

Crisis

Michael Joseph

The biennial conference of the Society was cancelled this September due to travel restrictions imposed by the respiratory virus pandemic COVID-19 (CoronaVirus Disease-2019). It had been our hope that *Gravesiana* would contribute to the buffet of intellectual and sensual pleasures provided by our President, Charles Mundye, and Honorary President, William Graves, and our conference planners, but now we hope it will serve as a partial distraction if not a consolation for their absence.

We could call this issue the pandemic issue, and, although it wasn't planned as such, we could point out that many of our articles either have a crisis at their core or describe events triggered by crisis, probably unsurprising given that they are mostly focused on the life and career of a poet: one who recalled the Irish apothegm, '*It is death to mock a poet. It is death to love a poet. It is death to be a poet*'.

However, since life must not always be contemplated head in hands, we begin the issue with a crisis-free offering by Dunstan Ward, who generously shares his experiences editing and compiling the magisterial three volume *Complete Poems* he produced with Beryl Graves and published (1995-1999) with Carcanet Press. In 'Versions of Robert Graves', he discusses, among other things, the inspiration for his prodigious task, his editorial methodology, informed by his association with the late Robert Bertholf, the Charles D. Abbott Scholar-In-Residence and former curator of The Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo, his rationale for privileging final drafts over first, his working relationship with Beryl Graves, and the reception of his volumes. He also reflects on spending his university vacations in Deyá, and provides vivid, poetic descriptions drawn from his contemporary diary of moments preserved from employment:

We worked steadily all day; one long humid summer I took only four days off. ‘You *must* go out,’ Beryl would say to me towards the end of the afternoon, and I’d go for a walk above the cliffs and, in warm weather, swim off the rocks. During the summer Lucia used to drive Beryl and me down to the Cala for a morning bathe. Beryl did the cooking, on a venerable Aga supplemented by a stove outside the kitchen door. She had a repertoire of tasty dishes, including an exemplary gazpacho. On fine nights we dined out on the terrace, maybe in the company of visiting family or friends. From time to time we would eat in the village or at one of the two fish restaurants down at the Cala, or, on special occasions, at an excellent cliff-top restaurant, Bens d’Avall, off the road north to Soller. In the evenings we played countless games of Scrabble.

Following ‘Versions of Robert Graves’, Alicja Bembien presents the first of our crisis essays, ‘Straddling the Fence’, a virtuoso analysis of the Claudius novels drawing on the historiographical methodology of the American historian, Hayden White. She examines Claudius’s contrasting representations of history, beginning with ontological assumptions that would undoubtedly have been familiar to Graves’s ancestor, Leopold Van Ranke:

‘The real to which Graves introduces his hero is constructed as if it were logical, coherent, and well-organised, and that what precludes Claudius from understanding the workings of the world are deficiencies in his knowledge and/or interpretation of his milieu’. However, once Claudius is better informed by betrayal, nymphomania, greed, vaunting ambition, sociopathy and other similar human qualities and tendencies, he is forced to conclude that ‘reality is not as ordered or organisable as he has supposed, that it is formed of people’s rational but also irrational needs and/or impulses’.

Professor Bembien postulates that Claudius’s intellectual evolution from teleology, the Victorian idea of history as a ‘grand narrative [. . . a] story with a central plot in which individuals

take their place', to contingency, the Modernist preference for complexity and disorderliness is precipitated by Graves's ontological crisis, and argues that his solution is finally to 'straddle the fence': to position himself, uncomfortably, against and within both Victorian and Modernist views of the past.

In 'Missing, Believed Dead: Graves and Contemporary Poetry' the poet Sean O'Brien delivers a remarkable appreciation of Graves's poetics which concentrates on three of his interests: 'crossings between the worlds of the living and the dead', 'formal tension' in some poems, and love poems. O'Brien's essay shows a concern for what Graves's oeuvre has to offer (it is considerable) to younger poets, and for Graves's proper place in the critically important transmission and tradition of poetry, as well as how those currents touch on the 'general esteem' with which poetry is held. O'Brien isn't manifestly troubled by crisis, but the question of crossing from the world of the living to the world of the dead, which begins his essay and occupies a lot of his attention, may be the wellspring from which all crises arise.

Joseph Bailey's 'Further into the Labyrinth' performs a close reading of the correspondence between Graves and the military historian, Basil Liddell-Hart, with whom he co-authored *Lawrence to His Biographer* (1938). Bailey's deft depiction of Graves as he feuds with the Lawrence committee and the Maccus-like Raymond Savage, while coming to terms with a co-author of a very different temperament, adds useful detail to an interesting chapter in Graves's biography, and modelling to his relationship with Laura Riding. Bailey follows Graves's correspondence to its conclusion, occurring as he is in flight from Deyá at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. Bailey promises us a minotaur at the beginning of his essay, and he delivers one.

Nick Carter and Nancy Rosenfeld directly address the theme of the 2018 conference whence many of these essays first emerged, 'Robert Graves and Europe: *Good-bye to All That / But it Still Goes On*'. In 'If "Princess Europa" Returned to Her Namesake Today', Rosenfeld concatenates Graves's published references to 'Europa' in two central works, *The Greek Myths* and *The White*

Goddess, ‘as possible sites of Grave-sean insights into the geographical-historical Europe’. She then treats in passing two of his poems, ‘Secret Land’, an imaginary plot that hovers above Graves’s geophysical concerns, and ‘General Bloodstock’s Lament for England’, an ostensible parody betraying wistful traces of Graves’s nostalgic vision of a lost ideal. Just as Bailey’s article concludes on a minor chord with rumblings of war and exile, Rosenfeld’s ends with that poem’s implicit rape.

Rosenfeld’s ominous insights into the *On-goingness* of cultural trauma darkens further in Nick Carter’s essay, ‘Visioning the Impossible’. If Rosenfeld provides the backward gazing profile of the Janus head, Carter would be the forward gazing one, although he begins by glancing backward. ‘Visioning the Impossible’ first assembles literary exhibits and authorities, both high – Yeats, Hardy, Eliot, Tennyson – and, arguably, low – Emile Sercombe, George Monbriot, Bob Dylan – to establish the occurrence and legitimacy of concern for the fate of civilization in modern letters. Asking then, in a tone meant surely to evoke Graves, ‘Where, then, is Graves in all this?’, he attempts to affirm that Graves was deeply invested in both the *It of But It Still Goes On* and the *whither*: civilization and its progressively concerning fate.

Carter reminds us that Graves defines civilization drolly in *The White Goddess* as ‘the graceful relation of all varieties of experience to a central humane system of thought’ in a part of the essay productively overlapping with Alicja Bemben’s contentions about Graves’s hybrid metaphysics in ‘Straddling the Fence’, before it segues into a comparative study of Claudio Magris. Magris, Carter says, is a ‘one time Professor of Modern and Contemporary German Literature at the University of Trieste, novelist, essayist, public lecturer, erstwhile senator of the Italian Republic, Erasmus prize-winner, but above all inhabitant of the melting pot of Central Europe – Trieste’. Characteristically ironic and hopeful, Carter concludes by flipping the premise: the question isn’t, what can civilization do for art, but what can art as a form of truth do for civilization. If the solution to civilization’s existential crisis is impossible to see, art ‘visions the impossible’.

Civilization under threat is the implicit concern of ‘The Archetype of The White Goddess in Robert Graves, Maja Herman Sukulić, and Ted Hughes’ by Tanja Cvetković, bringing us back to the touchstone if not the epicentre of Graves studies. Professor Cvetković draws new comparisons between Graves and Ted Hughes, with reference to his volume, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). She also introduces us to the contemporary Serbian poet Maja Herman Sekulić (nb. currently quarantined in New York), exploring Gravesian affinities in her poems about the Lady of Vincha, whom she describes as ‘the very first poet, proto poet, proto artist’, celebrated by the inhabitants of the Vinča culture in 5700-4500 BC.

The Lady of Vincha is the famous Neolithic figurine with triangular or pentagonal face, the protruding angular cheekbones, dreamy half-closed eyes, usually with her arms bended over her heart. She was the symbol of the rule of the female principle in Europe, but also the symbol of the first alphabet and messages inscribed in the Vinča script, the first proto letters still unknown to science.

As a generative symbol of civilization, The Lady of Vincha represents for Herman Sekulić ‘those values of humanity [...] which have been destroyed by the patriarchy’.

Nobody will need reminding that during the pandemic of 1918, while stationed in Limerick, Graves contracted the flu that would ultimately infect 500 million people, and kill one in ten. Despite suffering PTSD and general war-weariness, he recognized its early symptoms and ‘decided to make a run for it’. That way, he explained, ‘I should at least have my influenza in an English, and not an Irish, hospital.’

Respiratory illness was no stranger. At the age of three, he had been quarantined with the deadly whooping cough along with his older sisters, Clarissa and Rosaleen. It was at the Red Branch Cottage in Wimbledon, under lockdown, that he wrote his first poems. In my article, ‘Poet in the Nursery’, purloining the title of

an early canonical poem, I explore the highly precocious nursery verse, 'Who Did That', point out uncanny affinities with mature work, and speculate on its probable method of composition 'Poet in the Nursery' also revisits poems Graves wrote in his twenties, proposing that Graves's well-known post-war sensitivity was

conditioned by or induced by shellshock: but not determined by it. What we see in the post-war, shellshocked Graves had its roots in a condition implicated in a mode of consciousness that Graves associated [...] with poetry.

Four offerings fill out the second part of *Gravesiana*, beginning with poems by the American poet Rachel Hadas (whose father, Moses Hadas, the classical scholar, was a correspondent of Graves's), and JonArno Lawson, a Canadian poet with an international following. Hadas has published numerous books of poetry and essays. Her honours include a Guggenheim Fellowship, Ingram Merrill Foundation Grants, the O.B. Hardison Award from the Folger Shakespeare Library, and an Award in Literature from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. Her poems regularly appear in *The New Yorker*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and in *PN*. Lawson has published numerous books of poetry and essays. He is a four-time winner of The Lion and The Unicorn Award for Excellence in North American Poetry, among other honours.

Concluding our issue of *Gravesiana* are two biographical pieces. The first is an album of photographs taken mostly in Deyá in the same period Graves and Riding were first settling there by a German Jewish photographer who fled Nazi Germany. The original photographs are in the collection of the author, Miriam Frank, who, in an effort to adhere to our ad hoc theme, arranged to be born in Barcelona the year the Spanish Civil War broke out, and who, in addition to these fascinating photographs, provides an eloquent introduction. While, regrettably, there are no new likenesses of Graves and Riding, places and houses they

frequented are depicted, including a house that may have been the one they rented when they first arrived in Deyá. There are also portraits of some of the colourful figures who visited and settled in Deyá, including the German painter Ulrich Leman, his companion Joseph Fontdevilla, Sepl Campalans and her husband, the notorious Hubert von Ranke, Graves's German cousin, a onetime communist recruiter and French spy.

I would like to thank Lucia Graves and William for their help in identifying people and places in these photographs. They have enriched the clarity and scholarly usefulness of this album. Notwithstanding that, there are people neither they nor Miriam Frank could recognize. It is our hope that crowd-sourcing might fill in gaps: so, friends, if you can identify one of these figures, e.g. 'Man with army belt and hat', 'Man with small goat', please contact us, and you will be appropriately embraced in the next issue of *Gravesiana*.

The second biographical piece is a memorial by Jean Moorcroft Wilson to our friend and colleague Cecil Woolf, who passed away on 10 June, at the age of ninety-two, after a busy and productive life as scholar, biographer, and of course publisher. Cecil's wit and charm will be dearly missed by all of us.

Finally, stay safe; stay sane. We look forward to seeing you next year.