However, the guilt of his having escaped death (only eighty in the battalion survived)⁹ caused him to feel that he had somehow failed in not dying with so many of his comrades. It follows that Graves felt a certain reverence for those who were killed in battle and felt the need, in order to rationalise both the colossal waste of human life and his own survival in the midst of this, to elevate his experiences to a mythic level.

The story of *The Golden Fleece* is preceded by an eighteen page introduction in which Graves directly addresses his audience – an unusual practice in the act of novel writing. His motive for doing so is to have the Goddess reinstated in her rightful place. Indeed, according to Graves’s retelling of the story, the entire voyage of the Argo was contrived by the Goddess. Although at the beginning of the narrative the Goddess appears as Hera, merely the ‘consort to Zeus’ (pp. 56–57) it is she who controls subsequent events, not her husband, nor son. The Goddess says: ‘I [...] intend to take my revenge on every one of my [...] human enemies in turn; and upon my husband Zeus too. I am a very long-lived, patient Goddess, and it pleases me to take my time and keep my temper’ (p. 71). At this early stage the Goddess is a superior yet destructive being and has no qualms about annihilating those who stand in her way. Graves defends his reinterpretation of Her and the motivation behind the Argo voyage as follows: ‘[...] diversity of detail [...] typical of the whole corpus of Argonautic legend [...] justifies me in choosing for my own account whatever version of any incident makes the best sense, and even occasionally in improvising where a gap cannot be bridged by existent materials’ (p. 10). Graves justifies his inventions within the Argo myth to tell another story in an acceptable guise: rather than allowing the reader to discover how the story develops through the narrative of *The Golden Fleece*, he makes it clear in

the introduction that his intention is to tell the truth about the Goddess. However, the introduction is necessary to underline the controversial political/gender issues that permeate the entire narrative: within the novel's various contexts of myth/history/religion is a reinterpretation of the story by which Graves makes his approach to the theory that would thereafter shape his thinking about poetry.

The Goddess described in *The Golden Fleece* is hostile and ruthless, yet supreme. Few of the Argonauts who worship her die a natural or happy death. Orpheus's death, for example, is recounted thus:

Orpheus [...] died a violent death. The Ciconian women one night tore him to pieces during their autumnal orgies in honour of the Triple Goddess. Nor is this to be wondered at: the Goddess has always rewarded with dismemberment those who love her best. (p. 371)

The excerpt recalls images from Graves's war experiences. Paul Dubrille, a French Jesuit serving in the infantry during the First World War, wrote:

To die from a bullet seems to be nothing; parts of our being remain intact; but to be dismembered, torn to pieces, reduced to a pulp, this is a fear that flesh cannot support ... the most solid nerves cannot resist for long [...].¹⁰

Graves was no stranger to the conditions of war, and although he had served with courage as an infantry officer at the Battle of Loos and had been seriously injured at the Somme, the guilt of not having joined his comrades in a heroic death remained with him and within the core of his writing. As Patrick Quinn has written, 'the numerous volumes of poetry [...] produced after the war failed to exorcise the memory of the Great War from [Graves's mind]'.¹¹

The events of *The Golden Fleece* take place before the final overthrow of the matriarchal system and depict the religious conflict between the Gods and Goddesses and their respective worshippers. Graves's preference for the peaceful worshippers of the Triple Goddess, who exist in a world where there is an absence of war, cannot be hidden. However, the invading Achaeans bring with them 'their chariots and iron weapons' (p. 55), which give them superiority in battle. 'In Greece only bronze weapons had been known hitherto, and the horse, a sacred animal, was little used in warfare' (p. 55). Thus the peace-loving Goddess-worshipping peoples are defeated by the physical violence of the armed male warrior. With the introduction of war, matriarchy was supplanted by patriarchy. Graves links the unnecessary cruelty and waste of human life caused by war to the end of civilisation, and attributes the death of matriarchy to the usurping Thunder-god, Zeus. With such psychological reasoning, Graves is able to situate the untimely and tragic deaths of Lewis and his own son in the context of the Goddess, thus mythologising his personal experience.¹² The violent deaths of the Argonauts are necessarily revealed as actions favoured by the Goddess. The deaths of the Argonauts, and those of his colleague and his son, become a reason to rejoice rather than to mourn. He transforms this tragedy into metaphor and mythology. The deaths are perceived as sacrifice; proof, in a mythological context, of the victims' allegiance to the Triple Goddess.

Through the telling of the myth concerning the recovery of the Golden Fleece, Graves is conveying a message about the origins of the world and the truth about poetry. Among the Argonauts, it can be argued that Graves identified himself with Orpheus, for this singer, musician and poet fits neatly into the idealised persona Graves craved for himself. Orpheus could sing with such purity and grace that men could be steered from destruction and wild beasts would follow him.¹³ Indeed scattered among the pages of *The Golden Fleece* are delightful verses attributed to Orpheus. Through the peace-loving, Goddess-worshipping Orpheus and his

lyre, the Argonauts and readers are calmed and enchanted by beautiful lyrics. Moreover, the Argo and her crew are united through poetry and song, and peace reigns. In the introduction to *The Golden Fleece* Graves justifies the inclusion of Orpheus into the text of the novel by arguing that while he was ‘doubtful whether Orpheus ought to be included among the Argonauts [...] the quarrelsome Argonauts needed a musician to keep the peace for them almost as much as a helmsman’ (p. 25). Graves, then, identified so strongly with Orpheus that he felt it essential to place him prominently as a personification of himself in the novel. Thus, his decision to include Orpheus as an Argonaut serves to keep the sailors from trouble, but more importantly emphasises the role of the true poet’s relationship with the Goddess. Orpheus plays a didactic role within the narrative, informing the Argonauts and the receivers of the myth of the Goddess’s supremacy. The mythical persona of Robert Graves is re-created, in the guise of Orpheus, as the Goddess’s chivalrous and honourable poet/lover, who is meant to die a worthy death at the hands of the Goddess. On the subject of life and death Orpheus says:

We are all caught on a wheel, from which there is no release but by grace of the Mother. We are whirled up into life, the light of day, and carried down again into death, the darkness of night; but then another day dawns red and we reappear, we are reborn. [...] Death is no release from the wheel [...] unless the Mother should intervene. (p. 127)

Thus it is the Goddess who dictates who is worthy to die for her. By assuming the Orpheus persona and granting him a violent death, Graves may be seen as justifying his own existence on ‘the wheel’ of death and rebirth.

In *The White Goddess* Graves writes that the ‘poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth: his heart breaks with longing and love for her’ (p. 439). The Goddess/Muse is equated with truth, implying that the writing of inspired verse comes from adoration

and violent self-sacrifice, for no ‘poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified’. According to Graves, the true poet ultimately allows himself to be destroyed by the one he loves because his ‘inner communion with the White Goddess [is] regarded as the source of truth’. The true poet is the Naked King who is betrayed by the Goddess. Paradoxically, betrayal and sacrifice are the only means of creating true poetry. Just as the Argonauts meet strangely hostile deaths, so the true poet should be ready to die violently, ending his life pursued up the ‘grand defile’ by the Goddess’s hounds and rent ‘to rags’.¹⁴ The brutal death is a symbolic affirmation of the Goddess’s power and, for the poet-king, of her love for him. Graves writes that the Goddess ‘will gladly give [the poet] her love, but at only one price: his life. She will exact payment punctually and bloodily’.¹⁵ Graves is showing the paradoxical nature of the Goddess and, as he continues in *The White Goddess*, ‘the necessary ambivalence of poetic meaning [is] thus maintained: it is an axiom that the White Goddess is both lovely and cruel, ugly and kind’ (p. 241). The poet seeks full knowledge of the dreadful Goddess: to both fear and revere her. By proving his courage, he wins her love.

While the First World War produced many poets of merit, the only poet of consequence to emerge during the Second World War was, according to Graves, Alun Lewis. In his Foreword to Lewis’s *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (published posthumously in 1945) Graves wrote that from the very start of their correspondence he was aware that Lewis’s power lay in his poetic integrity (p. 8). For Graves, the following lines written by Lewis to his wife defined the importance of the poet in a world without value – and, Graves writes, the proof of the true poet lies in the consciousness of failure:

And although I’m more engrossed with the *single* poetic theme of Life and Death, for there doesn’t seem to be any question more directly relevant than this one, of what

survives of all the beloved [...]. Acceptance seems so spiritless, protest so vain. In between the two I live [...]. (p. 12).

Graves begins *The White Goddess* by stating that Lewis understood that ‘there is no choice’ for the true poet as there is only one ‘single theme’ (p. 17). Lewis’s readiness to die for the cause, that is, his dedication to poetry, had an immense impact on Graves’s thinking about the Muse who acts as the Goddess for the true poet. For Graves, Lewis’s death was imbued with symbolic significance. Lewis did not only die a soldier’s death, but as a poet dedicated to serving the Muse he had dedicated his life to art. As Graves writes in *The White Goddess*: ‘the single grand theme of poetry [is] the life, death and resurrection of the Spirit of the Year, the Goddess’s son and lover’ (p. 413). Lewis had become immortalised, along with Graves’s eldest son who was killed shortly afterwards, as the eternal son and lover; the King, forever favoured by the Goddess.

The true poet’s acceptance of his fate is an essential aspect of the Graves persona. In the penultimate stanza of the poem ‘Ibycus in Samos’ from *New Poems 1962* Graves asks:

Who here can blame me if I alone am poet,
 If none other has dared to accept the fate
 Of death and again death in the Muse’s house?¹⁶

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NOTES

¹ John B. Vickery, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 27.

² Robert Graves, *The Golden Fleece* (Edinburgh: Cassell, 1944), p. 11.

³ Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 4.

⁴ Robert Graves, *Collected Writings on Poetry*, ed. by Paul O’ Prey

- (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p. 340.
- ⁵ Robert Graves, foreword to Alun Lewis, *Ha! Ha! Among the Trumpets* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1945), p. 8.
- ⁶ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 30.
- ⁷ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That: An Autobiography* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1995) p. 196.
- ⁸ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, ed. by Grevel Lindop (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1997), p. 94.
- ⁹ *Goodbye to All That*, p. 196.
- ¹⁰ Wendy Holden, *Shell Shock: The Psychological Impact of War* (London: Channel 4 Books, 1998), p. 11.
- ¹¹ Patrick J. Quinn, *The Great War and the Missing Muse: The Early Writings of Robert Graves and Siegfried Sassoon* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1994), p. 9.
- ¹² John Smeds, *Statement and Story: Robert Graves's Myth-Making* (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1997), p. 275.
- ¹³ Pierre Grimal, *The Penguin Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 315.
- ¹⁴ Robert Graves, 'Dethronement' (1952), *Complete Poems*, vol. 2, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. 211.
- ¹⁵ *The White Goddess*, pp. 438–39.
- ¹⁶ Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, vol. 3, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), p. 49.