

## **Death Cycle**

*Dunstan Ward*

*Tongues of Fire: Songs by Eric McElroy*, James Gilchrist, tenor, Eric McElroy, piano (Thames Ditton, Surrey: SOMM Recordings, CD 0665, 2023).

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*Tongues of Fire* is the debut disc of twenty songs by the outstandingly gifted American-born composer and pianist Eric McElroy (b. 1992), sung with intensity and finesse by the British tenor James Gilchrist (b. 1966).

The disc comprises four song cycles, plus one single song, the longest, which are settings of poems by five twentieth century and contemporary poets: Gregory Leadbetter (b. 1975), Alice Oswald (b. 1966), W. S. Merwin (1927–2019), Grevel Lindop (b. 1948), and Robert Graves (1895–1985).

If the poetic presence of Robert Graves may be discerned to some degree in the work of each of the four other poets, they are also linked to him in various more practical ways. W. S. Merwin was engaged in 1950 by Robert Graves as a tutor to his son William; from 2019 to 2023 Alice Oswald was one of Graves's successors as Oxford Professor of Poetry; it was at a Robert Graves Society conference in Mallorca in 2018 that Eric McElroy met Gregory Leadbetter; and Grevel Lindop, surely the most Gravesian poet of the four, edited the 1997 revised fourth edition of *The White Goddess*.

There is a special bond, moreover, between Eric McElroy and Robert Graves, 'the first poet with whom I became obsessed', as he writes in the booklet accompanying his CD:

I encountered him initially as a translator (*The Twelve Caesars*), then as a novelist (*I, Claudius*), then as a theorist (*The White Goddess*) and lastly as a poet. My reading of Graves's complete poems at the age of 14 was a watershed moment; it is no exaggeration to say that Graves unlocked an

enormous part of my creative imagination which, despite having wandered in non-Gravesian directions since, remains forever indebted to his turning of the key.

McElroy has taken the title of his Graves song cycle, *A Dead Man's Embers*, from 'To Bring the Dead to Life', a poem written in 1935:

To bring the dead to life  
Is no great magic.  
Few are wholly dead:  
Blow on a dead man's embers  
And a live flame will start.

'Possession of the self by the subject, even to the point of reanimation, is the theme of this poem', McElroy explains. The theme of the six-poem cycle is death:

I toyed with settings of Graves for many years, but it was not until 2017 that I settled on a theme for *A Dead Man's Embers*. Graves's early war poems provided the material for a composition about death, exploring as they do our schizophrenic feelings of terror and awe towards the subject.

For his cycle, McElroy has chosen poems from *Goliath and David* (1916), *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), and *Country Sentiment* (1920), but rearranged them in a different order from Graves's. It opens with 'Two Fusiliers' (*Fairies and Fusiliers*), a tribute to the 'lovely friendship' between Graves and Sassoon.<sup>1</sup> Delicacy of feeling is conveyed by the rippling piano introduction, while the complexity of their relationship is enacted by the singer's elaborate melisma on 'lovely'. The music harshens in the second stanza to suggest 'all the misery and loud sound' of battle, then softens again at 'a Spring day'. Gilchrist's head voice rises to an astonishing exaltation in the closing lines' paradoxical resolution:

we found  
Beauty in Death,  
In dead men, breath.

McElroy places next in the cycle 'Here They Lie' (*Country Sentiment*), the last in Graves's ordering. It is one of the most expressive of the songs, with the uncanny initial 'Here', the lamenting two notes of 'Dead', the piano's subtly varied funereal tolling, and a wonderfully poignant effect with the final sustained high note's affirmation: 'Pride'.

In 'A Dead Boche', Graves's celebrated evocation of 'War's Hell', the 'loud sound', violent and discordant, of the first stanza is muted on its concluding word, a low, sinister 'blood', while the second stanza, Otto Dix-like in its gruesome explicitness, is eerily mesmeric, 'dribbling' given a run of notes that unexpectedly ascend, the ending an obsessive brooding, abruptly broken off.

'I am interested in the unknown, the enigmatical, the numinous, the half-ness of things', McElroy declares. In his setting of 'Haunted', he conveys a hushed sense of the uncanny, then of 'terror and awe' at death:

I meet you suddenly down the street,  
Strangers assume your phantom faces,  
You grin at me from daylight places,  
Dead, long dead

– those last three words breathed by unaccompanied voice; a pair of terse spaced piano chords bring the song to a sombre stop.

The cycle might well have ended here. Instead, McElroy surprisingly breaks the mood with two poems that could seem at first to bear no clear relation to what has come before. In 'I'd Love to Be a Fairy's Child', Graves exploits the Victorian and Edwardian cult of fairies in a slightly creepy kind of whimsy. For McElroy, the poem 'sits in a morbid shade by the very absence of horror'.

'There is an ecstatic element to the grotesque,' McElroy writes, 'analogous to the hysterical, that intensifies as the cycle progresses and reaches its apex in the final song, "Strong Beer"'. This is an

exercise (parodic, perhaps) in forced jollity, adopting that Chesterton-Belloc mode of patriotic celebration of Englishness – ‘English drink and English food’. The result of placing it here is curiously to subvert the preceding war poems. Thus the ‘prize’ for ‘the Fusilier’ is not ‘friendship blossoming from mud’ or ‘Beauty in Death’, but ‘Flags’; the ‘test’ to ‘find the bravest men’ is ‘Strong beer’, not ‘Pride’. The ‘living lads’ who are ‘haunted’ by dead friends that ‘Gulp down [their] wine’ give way to ‘jolly rascal lads’, ‘Who look on beer when it is brown, | Smack their lips and gulp it down.’ The thumping conclusion, “‘Teach me to live that I may fear | The grave as little as my beer’”, disconcertingly echoes ‘Here they lie who once learned here | All that is taught of hurt or fear’ . . .

Gravesians who were privileged to hear the composer and the thrilling soprano April Fredrick perform *A Dead Man’s Embers* at the 2018 Graves conference will be keen to listen to this splendid new interpretation, while others will have the opportunity to make the discovery of a powerful and original work – like, indeed, all the songs superbly performed on this disc.

**Dunstan Ward** is the co-editor of *The Complete Poems* of Robert Graves, and the author of three volumes of poems, *Beyond Puketapu* (2015) and *At This Distance* (2019), and *Departures* (2024). He was for many years the President of the Robert Graves Society and the editor of *Gravesiana*, the first name of this journal.

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<sup>1</sup> See Dunstan Ward, ‘Poetic Correspondence: The Verse Letters of Robert Graves’, in the 2023 issue of this journal, *The Robert Graves Review* 1.3 (2023), 514–33.