

Introduction

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This second issue of *The Robert Graves Review* begins with a quartet of critical studies. In ‘A Brief Foray into Nonsense by Way of Robert Graves’s *The Penny Fiddle: Poems for Children*’, Joseph T. Thomas Jr. examines this late selection of early poems through the lens of Wim Tigges’s nonsense theory, providing close readings of ‘Dicky’ and ‘Vain and Careless’, originally published in 1920, and ‘The Six Badgers’, new to this (1960) edition. Rehearsing Tigges’s idea that nonsense falls on a spectrum between sense and gibberish, and that the tension between these binaries produces ‘pure’ nonsense, Thomas posits that sense in Graves’s nonsense poetry derives from the poetry’s formal qualities, which dynamically interact with the incoherence or instability of the text. He references another binary to contrast ‘literary nonsense’ with other artistic idioms. The quintessence of literary nonsense is found in the tension created by playfully indeterminate over-abundance (or lack) of meaning balanced with a sense of order, design, semiotic satisfaction, and clear teleology. Without that sense of sense, countered neatly with the non-sensical, one approaches something akin to the complexity of Dada on one end and simple light verse on the other.

Whimsical, fanciful, and light-hearted though they may seem, in this regard, Graves’s poems for children are not ‘light verse’. And Thomas probes Graves’s nonsense to find a unique ‘construction’ of childhood [that is] more mysterious [...] than that held by many of his contemporaries’ and, most interestingly, more than ‘that held by many of our contemporaries’.

In addition to other nonsense scholars Michael Heyman and Kevin Shortsleeve, Thomas’s work draws on ‘Poetic Nonsense: Robert Graves, The White Goddess and Children’s Poetry’, my first article for the precursor of this journal, *Gravesiana* 3 (2013). But Thomas’s incisive and dexterous interpretations are distinctly and recognizably (and I should add inimitably) his own.¹

Although ghosts are often regarded as nonsense, Richard Carder takes them very seriously – as did Graves. Playing on Graves’s name to suggest facetiously a certain inevitability, a nominal incompatibilism loose in the cosmos, Carder’s ‘Graves, Ghosts, Madness, Magic & Religion’ plaits together several intuitively related themes in Graves’s work. The first part of his essay considers how the different usages and resonances of the word ‘ghost’ in Graves’s poems up to his 1940 collection, ‘No More Ghosts’ reveal different aspects of Graves’s beliefs and psychology. After a brief consideration of madness (the state closely akin to PTSD in which one might see a ghost) and sanity (not necessarily its opposite), the essay entertains a discussion of the paranormal or the surfacing of psychic phenomena in consensual reality. For this section, Carder includes excerpts from his protracted correspondence with Graves, which began in 1967 and ended in 1972. He points out that Graves not only published several books with Creative Age in the nineteen forties, but befriended its owner, Elizabeth Garrett, a noted psychic: ‘they got on like two oysters on a plate’; and asserts that Graves ‘habitually’ drew on psychic energies, citing as one example his frequent invocations of St Antony of Padua to help him locate lost objects. As Graves explains to Carder, ‘What all this means really is I suppose a “magical” means of focusing one’s attention on circumstances [...]. In scientific terms it is 5th dimensional thinking’.

Graves’s ‘psychic energies’ can be understood, writes Carder, by comparison with ‘remote viewing’, the practice of gaining accurate impressions or knowledge about a subject distant in space and / or time – a phenomenon taken quite seriously in certain quarters such as the US armed forces. Locating Graves’s thinking outside the mainstream of the Western Rationalist Tradition, Carder cites his collaboration in the nineteen-sixties with the Shah brothers, a topic pursued in Sara Greaves’s essay, ‘Robert Graves’s Mythopoetic Hospitality: Translating *The Rubaiyyat of Omar Khayaam*’.

According to Greaves, Graves engaged in this collaboration to further his own interests in Sufism; the Shahs’ conception of Khayaam as a Sufi perfectly aligned with his own mythopoetics. Therefore, ultimately, the poem owed a great deal to Graves’s

own thought and life experience. Just as she turns away from the popular notion that Graves served as an unwitting accomplice to a fraud, Greaves rejects the general low opinion about the quality of the poetry in his translation, writing, ‘it seems sad that the beauty of some of these quatrains should have been so overshadowed by the controversy of the non-existent manuscript’. The controversy over the authenticity of the alleged manuscript and the originality of Graves’s poetic form weighs heavily on the narrative of Graves’s public life and reputation and yet, interestingly – one must ponder the idea – Greaves speculates that ‘this controversy may have seemed to Graves almost a petty irrelevance’.

In the concluding section of her essay, Greaves delivers on the argument teed up in her title, the Rubaiyyat translation reveals a ‘mythopoetic hospitality’ in Graves: a primal state or a ‘new space’ congruent at key points with the ‘Eastern philosophies and esoteric communities’ (again echoing ideas asserted by Richard Carder). Her discussion of hospitality is informed by a specialized sense of the word shared by several theorists including Claude Raffestin, Henri Meschonnic, and Antoine Berman who declare ‘that translation [itself] amounts to a form of hospitality’.

The quartet concludes with an essay having only an inferential connection with Robert Graves: Faith Ellington’s readings of the under-regarded war poetry of women writing during the First World War, which she interprets through the writings of Gothic literary theorists. “‘Like a Ghost at the Door’: Women’s World War I Poetry and a Gothic Home Front’ systematically reviews aspects of the Gothic and more particularly the Female Gothic as exemplified in stanzas by a number of skilled poets, Teresa Hooley, Anna Gordon Keown, May Wedderburn Cannan, Nora Griffiths, Helen Dircks, Margaret Sackville, Helen Hamilton and Dame Edith Sitwell. She observes that it may be more meaningful to think more broadly of the haunted houses that reoccur in these poems in terms of a haunted home front, and to conclude that the pervasiveness of loss and trauma made the home front experience like that of the battlefield, effectively erasing the ‘clean division between safety and danger, between home front and front lines’. While Ellington’s essay doesn’t

specifically bend toward a reconsideration of the ghosts that populate chapters in *Good-Bye to All That* or Graves's war poetry, it does provide us with a perspective from which to make new meanings from them. Ellington's Gothic thus revisits Carder's ghosts while it subtly revises Graves's hauntings just as Thomas's 'Nonsense' revises Graves's penny fiddling.

By the way, as we have done previously, we would like to point out that Faith Ellington is currently a graduate student, studying at Louisiana State University, and to wish her well on what we expect will be a long, productive literary career.

Following Critical Studies, a Biography section new to *The Robert Graves Review* offers two exciting pieces. The first, an abridged essay by Vivian Holzer Rozental, recounts Graves's visit to Mexico where he would read *Antorcha y Corona, 1968*, at the summer Olympics (XIX). Fresh out of Bryn Mawr College, Holzer found herself appointed to organize a poetry symposium, one of nineteen cultural programs the Mexican government planned to host in connection with the games.

And Graves was the first of the eleven poets she was to organize. The essay begins as she sees him step off the plane:

He seemed aloof and absent minded, attracting attention because of his unusual and picturesque attire. He was very tall, wore shabby clothes and hid his messed-up curly silver hair under a broad-brimmed cordovan hat that covered his brow. His piercing grey eyes wandered through the crowd aimlessly. The crooked nose allowed me to unmistakably identify him as 'my poet'.

Holzer details her experience chaperoning Graves in and around Mexico City, which intensified when public response to the Tlatelolco Massacre forced President Díaz Ordaz to cancel the Symposium, and other poets bailed. She walks through their itinerary, including cultural visits to the pyramids of Teotihuacan, and a late sixteenth-century monastery (Graves, she remarks, was uninterested in the gilded altar but considerably taken by the small courtyard vegetable

garden), their efforts to set up poetry readings among the local poets as a consolation for the cancelled symposium, and their convivial meals at her parents' home. At one of these, Graves encounters Dr George Rosenkranz, an organic chemist whose pioneering work on yams and the related *barbasco* led to the discovery of the first combined oral contraceptive pill ('the pill') – a development Graves wholeheartedly approves.

Tossed together for a week, the aging poet and the college grad became fast friends. When Graves returned to Mallorca, they struck up a correspondence that lasted into the mid-seventies, and met in Mallorca and London. As well as chat about light topics such as owls (the Bryn Mawr symbol) and medals, their conversations touch on issues of moment to Graves scholars, remembered by the author with great clarity and detail. For example:

Robert wanted to experiment with mushrooms himself and felt authorized to do so as a poet. He had already revealed his desire in Mexico when we first met because he had heard of a mushroom in Oaxaca that had the same properties as Dionysius. He was convinced both species could get him to the gates of paradise, and he wanted to pass through during his lifetime, especially since his health was deteriorating and entering that unknown dimension was vital for him.

And ...

He had encountered other muses before, but, with the passage of time, had eventually felt betrayed by them. He despised their unfaithfulness and their lack of total commitment. Even with Laura Riding, the woman who had had the most influence in his young life, love had come to an end. Deep disappointment and suffering had followed, and he was forced to set her aside. He remained loyal to his former muses, showing them generosity, but they were no longer his source of inspiration. They had fulfilled their role; their virtues were lost, and the poet had to carry on.

The second biographical piece flows from the work of The Robert Graves Oral History Project,² an edited and annotated abridgement of an extended interview conducted with William Graves, elaborating on many of William's recollections of his father published in *Wild Olives: Life in Mallorca with Robert Graves* (1995).

Following on from Biography are shorter and more narrowly focused biographical narratives highlighting specific texts, beginning with brief accounts of two ephemeral texts previously hidden from Graves scholars. The first of these, 'A Previously Uncredited Letter', regards a letter published in *The Sunday Times* on 6 June 1937 over the name Alan Hodge that research shows Graves wrote. This essay contextualizes the letter and Graves's reasons, stated and unstated, for inviting Hodge to stand in as author. The verses in 'Verses for Margaret Russell' refer to a poetic inscription Graves penned in an autograph book belonging to Margaret Russell, who twenty years earlier had been nanny to his daughter Jenny (1919-1921). As well as transcribing the poem, this note chronicles the friendship that grew up between Russell and 'The Captain' and lasted over forty years.

'Derick Boothby's *White Goddess*', written by the book collector and Graves enthusiast Steven Michael Stroud, is one of those rare bibliographical essays that take a deep dive into the provenance of a single volume. Stroud begins by describing his excitement at having purchased over the internet from a reputable dealer a 'signed copy' of the Faber paperback edition of *The White Goddess*, which he discovers to be bound 'like a family bible' in black Morocco leather. He then relates how documents not disclosed in the bookdealer's description tumbled from the book: a letter from William Graves to a former owner (regarding the identities of the mysterious 'Derick and Rosalie', the previous owners), and, more astonishingly, a holograph note to 'Derick and Rosalie' from Robert Graves. In the second part of his essay, Stroud identifies Derick as Major Frederick 'Derick' Alexander Colquhoun Boothby (1909-1979), 'the leader of several covens in the British Witch Cult', and drawing on the correspondence between Graves and Boothby, discusses Graves's attitude toward witches,³ and the effect of *The White Goddess* on the Wicca community in Britain. Stroud concludes

his essay by examining yet a third treasure concealed in the ‘signed copy’: a card-sized print by the artist Rosalie Loveday, then engaged to Boothby and soon to be his wife. Although conceived for an unconventional Christmas card, the image of a young woman or perhaps a supernatural being draped sensuously in foliage impressed Graves with its uncanny likeness to Margot Callas, with whom he was then in love and for whom he was writing poems. After perusing photographs of Callas, Stroud admits to finding the resemblance uncanny as well.

The term bibliography may be stretched a bit with the concluding essay, a reprint of Patricia T. O’Conner’s masterful introduction to the 2018 Seven Stories Press edition of *The Reader Over Your Shoulder*, by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge. A grammarian and former editor of *The New York Times Book Review*, O’Conner’s erudite and passionate discussion of *Reader* is exemplary and well-deserving of another read and indeed a place in our archives. In her words: ‘[*The Reader Over Your Shoulder*] is the best book on writing ever published. It’s the sanest, most rigorous examination of English prose style to be found anywhere, and it may also be the most peculiar. *I doubt that we’ll see its like again.*’ (emphasis mine).

As in issue one of *The Review*, we are pleased to offer original poetry by six distinguished and talented poets with diverse practices: Joseph Thomas (the poetic alter ego of Joseph T. Thomas, Jr), Dunstan Ward, Beverley Bie Brahic, Stephen Romer, Medha Singh, and Jonathan Davidson. For this issue, we invited an esteemed poet not affiliated with *The Review*, Gregory Leadbetter, to choose work by poets we otherwise might have missed and to provide a brief introduction. He eloquently articulates the inspiration that underlies our initiative:

[The poetry universe] is better conceived as a vast commonwealth of human history, activity, and possibility in which there is always more to discover, to know, and to enjoy than we can ever wholly grasp, quantitatively.

We hope you approve of this innovation as plans are already underway to repeat it in 2023.

We close this second issue of *The Robert Graves Review* by honouring two departed colleagues and friends, Alice Hughes Kersnowski, and Anne Mounic, in personal tributes written respectively by Kathleen Maloney and Dunstan Ward.

I would like to thank William Graves and The Robert Graves Copyright Trust, which holds the copyright on Robert Graves's writing, for allowing us to publish his texts; to William and Philip Graves for transcription triage; to Philip for building a nimble operating system for our website; to my associate editors, Alicja Bemben, for co-piloting this issue, Lucia Graves and Patrick J. Villa, for professionalism and collegiality, Carl Hahn for continuing to unearth texts unknown to Graves research, Dunstan Ward and Fran Brearton for assistance in compiling this journal's Poetry Section; various Editorial Board members for vetting submissions, assisting in and engaging our authors in the writing process, and for their wise and generous advice, and for the continuing support of The Robert Graves Society and its President, Charles Mundy.

NOTES

¹ As he notes, Thomas's talk was part of an online panel presentation at the Pacific American Modern and Ancient Languages Association conference, 13 November 202, a video of which is still available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHsEQCQT3Ec&t=62s>.

² The purpose of the Robert Graves Oral History Project is to record oral histories with people who interacted with Robert Graves. Anybody who fits the description is invited to contact us to discuss arranging a recorded interview. The Project currently consists of three members of The Society: Lucia Graves, Carl Hahn, and Michael Joseph.

³ We will hear more about Boothby and Graves in a subsequent issue of *The Robert Graves Review*.