

*THE ROBERT GRAVES  
REVIEW*

Volume 1, Issue 1  
Summer 2021

The Robert Graves Society



Editor: Michael Joseph (USA)

Associate Editors: Alicja Bembien (Poland), Lucia Graves (UK), Patrick Villa (UK)

Bibliography Editor: Carl Hahn (USA)

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Production and DTP: Michael Joseph

This publication is financed by the Robert Graves Society. Its primary referential version is the electronic one.

Online ISSN: 2635-0904

Print ISSN: 2635-0890

Postal address:  
St. John's College  
St. Giles  
Oxford  
OX1 3JP

Contact information:  
Michael Joseph  
mjoseph@rutgers.edu

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Covert art – Robert Graves beside olive tree in Deyá, 1969, photograph by Lloyd Borguss (1928-2017). Original photograph in the University of Victoria Library Special Collections, Robert Graves Collection, SC050.

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# *Introduction*

*Michael Joseph*

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As many of you are aware, The Robert Graves Society has been publishing a journal since 1996. *Gravesiana: The Journal of The Robert Graves Society*, an offspring of the two centenary conferences held in Palma and Oxford, continued a run of journals about Robert Graves that began during his lifetime, in 1972. *The Robert Graves Review* succeeds *Gravesiana*.

Retiring *Gravesiana* was a gradual process begun in 2016 when Charles Mundy, then incoming Society President, suggested a new title that more clearly asserted the journal's identity as a vehicle for contemporary scholarship would better fit our purpose. Wanting to avert potential reference problems, we chose first to complete *Gravesiana* volume 4, begun under Dunstan Ward's editorship in 2014. After publishing the last issue in summer 2020, the Society pondered name alternatives at a virtual meeting the following December. *The Robert Graves Review* was suggested, warmly received and after some reflection and prayer, ratified: the name change was announced in February.

In addition to the journal's name, we have renovated our delivery system. While we continue to deliver the journal as individual downloadable essays in PDF format, we are now offering under an open access policy texts readable by web browsers, the main feature of our new website, engineered by Philip Graves. The new website, part of a larger Society website initiative described below in William Graves's 'Robert Graves Trusts and Related', will make submitting and reviewing texts for publication easier, and give readers quicker access to more information about the journal; and it will enable us to respond better to changing technologies and enhancements. We would like to extend to Philip our heartfelt gratitude for generously donating his wizardly skills to our enterprise. As well as an education, it has

been a great pleasure for us working with him over the last five months and watching a premier website take shape under his hands.

Readers will notice that we have also expanded our editorial staff and board. Alicja Bembien, a literature scholar at the University of Silesia has joined our cohort of Associate Editors, Lucia Graves and Patrick J. Villa. Carl Hahn, a Graves bibliographer, has become Bibliography Editor, and former Society presidents Fran Brearton and Dunstan Ward have assumed the title and toil of Associate Poetry Editors. Their contributions will be immediately evident to everyone reading this issue and the issues to come. The Board has also grown, adding Anett Jessop, a Modernist scholar based at the University of Texas at Tyler, and one of our two North American Vice Presidents. It is our pleasure to introduce them and welcome them to *The Robert Graves Review*.

*The Robert Graves Review* 1.1, unfolds in four sections, *Critical Studies*, *Bibliography*, *Notes*, and *Poems*. *Critical Studies* begins with Gregory Leadbetter's 'The "Reserve of Superstition": Graves, Coleridge, and the Poetry of Mystery', which presents a new coinage, reviving an old coinage from by S. T. Coleridge riffing on a phrase from Sir Walter Scott. The 'reserve of superstition' is a 'supra-cognitive sensitivity', a kind of modality of conscious or mental state Leadbetter describes as essential to both spirituality and poetic creativity, one that allies Coleridge and Graves in the 'revision of spirituality'. In his ontological argument, Leadbetter evokes 'superstition' as an active principle operating in the composition of poetry and tops off his discussion with his own poem 'A Poppet' to demonstrate the modality *in praxis*.

Nodding toward our obsessive and surely life-saving pandemic routine, Devindra Kohli looks at hands and handwashing in 'What Handwashing and Social Distancing in the Times of Corona Remind Us: The Left Hand is as Vital as the Right'. Weaving autobiography into an engaging tour of hand / washing routines in

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the work of various writers, including John Donne, W. B. Yeats, Thomas Hardy, Ernst Jandl, and Robert Graves, Kohli's deceptively breezy essay maintains an underlying seriousness and compassion. He tells us:

At the heart of the perceived or mythologized dialectic of the hands, then, lies a recognition of a quintessential duality within and without us. It propels our search for balancing or reconciling, however momentarily, through a creative interaction with the other within us and without – in the human world, in Nature, and the divine. (p. 23)

Deceptively breezy might also describe William Nicholson's children's book *The Pirate Twins*, which Marilyn S. Olson discusses in 'William Nicholson and The Pirate Twins'. As well as noting personal relationships, such as Robert Graves's association with the precursor dolls Nancy Nicholson fabricated during their marriage, and the significance of Jenny Nicholson and Eliza Banks to the book's creation, her beautifully illustrated essay documents its aesthetic and cultural dimensions, the significance of the book to the history of children's literature and to understanding Nicholson's artistic vision. In what may become her essay's most discussed passage, Olson reads the problematic Blackness of the twin pirates, and its ramifications.

Focus shifts from dolls to trolls in Paul O'Prey's bio-critical analysis of 'The Troll's Nosegay', a whimsical sonnet Graves composed in 1919 depicting a troll charged by 'a lady' to provide her a nosegay – a small bouquet. Graves light-heartedly transposes the paradigmatic comic lovers into a fairy-tale setting to create a gossamer sonnet, at a time when his very life hung by a thread.

My temperature rose to 105, and both lungs were affected. The over-worked doctor said I had no chance, the household wept openly, but one thing kept me alive: the obstinate intention of getting my poem right. (p. 59)

O'Prey allows space for the reader to consider that soldiers are the most pragmatic of people. War makes one ruthlessly pragmatic. Good soldiering presupposes staying alive, and yet here is Graves, an experienced and by every account a very good soldier, fully convinced that composing a fairy tale sonnet would keep him alive. Well, but it did. And this belief epitomises a mode of magical thinking that engenders a magical poem.

Joseph T. Thomas Jr.'s contribution broadens a critical review of ostensibly simple poems from this early period. He considers the aesthetic complexity of Graves's poems for children (declaring them 'neglected masterworks') by likening them to children's poems by Theodore Roethke, Graves's American contemporary. Thomas's (take a deep breath, o, clarinettist) 'Drawing Music from Penny Fiddles, or, a Biographical Account of Robert Graves and Theodore Roethke's Secret Lives as Children's Poets with a Look at their Neglected Masterworks, *The Penny Fiddle* and *I Am! Says the Lamb*, along with a Few Other Things' situates both poets in the Romantic tradition of Williams Blake and Yeats, and, provides rich analyses of comparable bearish traits, life and death concerns, and what Thomas calls 'joyous foolery':

Again, this is joyous foolery and nonsense. Like Graves and Roethke, however, I mean it seriously. Like Allie, I fashioned this essay as a call, as an occasion to summon Roethke and Graves from their rest, to place them on a nice beach in Mallorca and watch them 'play by the water's edge | Till the April sun set', to imagine what we might hear should we listen in on them as they (like the Boy and the bush) Talk and they Talk and they Talk. (pp. 75-76)

One might append to Thomas's melancholy-playful conclusion a paraphrase from Roethke: 'and they know they know they know'.

In a comparable comparative analysis, Eva Isherwood-Wallace brings together two first generation Modernists, Laura (Riding) Jackson and Mina Loy, to study their indebtedness to Gertrude Stein (whom Graves and Riding published in *Seizin Two* [1929]).

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The bridge from Thomas's Postmodernist readings to Isherwood-Wallace's Modernism – and perhaps from Graves's poetry of the late teens and twenties to that of the thirties – is nonsense, albeit nonsense of very different strains. In her incisive commentary on shared linguistic properties, Isherwood-Wallace notes the purpose of Steinian nonsense (or, as she prefers 'non-sense') was to de-historicise language.

Riding and Loy both identified this sense of 'pure' language in Stein, regarding her often non-sensical poetry as resistant to traditional associations and grammatical form. Their own poetry responds to Stein's approaches, grappling with this 'new' and 'pure' language as a tool against the legacy of historical influence. (p. 85)

By the way, Isherwood-Wallace is a grad student at Queens University Belfast, and we are glad to publish the first fruits of what we trust will be a long, productive literary career.

Since Isherwood-Wallace's analysis spins around critical as well poetic expression, it seems apt to follow the thread with Alicja Bembien's meta-critical review of the early critical responses (1956-1999) to Graves's *I Claudius*, and *Claudius the God*. In her essay, Bembien demonstrates that early criticism of the Claudius books collected into three pockets of interest, or, to use her metaphor, contributed to three 'pillars': Graves's synthetic predilections (merging opposites, e.g., past and present, fiction and history); the structure of his works; and interpretations of the central character, Claudius. Despite the homologous tendencies she illuminates, Bembien praises the criticism she surveys for persistently formulating new perspectives.

My essay on Graves's 'The Face in the Mirror' follows, capping the *Critical Studies* section of the journal. In 'A Different Look for "The Face in the Mirror"', I propose that far from brutally leveraging the demands of the flesh as incentive for writing poems, Graves plays off the poem's focus on materiality to interrogate the validity of his lifelong claim of being a poet. I also

try to show that this poem's preoccupation with the body (distanced, as is 'the face') parallels the poet's preoccupation with the terror of history, personal or otherwise, which it attempts to resolve by reimagining the body as (borrowing from Blake criticism) a 'body of the imagination'. I end by asking readers to consider that 'The Face in the Mirror' apostrophises the 'body of imagination' in its very form by assuming the contours of the female organ of generation.

*Bibliography* contains two pieces, chiefly by Carl Hahn, the journal's Bibliography Editor. First, 'The Plague of Modern Scholarship (Theses and Dissertations on the Subject of Robert Graves)' is a comprehensive list of recorded scholastic works produced between 1933 and 2021, along with the reference sources in which these are catalogued. This unique bibliographic resource will serve Graves scholarship for years to come, but there are also intriguing patterns in the data worthy of pondering in their own right. For instance, we see the geographical breadth of Graves scholastic study: thirty-two countries are represented, and sixty-eight American colleges and universities located in thirty-eight states. As well as the familiar pairings with Sassoon, Blunden, Owen, and Hughes, we find Graves rubbing unlikely elbows with Edith Sitwell, H. Read, Thomas Pynchon, John Oxenham, Samuel Barber . . . Society members will be pleased, though hardly surprised, to discover the number of scholastic works on Graves is on the uptick: the period between 1990-1999 produced twenty works; that between 2000-2009 produced thirty-five; and between 2010-2021, fifty-three. The accelerating pace of 'the plague' means that by the time you are reading these words, the list will be incomplete: but thus, a foundation for future instalments.

Hahn's other contribution shares an unrecorded poem published in 1926, along with the picture by Stanley North it was written to accompany. As well as reprinting the lost (untitled) poem, in 'The Ur-Text to "The Country Dance"', Hahn and I point out telling similarities between it and the poem it was revised into and thematic links with 'The White Goddess'.

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Balancing the deep verticality of Hahn's dive into dissertations, William Graves MBE begins the *Notes* section with an expansive bird's-eye view of what might be called the functioning Graves universe. In tracing his 'efforts over more than thirty-five years to preserve and make accessible for research and general knowledge the writings of [his] father', William illuminates the achievements of The Robert Graves Copyright Trust, St John's College Robert Graves Trust, The *Fundació* Robert Graves, and other initiatives that directly or indirectly inform the studies of every writer present in our journal and many of its readers, too. William also rehearses a thumbnail history of the journal, and thus here seems an opportune moment to acknowledge that *The Robert Graves Review* owes William Graves a profound debt of gratitude for supporting the website on which you may be reading this sentence offering him our humble thanks for his vision, resolve, and awe-inspiring energy (and did I mention his son, Philip?).

Oliver D. Smith concludes *Notes* by marking Graves's writings during the nineteen fifties and sixties on the legend of Atlantis, which challenged the conventional wisdom by asserting a factual basis for Plato's account. According to Graves, the legend had historical underpinnings in the flood that washed over the island of Tritonis, and observations of a sunken harbour at Pharos dating back to the Egyptian New Kingdom. One of the several sources of Smith's investigation, 'The Lost Atlantis' appears in *The Crane Bag* (1969), which, by chance, also contains 'The Uses of Superstition', the essay Gregory Leadbetter builds on in this volume's lead-off spot.

*The Crane Bag*, with its freight of essays on mystery, magic, song and poetry, appeared the same year Donovan's song *Atlantis* hit the charts (even reaching no. 1 in Switzerland). We say this to point out that, even at seventy-five, having lived most of the previous forty years in Deyá, Graves was somehow still in touch with the counterculture of his day.

To launch *The Review* in style, we thought we should respond to Ian Firla's wish, expressed in his introduction to the 1998 issue of *Gravesiana*, that the journal include more 'creative writing', and

that his own generous selection of poetry wouldn't be a 'one-off'. In our no less generous selection, we have included poets who participated in our recent conferences (as did Firla), along with one or two poets we hope you will agree we should know better. Joining company with Gregory Leadbetter's exemplary poem, introduced in essay number one, are poems by (in order of appearance) Michael Longley, Ruth Fainlight, Grevel Lindop, Paul O'Prey, and Linda Morales Caballeros. In ways consonant with William Graves's magisterial view, we think these poems illuminate the cutting edge of Graves's poetic universe.

At a moment of weakness, prompted by the references to *The Crane Bag*, and the rich gallimaufry of scholarly interests, approaches, styles, and modes of expression, analytical, bibliographic and creative, we have here, we fleetingly considered naming this issue 'The Crane Bag', which would have had the additional virtue of extending the medley of themed editions that concluded *Gravesiana*. However, enticing though that prospect was, we decided in the end *The Robert Graves Review* lost nothing by having no modifying rubric, by appearing just as *The Robert Graves Review* volume 1, issue 1.

*CRITICAL STUDIES*

