

## **Closing the Book: An Introduction**

*Michael Joseph*

With the fourth issue of *The Robert Graves Review*, we bring volume one to a rousing conclusion. Fittingly, the issue joins the voices of poets and scholars who have nourished the journal for well over a decade, to those of scholars and poets who arrived within recent memory, as well as seasoned newcomers, and emerging scholars, mixing considerations of less-studied sectors of Graves's life and work with fresh takes on areas of continuing relevance.

Perhaps because of my own indecisiveness around the subject, I found the reoccurrence of the terms 'muse', 'muses' and 'Muse' puzzling, and dug into the archive and my own writing for clarification. For the most part – and certainly in this issue – the uses of 'muses' are certain, unambiguous and defensible. But collectively they tend to represent what might be described as a general state of confusion. In part, this is an effect of semantic bleaching. The terms haven't lost their precise meaning in context, but in the wider discourse, they have taken on slightly burdensome implications, the way the term 'woke' has in recent years become a term of mockery.

'Muse', can be divided into three categories sharing porous boundaries: the ontologically complex entity, *The Muse*, the largely metaphorical category of *musedom* (a kind of bio-poetic action potential), and *muses*, the women in Graves's life, sometimes restricted to the younger friends he made in the sixties and onward, but sometimes inclusive of women in earlier periods as well.

Increasingly, the term *muses* has become constraining, archaic, and belittling to all concerned: a distorting lens through which we perceive Graves appropriating the personhood of young women, while magnifying his own. Unfortunately, Graves's late pronouncements have been less than helpful in correcting this impression. When we regard them as tokens of a paradigmatic type – the personal muse – these unique persons disappear, and we miss the opportunity to evaluate their individual impact on Graves's life and poetry, as well as his impact on them. In the cause of

formulating the most productive way to understand these women and Graves's relationship(s) to and with them, calling them *muses* becomes a hindrance.

By itself, the term 'personal muse' does the greatest damage of all, all around. The woman who becomes the personal muse surrenders her individual identity but gains little. She is not the Muse, a transpersonal entity, she is merely a link to the Muse—a muse—her function somewhat akin to that of the classical Greek temple prostitute. But 'personal muse' suggests something less even than that. Her status depends on the person with whom she is linked, the poet she inspires. And this dependence not only has the appearance of being transactional, but it is also a fundamental contradiction of a core tenet in Graves's belief structure.

The contact with the sacred is perceived as transpersonal. Inspiration is subjectively experienced as a non-subjective revelation of an enduring, timeless, and hence impersonal reality. The Muse is the phenomenological anthropomorphization of the sacred for all poets. This idea resonates throughout Graves's poetry and prose. By implication, the idea of the personal muse is nonsensical and grossly misrepresents the phenomenon.

Invoking 'muses' also shaves the narrative of a rich and diverse period of Graves's life, minimizing areas of remarkable intellectual accomplishment, and, inevitably, casting Beryl Graves in the role of martyr: part gallant Penelope, part Great Mother, part Tammy Wynette, instead of an independent and intelligent, loving woman who inspired some of Graves's most heartfelt and moving love poems.

One cannot leap over the fact that Graves claimed *muses* for his own use, defined and valorised the muse/poet relationship, which has tempted readers to privilege a biographical approach to his intellectually challenging poems (*there goes Margot, there, Aemile*). But what Graves understood as 'muse', can no longer be understood by the word 'muse', due in large part to the downstream effects of his popularization of the term. Graves innovated or popularized epistemologies and new ways of knowing that contributed to a critical methodology that featured freer and more profound understandings of the relations between men and women.

And these have looped back to observe and recharacterize Graves in ways that have been both illuminating and obscuring. We see this problem nowhere more clearly than in the divide between older and younger scholars. Older, more experienced scholars may tend to become frustrated by the criticisms levelled at Graves's work and morality by younger scholars because they feel younger scholars only see the past imperfectly, through the glass of the present. And younger scholars tend to become frustrated by these criticisms because they feel older scholars only see the present imperfectly, through the glass of the past.

In light of these confusions and this impasse, I would like to retire 'muses' and 'personal muse': even to cut the cord with 'Muse'. Time has severed the connection with the sympathetic imagination that devised it. We can get lost in the infinite regress of definitions or let it go. As the full scope of Graves's genius comes to light, 'muse' must fade away, so why not let it happen now? Finally, I sense that the current confusion might have delighted Graves, for whom it sometimes seems confusion appeared as the natural state of truth. However, my sense of what Graves would think about my sense of what he would think of our apparent confusion is less personally flattering.

*The Robert Graves Review* 1.4 begins with a penetrating study of Graves's influence on the late A. S. Byatt. Bret van den Brink's 'Beatrice Nest, White Goddess: Romance and Ecology' argues that *Possession*, Byatt's Booker Award winning novel, cannot be properly understood without understanding Byatt's borrowing from *The White Goddess*, and recognizing the character of Beatrice Nest as a transposition of the Goddess. We welcome van den Brink to the pages of *The Robert Graves Review* and look forward to his further investigations into Graves's influence and writing.

Joseph Bailey's 'Coachmen into Chauffeurs' extends his fruitful investigations into the Liddell-Hart Library at Kings College, which we have sampled in his 'Further into the Labyrinth', published in the final issue of *Gravesiana*. Here, Bailey examines the correspondence between Liddell-Hart and Graves debating Britain's actions in the ongoing war (WWII) and the prospects for peace.

“‘Poised There in Conjunction’ with the Muse’, by longtime contributor Devindra Kohli, rounds out the Critical Studies section. With Kohli’s erudite, far-ranging reflections, the journal has now within recent memory seen three papers on ‘The Face in the Mirror,’ encompassing three diverse interpretations grounded in three distinct understandings of the nature of inspiration. Where Peter McDonald found an aging man’s heroic longing, and I, a pre-critical commitment to poetry and a tragicomic rumination on the opposition of biological positivism and spirituality, Kohli finds an ecstasy that overcomes the contradictions between sensuality and faith.

Our Biographical Studies section offers three personal recollections. In a remarkable synthesis of her parents’ correspondence, 1939 to 1975, Lucia Graves writes about the close, affectionate relationship that formed the unshakable foundation of the poet’s life and work for over forty years. Lucia has chosen many memorable passages from their letters touching on all aspects of their life together, gracefully shaping them into a compelling narrative of domestic felicity.

Our second biographical offering, ‘An Interview with Vivian Holzer Rozental’ delves further into material introduced in Rozental’s 2022 article ‘Poetry and the Olympics, 1968 Mexico, Robert Graves’, which recounted her impromptu partnership with Robert Graves, struck up during the troubled run-up to the 1968 Mexico Olympics, and their subsequent friendship. Readers will find Graves’s interactions with local poets, as well as cultural figures such as George Rosenkranz, a Hungarian organic chemist, most interesting. Rozental’s reflections on Graves’s forthrightness, energy and warmth make good reading, as does her ability to convey the intensity of the poet’s curiosity and wide interests.

Closing the section, Malcolm Southan offers a journalist’s eye-view of a pivotal moment in Graves’s life. Recounting his visit to Deià in 1958, and his subsequent interest in Graves’s life in Wales, Southan shares circumspect observations on Graves’s work habits, the increasing distractions in his life, and the Deià café scene.

I'd been on a Mediterranean beach the previous year in Italy – and, of course, since then I have experienced beach life in various Mediterranean countries – but never before or since have I been in company so little interested in what was happening on the beach or in the water and so preoccupied with what was happening up the hill, where the village was (p. 740).

Notes introduces a new (and we hope notable) feature, a symposium of lightly edited papers presented at the recent Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention (2023). The papers were tethered (loosely) to Graves's activities during the Sixties. In a paper that conjures up the first of two unexpected pairings, Jonahs Kneitly ponders the similarities between Graves's poetry and that of the anti-establishment Beat poets, particularly Allen Ginsberg. He argues that Graves and the Beats alike challenged repressive postwar sexual mores. Elena Theodorakopolous finds much to challenge in Graves's idiosyncratic use of classical mythology, and as well in his jaunty magazine pronouncements about 'real women'. While Kneitly visualizes Graves in the Sixties as a restless establishment gadfly, Theodorakopolous counters with a vision of him as a would-be Hugh Hefner, a position she argues with, among other evidence, a poem by Ruth Fainlight. Concluding the panel, Joseph T. Thomas Jr, a contributor to every issue of *The Robert Graves Review*, reflects on Graves's influence on 'the counterculture', likening him to fellow WWI veteran, influencer, and Sixties 'backpack author', J. R. R. Tolkien. Welcome to newcomers Elena and Jonahs and good luck and godspeed to all panellists with their evolving projects.

Our *Poetry* section presents twelve previously unpublished poems by five poets, Sean O'Brien, Katharine Towers, Kris Johnson, Alexander Wolff, and Maryann Corbett, the latter four poets (new to these pages) divided into two complementary sections: Poems Selected by Sean O'Brien, a steadfast presence in our *Review*, and Poems Selected by Rachel Hadas, whose poetry appeared here in 2020.

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*The Review* finishes with a pair of reviews. In *Death Cycle*, Dunstan Ward writes of the pianist / composer Eric McElroy's musical CD, *Tongues of Fire: Songs by Eric McElroy* (his 'debut disc'), with admirable sensitivity to McElroy's creative interpretations of Graves's poems and musical figures. Judith Woolf, who introduced herself to us last year through her creative analysis of Graves's 'Love Without Hope' here shares penetrating insights into literary criticism in 'Neil Corcoran's *Negotiations: A Critic and his Contexts*', including an original poem inspired by it. She concludes: 'Critics such as Corcoran, who demonstrate by example that clarity is a form of wit, are badly needed these days, especially when they *make us look more closely at poets whose work we thought we already knew*' (emphasis mine). I am deeply grateful to have these insights mark the end of the substantive portion of volume one.

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I would like to acknowledge the hard work and dedication of several editors and friends that, if not for whom .... First and foremost, I want to thank *The Review's* associate editors: Lucia Graves, whose research skills and unsleeping commitment to the highest editorial standards are inspirational; Carl Hahn, bibliography editor, whose meticulous overhaul of Higginson's bibliography has become the tentpole of our editorial practice, and whose co-direction of The Robert Graves Oral History Project is no less valuable to that initiative; Dunstan Ward, associate poetry editor, for his reliable counsel on poetical matters; and Alicja Bemben, associate editor, for her steady hand in keeping the ship moving smoothly forward according to evolving standards in scholarly publishing. I would like as well to extend hearty embraces to Sean O'Brien and Rachel Hadas for selecting poems by accomplished poets new to our shores; Anett K. Jessop deserves our gratitude (and therefore receives it) for masterminding the MLA project and for helping to steer it into the journal; Philip Graves, a round of applause or indeed a standing ovation for his all-seeing attention to *The Review* website. Our continuing thanks goes to William Graves MBE for his selfless leadership and exemplary

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dedication to open and disinterested scholarship in the work of Robert Graves, and to the Robert Graves Trust for their generous permission to reprint copyrighted material from the Graves estate. Without their support, we would all be off playing skittles.

I am lucky indeed to have fallen into this distinguished company of talented friends, scholars, poets, writers, and merrymakers, now over the course of seven issues, and trust that the members of The Robert Graves Society as well as the broader reading community will be pleased and impressed by their combined efforts in the fourth and final issue of the first volume of *The Robert Graves Review*. Readers, we hope you will be encouraged by what you will have read to join the conversation and submit your own critical and biographical studies, notes, poems and reviews to volume two.