

# Mirage and Echo

*Miriam Gamble*

***Robert Graves: Selected Poems*** edited by Michael Longley  
London: Faber, 2013. 176 pp. £15.99. ISBN 978-0571283835

In the short essay ‘A Comparison’, Sylvia Plath defines the action of lyric poems (‘the small, unofficial garden-variety poem’) as being like what happens to the scene in a snow globe when the ornament is shaken:

You turn it upside down, then back. It snows. Everything is changed in a minute. It will never be the same in there – not the fir trees, nor the gables, nor the faces.

The disorientation and warping implicit in this statement – along with the doubled sense of sameness in difference – perfectly describes what happens in the characteristic Graves poem. In ‘Ogres and Pygmies’, for example, the reader who seeks to judge between ‘The thundering text, the snivelling commentary’ enters a hallucinogenic realm wherein ‘his own members bloat and shrink again’, becoming ogreish and pygmyish by turns. In ‘The Legs’, the globe is twice upended: first, by the disturbing assertion that most of us are being carted about by legs that, in the effort to hide their ‘senseless, frightening / Fate’ from themselves, dispense their time in going ‘Resolutely nowhere’; second, in the self-reflexive twist Graves performs on himself – the one who stands ‘Entire’, at a remove from the unreflecting ‘rout’:

My head dizzied, then:  
I wondered suddenly,  
Might I too be a walker  
From the knees down?

Gently I touched my shins.

The doubt unchained them:  
 They had run in twenty puddles  
 Before I regained them.

From an imaginative critique of habit which, to prove its difference, already comes at the world from a bizarre angle, 'The Legs' builds towards the unnerving reveal of the last two stanzas. Graves shakes our snow globe for us, then allows the poem to shake his own – to undercut the mind's sense of its own organic unity and instead permit the animal body to rule, to run off with itself; the fable doubles back, undercutting the 'moral' it had seemed to offer. As in 'The Bards', the 'gross enchantment' that enters unexpectedly, twirling 'An unpilled holly club', wreaks havoc on the decorous 'samite-curtained / Jewel-bright hall' of the poem.

This is mature Graves at his best: weird, cussed, cantankerous, puckish, alternating darkness and light. It's the Graves who fathered Ted Hughes (could 'Law in the Country of the Cats' have been written without these poems? Or 'Her Husband'?) and the pre-kink-ironing-out Derek Mahon: the Mahon of 'My Wicked Uncle' and 'First Principles'. True Graves irradiates kink and quirk, and in the period that produced these poems he stands as Lawrence's only contemporary kindred spirit: a wicked tongue-poker who aims his catapult at earnestness and hits it square in the forehead. The dialogue poems of Edward Thomas and Robert Frost encounter their *duende* (properly understood as a household goblin or sprite) in 'Welsh Incident'; and those who followed in the empirical line – most notably Seamus Heaney – find themselves uncannily presaged and mocked in 'Wm. Brazier':

And the pony's name was Soot, and Soot was black.  
 But the brass fittings on the trap, the shafts,  
 On Soot's black harness, on the black whip-butt,  
 Twinkled and shone like any guardsman's buttons.  
 Wasn't that pretty?

The staunch presence of empiricism in the mainstream bloodline of postwar British and Irish poetry (Heaney by Hughes) perhaps explains Graves's relatively marginal position in terms of accepted influence. We've loved our words solid, rolled around on the tongue and evocative of the objects conjured thereby; what Graves offers us is 'such vague bloom as wandering dreams enclose', the 'elvish unsubstantial'. What's more, he knows he's frustrating reader expectations, and relishes the fact. 'Welsh Incident' should rightly be read as a kind of early *ars poetica*, with the 'Very strange, un-Welsh, utterly peculiar / Things' standing in as cheeky analogues for Graves's poems: grunting their boredom at the solid citizenry as represented by the mayor with his 'good Welsh' and 'fluent English', resolutely refusing to do anything more reassuring than 'something' which is 'recognizably a something'. It also goes some way to explaining his significance to Michael Longley, in whose early books like *An Exploded View* and *Man Lying on a Wall* securities are decimated, the self weighed (sometimes literally, as in 'Check-up') and found to be light, conceptual, threatened:

Weighing now my long bones,  
In the palm of your hand  
My testicles, future:  
Because if they had to  
The children would eat me –  
There's no such place as home.

The appeal of Graves to Northern Irish poets of Longley's generation is obvious: the older poet's spirited refusal to march to the tune of the times, to offer poetic commentary on 'events of significance', would have offered a welcome alibi to writers who found themselves, in the early stages of their careers, expected to 'respond' in clear and timely fashion to the civil breakdown that was happening around them. Longley's introduction points to this: his assertion that, for Graves, 'The terrible subject matter [of the First World War] needed time to settle to an adequate imaginative

depth' mirrors closely his proclamation, in the introduction to *Causeway: The Arts in Ulster*, that the poet is not a journalist, and that traumatic happenings need time to find their way into poetic expression that is worth its salt. Although his insistence on the poet's liberty to write the 'one story only' would have spoken to the Heaney of 'Exposure', the fact that Graves largely suppressed his war poems, writing them out of his own poetic history, may have meant that, for a poet like Heaney, he couldn't offer a workable model – what Heaney famously defines in 'Feeling into Words' as 'symbols adequate to our predicament'. But Longley's own poems have always been more inclined to come at things from angles; to express a psychic atmosphere rather than address a happening head on. *Man Lying on a Wall* is a Troubles book through and through, but the poems in it don't, largely, talk about the Troubles; rather, they operate like the Troubles did, bringing the public into the domestic, stirring up the small stanzas of the lyric poem, and the rooms of the private house. Fiction-writing lodgers enter and steal the identities of the hosts, writing and re-writing their private lives; personal relationships are 'Desert Warfare': 'She might be a mirage, and my long / Soliloquies part of the action'.

In this selection, Longley retrieves and presents war poems that Graves himself discarded: the book is prefaced by a war poem, 'The Patchwork Quilt', and the opening pages are devoted to poems written whilst Graves was a soldier. Largely, these latter are juvenilia – apprentice pieces that haven't yet found symbols adequate to their own predicament, haven't found a metier for writing war that marks them out as distinctive. They are the work of a young writer (and probably a young writer in a hurry); they testify, but they don't sparkle or for the most part even disturb. However, Longley's sense that recovering these poems is a valuable act is proven sound by the way in which his selection forces a re-reading of the better known poems in Graves's oeuvre. War, this selection makes clear, is central to creating the sensibility that characterises Graves's work, much in the same way that the Troubles have coloured Longley's own: it is the

parcel tied with string out of which come the blocks of slate, the yellow nets, the 'white / And black acres of dominoes' that are his unsettling genius. War poems fill the opening pages, but after this they appear sporadically throughout the selection, and their placing clearly indicates relationships between Graves's experiences as a soldier and the way in which he looks at the world in successive phases of his career. Presenting a tranche of them at the start makes them unavoidable as mental markers to the reader when, later, they are encountered in isolation.

'Assumption Day' (here grouped amongst the early war poems, though it in fact dates from 1938 and locates itself in the run-up to Hitler's annexation of the Sudetenland) elucidates where Graves is coming from in poems like 'The Pier-Glass', 'Welsh Incident' and 'The Legs'. 'What [is] wrong with the day' in this poem of impending conflict is the fact that it juxtaposes familiar rituals from the 'real world' with the current situation – a doubling seen again and again in Graves's writing of the 1920s and 30s. 'Assumption Day' doesn't as a whole strike through into memorable places, but its pitching on the line between two worlds is indicative, as is the brief, seemingly-negligible aside about 'a pale flower whose name someone once told me – / Someone to be mistrusted'. In this remark (which also calls to mind Great War euphemisms like 'the accessory') is the nub of poems central to Graves's aesthetic, such as 'The Cool Web', which challenge the rule of the noun, the paradoxically evasive urge to name, identify and slot into a comprehensible system. Likewise, 'A Letter from Wales' (which readers familiar with *Goodbye to All That* will recognise as being addressed to Sassoon, and which, again, doesn't appear in the 1957 volume *Robert Graves: Poems Selected by Himself*) clearly articulates the effect of the Great War in shaping a mind uncertain of its grounding in externalities (which include the conception of a fixed self). Here, Graves figures himself and Sassoon as having died multiple times during – and in Graves's own case, after – the war: 'I died at Hove after the Armistice, / Pneumonia, with the doctor's full consent.' 'An Occasion', which follows on from 'A Letter from Wales', opens

out the eighth stanza of ‘The Legs’ into darker and starker places (‘Though my smile was broad / The legs could not see, / Though my laugh was loud / The legs could not hear’):

‘The trenches are filled in, the houseless dead  
Disperse and on the rising thunder-storm  
Cast their weak limbs, are whirled up overhead  
In clouds of fear. . . .’

Then suddenly as you read,  
As we sat listening there, and cushioned warm,  
War-scarred yet safe, alive beyond all doubt,  
The blundering gale outside faltered, stood still:  
Two bolts clicked at the glass doors, and a shrill  
Impetuous gust of wind blew in with a shout,  
Fluttering your poems. And the lamp went out.

Those two bolts clicking at the glass doors horrify as Beckett horrifies; indicate that, actually, it can’t be taken for granted that this is life rather than the mere illusion of life, some kind of demonic facsimile.

We know Graves as a poet who insisted upon the ‘true dream’ of poetry (and on his own idiosyncrasy); who held poetry up as something which could literally reconfigure the world, or at the least present a world other but equally valid. From ‘The Terraced Valley’ to ‘Mid-Winter Waking’, his poems invest in themselves as entities infused with genuine magic – a groove of thought which doubtless deepened itself through the reading in myth and bardic tradition explored in *The White Goddess*. Reading this book, we see that he might have been driven to these ideas rather than going willingly (another possible explanation for his excision of the war poems: would Graves’s pride have allowed him to admit that?). We see that war set him mentally at odds with what surrounded him, made him question everything, wouldn’t allow him to square the circle detailed in ‘Alice’ of a ‘chance-discovered land’ which was ‘as true as anything you’d swear to, / The usual three dimensions you are heir to’ but which yet did not invalidate

or replace 'the clean / Dull round of mid-Victorian routine'. Alice is a cypher for Graves, her journey through the looking glass a cypher for his journey to the trenches. All looking glasses lead to the trenches.

This insight, which Longley's manner of arrangement provokes, also brings a great poignancy to some of the late poems collected here: 'A Measure of Casualness', 'Not to Sleep', 'Black', 'Good Night to the Old Gods'. The knee-jerk of metaphorical thought causes Graves to lose his mojo after a while: what was once entrancing otherness becomes merely a habit of converting everything into something else, into grist to the mill of the system. Women are muses, animals (with the exception of 'The Blue-Fly') reflections of the self and the self's love affairs with woman or muse or both (basically interchangeable). For female readers, and in particular for female readers who are also writers, the role of woman as presented in Graves's work can really chafe; although celebratory of them, Graves confines women to the position of stimulants or reflectors of poetic light. In such a framework, love often becomes a concept rather than something the emotional – or even metaphysical – reality of which can be felt, a fact of which Graves seemed to be aware. In 'The Green-Sailed Vessel', he as good as begs his female addressee to stop him forging 'resemblances', and in 'Her Brief Withdrawal', he facilitates the speaking back of his 'muse': 'you have entangled me / In my own mystery. Grant me a respite: / I was happier far, not asking, not much caring, / Choosing by appetite only'. From poems like 'Not to Sleep' and 'Black', the appetite of physical lust all of a sudden, and as if from nowhere, surges off the page at the reader: 'I am bleached white, my truant love. Come back, / And stain me with intensity of black'. What Longley describes in his introduction as the 'flexible, at times improvisatory, jazzy even' quality of Graves's less 'chaste' work comes through in the surprise enjambments of 'Not to Sleep' – 'my feet brushing the carpet / In courtesy to civilized progression' – and in the startling denouement of this poem, which ends with the birds 'still alert, grumbling gently together'. Here, the surprise is back (the poet

surprises himself, and so surprises us), and what it's born of is a late and desperate recognition – akin to Yeats's – of the value of the rudiments of existence, of basic physical being-in-the-world. Although it asserts that 'Old age, not Fairyland, was his [Oisín's] delusion', 'The Broken Girth' strikes chords with Yeats's 'The Circus Animals' Desertion': it's as though, late on, the scaffold of that prized 'other realm' falls down, the spell-ing stops, and what was there all along but suffocated by the spell-ing is embraced and devoured:

my shoulder-nooks flower;  
A scent of honeysuckle invades the house,  
And my fingertips are so love-enhanced  
That sailcloth feels like satin to them.

('A Measure of Casualness')

These are lines of which the lusty Neruda would have been proud, that celebrant of the earth in all its sticky, stinky richness.

In 'The Last Day of Leave', one of the last war poems included, Graves recalls a day spent with four other people prior to his return to the trenches. Here too tangy physical detail is at a premium: 'the coffee tasted memorably of peat'; 'The sun so hot it made the rocks quiver.' The poem concludes, however, with a silent plea from the others for 'a blind-fate-aversive afterword' from Graves – again, that idea of the poem as something which can magic transformation, successfully send its 'bladed mind' through and counter to time, space, chance. The 'afterword' offered by Graves is ambiguous – no more, really, than a spur to memory – but by juxtaposing this poem with 'Amergin's Charm' ('I am a wizard: *who but I / Sets the cool head aflame with smoke?*'), Longley suggests once again that the devotee of 'mirage and echo' was, as Auden said of Yeats, 'hurt' into the territory most characteristic of him. War drove Graves off the graspable earth (so much so that, although he would have hated the contention, he serves as a notable fore-runner to postmodern

poetics), made him a poet of profound (and often wonderfully wacky) epistemological doubt. In his introduction, Longley states that Graves's war poems are all love poems; what his selection proves is that the reverse also holds, and not just with the love poems: though they may not take war as their subject, all of Graves's poems are war poems in that they are coloured and conditioned by the irreversible impact of that four-year-long counter-reality.

**Miriam Gamble** is Lecturer in Creative Writing at Edinburgh University. Her first collection, *The Squirrels Are Dead*, was published by Bloodaxe in 2010 and won a Somerset Maugham Award; her second, *Pirate Music*, is forthcoming from Bloodaxe in September 2014.