

# Contents

## *Editorial*

**Editorial statement** 163

**Editorial** 164

*Dunstan Ward*

## *Obituaries*

**Alan Sillitoe (1928–2010)** 168

A Personal Memory

*Lucia Graves*

**Colin Wells (1933–2010)** 172

In Memory and in Celebration of Colin Wells

*Frank Kersnowski*

**Colin Allen (1929–2010)** 176

Remembering Colin Allen

*Joseph Bailey*

## *Features*

**An Unrecorded WWI Publication by Robert Graves** 179

*Eric Webb*

**Graves and the Grocery** 205

*Philip Stewart*

*Critical Studies*

**Robert Graves and the Scholars** 211

*Norman Austin*

**The Claudius Novels and Imperial Family  
Melodrama** 235

*Peter G. Christensen*

**‘You may not believe it, for hardly could I’:  
Robert Graves and the Bible** 251

*Anne Mounic*

**A ‘Spirit Above Wars’: Robert Graves’s Self-Portrait  
as Soldier and Poet, 1915–29** 290

*Dominic Hibberd*

**Sources, Collaborators, and Critique in *Antigua*,  
*Penny*, *Puce*** 309

*John Woodrow Presley*

**Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves:  
The Question of Collaboration** 331

*Mark Jacobs*

**One Story and One Story Only:  
Robert Graves’s American Reputation** 348

*John Woodrow Presley*

*Review*

***Robert Graves: A Life* by Bruce King** 370

*Matthew Betts*

## Editorial statement

*Gravesiana* is a peer-reviewed journal which publishes scholarly articles concerning Robert Graves and members of his circle. It also contains reviews of the latest studies about Graves and those connected with him or the subjects of his works. There are biographical articles which aim to highlight Graves's personal relationship with various literary and other contemporaries, as well as providing personal glimpses of the man behind the poetry, fiction, mythography, scholarship and criticism.

The journal is also the publication of the Robert Graves Society and contains information concerning the society's activities, including conferences, lectures and other events of interest to those engaged in Graves studies.

*Gravesiana* is now available as an electronic journal (at [www.robertgraves.org/jana](http://www.robertgraves.org/jana)) and welcomes submissions from all who read its pages: the intention is that it should be a lively and intellectually challenging journal that in some degree reflects the protean spirit of the man to whom it is dedicated.

# Editorial

*Dunstan Ward*

This is the first electronic issue of *Gravesiana*. Following discussion over several years, the decision to go online was finally taken at the meeting of Robert Graves Society during the 2008 Robert Graves Conference at Oxford.

One major advantage is accessibility. In his article on Graves's American reputation John Woodrow Presley, Vice-President (Americas) of the Robert Graves Society, 'applaud[s] the society's growing reliance on the internet. All that can be done [...] to help Graves scholarship more rapidly appear in print (especially on the internet) should be undertaken.'

Online publication should also help solve the problems which have beset the journal, causing delays in the appearance of several issues, including this one: we owe apologies to our readers and gratitude for maintaining their commitment to this vital forum for Graves studies. Past history and hostages to fortune notwithstanding, our aim is to bring out the journal on time every year.

This *Gravesiana* is a 'first' in other ways. It features a hitherto unrecorded 'letter from the front' which Robert Graves sent in 1915 to his old school magazine, *The Carthusian*. Eric Webb convincingly identifies Graves as the anonymous author of 'Is my Team Ploughing...?'. He suggests that it is really a letter to 'Dick', the younger schoolmate whom Graves loved, and, moreover, 'an *apologia pro vita sua* on the eve of battle'.

Another discovery is the exact site of the shop that Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson ran on Boars Hill, five miles from Oxford, in 1919–21. Philip Stewart's account of his researches is illustrated by the shop sign 'almost certainly' painted by Nancy Nicholson, the report in the *Daily Mirror*, and a view of the spot where the shop stood.

Dominic Hibberd's article in the 'Critical Studies' section is ground-breaking in a different sense. It reveals the extent to which

*Goodbye to All That* re-invented in 1929 the Robert Graves of the wartime letters and poems, and how different his earlier attitudes were both to the war and to poetry about it. The much-quoted episode in *Goodbye* when Graves tells Sassoon that he will change his style after he has been in the trenches is just one of the numerous points where Dominic Hibberd sets the record straight.

The articles by Eric Webb and Dominic Hibberd are among several in this issue that might be considered to answer the plea of a speaker at the 2008 Oxford meeting for Graves criticism that eschews ‘hagiography’. Norman Austin dissects with forensic precision Graves’s *modus operandi* in *The Greek Myths*. However, far from merely doing a hatchet job (like an infuriated academic a few years ago in the *TLS*), Professor Austin demonstrates both the weaknesses and the strengths of the work. And he even concludes that ‘Graves himself would be astonished to discover how deeply the Goddess theory has infiltrated into the Academy’.

Nonetheless, in American universities John Woodrow Presley finds that there is an alarming lack of interest in Robert Graves’s work. Among a multiplicity of factors that Professor Presley examines is the low rating accorded to Graves’s work by those academic equivalents of Standard & Poor’s, the Norton Anthology and its predecessor, the Untermeyer anthology in its successive editions. There has been, too, the aggressive campaign conducted by Laura Riding and her followers during her lifetime and since. The Graves-Riding collaboration, the subject of two articles in the last *Gravesiana*,<sup>1</sup> is in this issue viewed from the ‘other side’ by Mark Jacobs.

Any hagiographical risk inherent in her theme is surely avoided in Anne Mounic’s luminous study of the connections between Robert Graves’s work and the Bible. And as well as the poet, the mythographer and the biblical scholar, Graves the historical novelist is represented by the late Peter Christensen’s exposition of ‘family melodrama’ in the Claudius novels, and by John Woodrow Presley’s incisive analysis of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* in terms of ‘Sources, Collaborators, and Critique’.

In this *Gravesiana* we commemorate three outstanding supporters of the Robert Graves Society, whose deaths in 2010 bring to members of the society a real sense of personal loss.

Alan Sillitoe was a wonderful friend to the society and to the cause of Graves studies. His inimitable talks and readings from his novels, poetry and letters at Robert Graves Society events in Oxford, Mallorca and Paris will always be treasured; they are evoked by Lucia Graves in her ‘personal memory’ of Alan Sillitoe. The society has been enriched by the whole-hearted involvement of one of the key writers of our times.

The highly productive scholarly life of Professor Colin Wells, distinguished classicist, archaeologist and historian, who presented elegantly erudite papers at Robert Graves conferences in Paris in 2004 and Oxford in 2008, is celebrated by his friend and former colleague Frank Kersnowski. Joseph Bailey, a fellow member of the council of the Robert Graves Society, pays tribute to the late Colin Allen. Elected to the council in 2004, Colin Allen gave a memorable talk on Claudius at the 2002 Rome conference; his counsel and genial company at the society’s events were very much appreciated.

The Robert Graves Society offers its sincere sympathy to Alan Sillitoe’s wife, Ruth Fainlight, to Mrs Kate Wells, to Mrs Patricia Allen, and to their families.

As editor of this issue, I wish to thank Lucia Graves and Patrick Villa for their invaluable help. This *Gravesiana* is a ‘last’ in that it marks the end of my ten-year presidency of the Robert Graves Society. My grateful thanks go to all my friends in the society for their support, and my best wishes to my successor, Dr Fran Brearton.

*This issue of Gravesiana is dedicated to the memory of Alan Sillitoe.*

**Dunstan Ward** was formerly Professor of English at the

University of London Institute in Paris. With Beryl Graves he edited the Carcanet and Penguin Classics editions of Robert Graves's *Complete Poems*.

---

# A Personal Memory: Alan Sillitoe (1928–2010)

*Lucia Graves*



*Alan Sillitoe with William Graves and Ruth Fainlight, Oxford 2008*

The poet sings his poems on a bridge  
A bridge open to horizontal rain  
And the steely nudge of lightning,  
Or icy moths that bring slow death  
Croon him to sleep by snow-wings touching his eyes.

[from 'The Poet', 1968]

Alan Sillitoe, poet and novelist, who died on 25 April 2010, aged 82, was a life-long friend of my family. He also had many good friends among the members of the Robert Graves Society, of

which he was a prominent and much-loved contributor. Nobody who was there that November night in 1995, in the packed hall at La Residencia (Deyá), will forget listening to Alan reading Robert's poems together with his wife, the poet Ruth Fainlight. That night, Alan interspersed his reading with reminiscences of Robert, describing their first encounter in 1953 – Alan riding up from Sóller on a hired bike – and their subsequent connections over the years on both literary and personal levels. To end the evening, he pulled out his Morse key and tapped a message of greetings from us all, for Robert to receive in the world beyond.



*Alan reading at the wreath-laying, Deyá, 2006*

Alan delighted us with many other readings over the years, at various Robert Graves conferences, at the Madrid exhibition in 2002 and, most recently, at the Oxford Conference of 2008, where he read a selection of Robert's letters to him. Perhaps the most memorable of his poetry readings was at the wreath-laying ceremony to mark the Ninetieth Anniversary of the Battle of the Somme: we'll all remember Alan, standing by Robert's grave in

the Deyá cemetery, his head bowed as he read, his words echoing in our hearts. The two Royal Welch Fusiliers who had been flown over from Cyprus to take part in the ceremony were offered a cigar each by Alan – apparently Robert had told him to do just that whenever he came across a member of his old regiment.

A few days later, on 12 July 2006, Alan sent me a trench map dated May 1916 of the High Wood area, where Robert was wounded during the Battle of the Somme. ‘I’m sure you’ll like to have it,’ he wrote. ‘He may well as a captain have carried a copy in his tunic when the shrapnel struck, or seen one before he went into the attack.’ I treasure that gift – probably the very map that inspired his poem ‘Somme’. Alan’s love of maps and his Morse-code knowledge dated back to the days when, still a teenager, he served as a wireless operator for the RAF in Malaya at the start of the Emergency. After he was discharged from the army in 1948 he was diagnosed with TB and had to spend almost a year recovering in a sanatorium – a time during which he became an avid reader and turned his full attention to literature and to writing. So when, as a ten-year-old, I first met Alan in Mallorca, his writing life had only just begun.

Already then, he thought of himself primarily as a poet. ‘When I became a writer it was as a poet,’ he explains in the introduction to his *Collected Poems* (1993), ‘but it didn’t take long for fiction to obtrude, perhaps to fill in those spaces which must necessarily exist between one poem and another, my temperament having decided that during my life I could not be permitted to be unoccupied for a moment. Such periods of emptiness, being too fearful to contemplate, were duly filled, and have been so ever since.’ Much has been written and discussed about the content and themes of his work, and the ‘angry young man’ label he was always trying to escape. Alan cared and felt deeply about many issues and these pulsate both within and beyond the world of Arthur Seaton and his other fictional characters. Not enough has been said about his poetry, about its powerful combination of clear language and deep emotional insight, a voice which can also be heard in his prose. Take, for example, these words from *A Man of*

*His Time* (2004):

He didn't see her glare of loathing but he knew it was there. Not with all the tools in the forge would he be able to cut a way through the wall of her dislike, supposing he cared to, which in some way he did.

I hold many good memories of Alan – in particular those evenings at his London flat with Ruth during the last fifteen years or so. Alan, in his leather waistcoat, with his welcoming smile. Those lovely meals in the kitchen at the end of the corridor and down the steps: kippers and gherkins, Ruth's delicious soups or casseroles, the French wine and the shots of vodka. And then the pipe and the conversation in the drawing room. Books everywhere. His warmth, his generosity, his humanity and his refreshing sincerity are just a few of the things we shall all miss. But his words remain. And it was, of course, Ruth, his soul mate, who always kept the back door of poetry open for Alan, as he so perfectly put it in these lines:

You are the harvest of this world,  
Opening each back door to  
Stepping stones through tortuous wayfaring.

[from 'Perplexed, placed as I am', 1960]

**London, June 2010**

# **In Memory and in Celebration of Colin Wells (1933–2010)**

*Frank Kersnowski*

I met Colin Wells in 1988 when he was appointed the Murchison Professor of Classical Studies and Chair of the Department of Classical Studies at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas, where I was a Professor of English. His appointment was distinctly appropriate, since he actually had to form a department and develop its curriculum. He did both, and continued his distinguished career as a classicist and archaeologist with the poise and modesty of the truly exceptional.

By the time he came to Trinity, Colin had served ably as a teacher and administrator at the University of Ottawa. Entering there as a Lecturer in 1960, he was a Professor when he resigned in 1988. He had also served as the Chair of the Department of Classical Studies, as interim Dean of the Faculty of Arts and School of Graduate Studies, and, in a typically eclectic role, as Acting Chair of the Department of Music. Following these he was appointed Vice-Dean of the Faculty of Arts. Other appointments concerning curriculum and research testify to professional abilities of an unusually high order.

Such administrative positions as these reflected the esteem of his colleagues for a teacher and scholar of exceptional talent and accomplishment, as is evident in his own modestly phrased résumé, which simply lists the nineteen professional organisations in which he had accepted responsibilities by the time I met him. By then he had also published his four major books, though revisions and translations would follow, forty articles, and twenty-nine reviews. Reviews are a service to the profession that is often undervalued: Colin's were a notable contribution to his discipline. He makes no mention of the number of papers read, panels participated in, meetings chaired; undoubtedly they were legion. He was a visiting lecturer at Oxford, Berkley, Strasbourg, Austin,

a visiting Fellow at Brasenose College, Oxford, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London. Trinity University was indeed fortunate to have such a distinguished academic. He was, also, as I found, a distinguished human being, someone who always brought lustre to our profession.

Colin and I would have met at a reception or over coffee in the faculty club, somewhere informally, and discovered that we had an interest in common: Robert Graves. Kate Wells, Colin's wife, is the daughter of the writer Richard Hughes, who was a friend of Robert Graves. In fact, Graves found for him a house in Wales that the family still owns. As members of the Robert Graves Society will recall from meeting them at conferences in Paris and Oxford, where Colin presented erudite and elegant papers, Kate and Colin shared a special understanding of Graves and his writing.

With our mutual interest in Graves as a start, I like to think that Colin and I developed a friendship that we both enjoyed, albeit my part was often that of comic relief. Administrative work at Trinity was often vexing, or at least troublesome. I remember one morning seeing Colin coming toward me in a hallway, head down and frowning; so I stopped him: 'Colin, on my way to work this morning I went by my dry cleaners and heard a conversation replete with classical wit and allusion.' (Colin's sceptical look did not deter me.) 'The man in line in front of me handed the clerk a pair of torn trousers. Receiving them, the clerk said: "You ripa dees?" To which the customer replied: "You mena dees?"' Colin brightened a bit, then said with fingers pinching the bridge of his nose, "Thanks, Frank. This morning I needed that".

That Colin's efforts as an administrator were not only successful but also prescient and forward thinking is shown in the stature of his department, even in the time since he retired. The Classics Department under his guidance went from the occasional teaching of classical languages to one that has a shaping influence at the university and attracts students of real merit. Such does not occur in a vacuum. Colin not only served on divisional councils, search committees and curriculum councils as is expected of

departmental chairs, he did so with exceptional tolerance and intelligence. Here was a scholar who could have had a prestigious appointment as a Latinist at an Irish university but was willing to negotiate with outsized egos to strengthen this university and its community.

Colin laboured in the academic trenches, but did not neglect the strong base in research that so identified him, and gave him his international stature. The excavations of Carthage that he began while he was at Ottawa continued when he came to Trinity, often with the participation of undergraduate students. He also extended his research to northern France. As his publications show, much of the strength of his research came from his concern with the lives of people during the time, as well as the historical events that shaped them. His publications after he came to Trinity build on what he had done before. He published twenty-two articles, thirteen book reviews, and six books, of which five were revisions or translations of *The Roman Empire* (1984; second edition, 1992). This book was for me the jewel in his crown. It gave him opportunity to use the full range of his abilities: historian, translator, archaeologist, and storyteller. All of this he did in prose that is both authoritative and readable, as is evident in his preface to *The Roman Empire* when discussing the forming of ‘the equestrian order (*ordo equester*)’ by wealthy men who did not wish for a political career:

This had evolved from the cavalry of the Early Republic, but the equestrians (equites or knights) of the Late Republic had no more in common with mounted warriors than have the successful businessmen, diligent civil servants and distinguished academics raised to the knighthood in modern Britain (‘Prince, Bayard would have smashed his sword / To see the sort of knights you dub. / Is that the last of them? O Lord, / Will someone take me to a pub?’).

After a brief illness, Colin died on 11 March 2010 at his home in France with his family around him. We shall not look upon his

like again.

**Colin Wells** was born on 15 November 1933 in West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire, England. His education comprised Nottingham High School 1943–52; Foundation Scholar, Sir Thomas White Senior Scholar; Varley Scholarship for Classics, Oriel College, Oxford 1950; Oriel College, Oxford 1952–54. His university education was interrupted by National Service, in the Royal Artillery as a Second Lieutenant in the Forty-first Field Regiment in Egypt and Germany. He was a Lieutenant in the South Notts Hussars Yeomanry, Royal Horse Artillery 1956–60. He was again at Oxford as an undergraduate 1956–58 and as a D. Phil. student 1962–64. His degrees were University of Oxford B.A. 1958; M.A. 1959; D. Phil. 1965 (thesis, ‘The Frontiers of the Roman Empire under Augustus’, under the supervision of Professor Sir Ian Richmond). Colin Wells died on 11 March 2010. He is survived by his wife Kate, two sons, Dominic and Christopher, and his grandchildren.

# Remembering Colin Allen (1929–2010)

*Joseph Bailey*

It is with sadness that we have to tell readers of the death of Colin Allen, who together with his wife Patricia was a long-standing member of the Robert Graves Society.

I first got to know Colin and Patricia at the Rome conference on Graves at the British School in July 2002, where Colin gave a paper on what he termed ‘The Enigma of Claudius: Graves and the Historians?’ I think the question mark in the title was decisive for Colin since he followed several speakers who had asked whether or not Graves’s work had been a historically accurate rendition from Suetonius or whether it was best seen as fiction in its own right. The preponderance of opinion seemed to be that it wasn’t and it didn’t much matter. Colin revelled in the attempts to make comparisons between the historical world and modern interpretations of it.

Colin in his professional life had been an Administrative grade civil servant, and as General Manager of the Covent Garden Market had overseen the removal of Covent Garden from the heart of London to its present site in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This would have been a difficult enough job given the historical associations of the market and the concerns of those who lived locally, but in the context of the times in which the changes took place, with mounting worries about the destruction of London and the growing environmental movement, it took all Colin’s political skills and foresight to persuade local communities and businesses where their long-term interests lay.

Colin, who was born in 1929, wanted to study ancient history at Cambridge and was awarded a place, but he decided that the family finances would not support his undergraduate ambitions, and instead took the Civil Service examination at the same time as his Cambridge entrance and passed out top of his year. Those who knew Colin wouldn’t be in the least surprised to learn that later in life he attended Birkbeck College, the part-time college of the

University of London, and obtained two MAs, in archaeology and in the history of the ancient world.

In 1953 Colin married his wife Patricia, and they had three children. Of their two boys, one entered the medical profession and become a general practitioner; the other studied Classics and become an archaeologist (he told me he had been supervising a dig in northern France this past year). Their daughter studied languages and until her marriage was organising conferences in France, Spain and South America.

Colin and Patricia were both strong supporters of the Robert Graves Society, and as well as attending conferences in Rome, Paris and Mallorca they went to Madrid, London and Oxford for shorter 'get-togethers'. I recall one occasion a few years ago at a RGS meeting in Islip, where Robert Graves and Nancy Nicholson lived in the 1920s. We had the meeting in the back room of a historic pub and Colin became very animated when he learned I would be returning to London that day; he insisted that the next time I came to the city for any reason we must meet up and I should stay with him and Patricia at their house in the village of Horspath outside Oxford. I did so not long afterwards and after a long evening meal in the city, I stayed with them at their lovely home. Patricia, who trained as a psychotherapist and ran her practice from their house, had been involved in training another generation of therapists and was very open about the difficulties of her work. It was typical of them both to be so generous with their time and hospitality.

The last time I meet them both was at the Eighth International Robert Graves Conference at Palma, Mallorca, in 2006. I remember to this day the leisurely meal we had at the restaurant overlooking the Cala de Deyá and Colin and Patricia's patient way with a rather dotty young lady who knew next to nothing about Robert Graves and seemed to have come along for the ride.

Colin was interested in archaeological work himself and as a member of the Hadrianic Society had been on sites in Northumberland and elsewhere. He was keen member of the Oxford Wine Society and together with Patricia was an excellent

bridge player. It was very difficult to think of Colin as an older member of the community and I was astonished to learn he was in his eighties when he died. He was active and looked years younger than his chronological age. Sadly, we were told that he would not be coming to the Robert Graves Society's 2008 conference at St John's College, Oxford, because of his doctor's advice about the possibility of catching infections, as he was receiving chemotherapy treatment in a hospital in Oxford. And this year we learned of his death after a short stay in a local hospice. I can still recall his hearty laughter, and I'm sure he always believed like Robert Graves that we had come a long way from the ancient world – and not always in the direction of progress.

**Colin Mervyn Gordon Allen (1929–2010). R.I.P.**

# An Unrecorded WWI Publication by Robert Graves

Eric Webb

## Is my Team Ploughing . . . ?

---

PAS-DE-CALAIS.

September 15th.

I met the Daviesite<sup>1</sup> at the “Globe.” I’m afraid I mayn’t name the exact town in Northern France ornamented and refreshed by this glorious institution, but anyone who has been out any length of time with the First Army could tell you. Every officer’s charger in at least eight divisions knows the way to its doors: from early dawn to the curfew toll they are lined up in the sunny square outside, chestnut, black, roan, bay, sorrel and mouse-coloured, waiting for their masters that are drinking inside and rather resentful of the dirty little *gamins* who hold their heads, smoking cheap cigarettes and shouting obscene cosmopolitanisms at passers-by.

Nutshell novels of the dim golden future age known as *après la guerre* will never start with the conventional pre-war: “They were dining at the Ritz,” or, “They sat discussing quails and champagne at the Criterion,” but simply, “They walked into the Globe and called for cocktails.” Which was what we did.

The Daviesite said brusquely but not unfriendly, that he was condemned if he expected to meet me again. “Weren’t you killed at Hooge?” he asked, rather unreasonably. I suggested he was a little premature, but perhaps in view of immediate future military operations . . . .

“Going over the parapet?” his eyes asked. I answered him, perhaps next week: anyhow he’d have a cocktail with me?

“Chin-chin,” he said and drank. “Floreat<sup>2</sup> and all that,” said I. And then of course we started talking of Old Carthusians we’d

met and the casualty lists, and so on.

“Was down at Ch’ouse<sup>3</sup> last week,” he said moodily, “on leave.”

“Why so sad?” I asked.

“Oh! because it was empty – holidays, of course – and people were building things all over Lessington,<sup>4</sup> and at the top of the hill as you come up from Bridge,<sup>5</sup> Gymnasia<sup>6</sup> and Armouries<sup>7</sup> and a new playroom for the Beaks.<sup>8</sup> ... By the way, you had some connexion with the Maiden Aunt, didn’t you? Pink production,<sup>9</sup> tizzy<sup>10</sup> a month?”

“What, the *Car*.?<sup>11</sup> Yes, once. How’s she running now?”

“Spitting blood, I’m afraid. Mr. Lindsey<sup>12</sup> howling for copy, Editor for contributions: meteorological report<sup>13</sup> only coming in regularly from Robinites,<sup>14</sup> and joint-editor collecting Mr. Stokes’<sup>15</sup> clippings from the Daily Press and pretending he cut them out himself. Fact is, everybody’s too busy becoming War-lords to care whether the number of pages in the current number is four or forty....”

The Daviesite and I parted most affectionately, and I smiled to remember how I had once loathed the man. Well, here was an excuse for writing to my dear old pink friend<sup>16</sup> and unburdening my home-sick heart. Does she want contributions? She shall have one, by Jove! I’ll tell her of the weird hour in the early morning, which is known as “Stand-to,” and which, pray Heaven, after the war I may never, never meet again, when a weary night has worn to its close, all patrols have come in, and in case of an attack by the enemy in the half light every rifle available is ready at the parapet. A wholesome morning colour spreads in the East behind the German trenches, the stars go out one by one and great water-rats scamper back into the canal from their nightly scavenging operations in the trenches. Light broadens more and more, and soon the order comes down “From Captain Curse’em, day sentries”: then all but these unfortunates and the officer and N.C.O. on duty roll off into scrapen holes to sleep till breakfast. Absolutely nothing doing. No shelling, no “minnies,”<sup>17</sup> no “torps,”<sup>18</sup> no sniping even; only a couple of our aeroplanes<sup>19</sup> high over the lines and little puffs of white shrapnel<sup>20</sup> marking their

course back for miles. We're sleepy, so's Fritz, and there's a lull in the Battle of Slime-pits.

So now the O.C. forgets the war for awhile and his mind inevitably turns to thoughts of Holy Charterhouse, and he asks questions like the anxious one put by a dead Shropshire lad,<sup>21</sup> which serves as heading to this letter. O Holy Charterhouse, once alternately loved and loathed, and now only loved, and the whole tribe of Carthusians! Noble pagans these for the most part, whose heathen virtues on reconsideration seem always to have outweighed their more civilised vices. But there was and will always be a little rebellious section of classical scholars whose idealism is as laudable as their lack of prudence is regrettable.

Intellectual and Athletic prigs: do they still fight, or in these cranky times has an armistice sprung up between them sealed by the blood of the slain?

He wonders what the First Eleven is like now and whether they win matches. Have boxing and fencing stopped since the departure of Sergeant Jerry Singleton,<sup>22</sup> little Tommy Wright<sup>22</sup> and old fat Harris<sup>22</sup> with his bland smile, tattooed arms, and the voluminous protective plating of "old iron."<sup>23</sup> What of little School Tennis so long trampled in the mud and only last year prodded and oxygenated into open revolt against Cricket, the tyrant? Has it drawn sword and fought manfully for its liberty like brave Belgium,<sup>24</sup> or has the poor little thing lost heart and relapsed into a last decline among the old broken asphalt and scraps of rusty wire netting, to become presently as extinct as the old school sport of hoop bowling?

He wonders whether his name is still bandied about in changing rooms, and who would say what if they saw his name in a casualty list, and how soon he'd be bunked<sup>25</sup> if he were back at Ch'ouse, and whether the C.O.T.C.<sup>26</sup> knows anything about bombs and m.g.<sup>27</sup> and where Fug Shop<sup>28</sup> and Stinks Buildings<sup>29</sup> are engaged in munition making; and so on, till the sun shines warmly and the hands of his wrist-watch point to five o'clock, and he thanks God and staggers off to Company H.Q. (a dry but somewhat verminous culvert in the canal bank), and having roused in his place the

junior subaltern who snores near the entrance in a fleece-lined Burberry and a waterproof sheet, he lies down himself, sleeps, and dreams it is Sunday morning before Chapel and he is walking arm-in-arm with someone round Cabbage Patch,<sup>30</sup> counter-clockwise, as usual, a pink carnation in his buttonhole<sup>31</sup> and a red anthem book under his arm.

OLIM TOGATUS

## Notes and Comments

The short article above was published in the October 1915 edition of *The Carthusian*, the magazine of Charterhouse public school: my own old school, on the outskirts of Godalming, near Guildford, Surrey. This is its first republication since.

Altogether some thirty ‘letters from the front’ from old boys serving in or alongside the armed forces appeared in *The Carthusian* during the war years, with a handful more in its sister publication, the school’s arts magazine *The Greyfriar*. Several of these were published pseudonymously, as here, or anonymously, so that their authors are now unguessable beyond a rather broad range of possibilities, but ‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’ contains a number of internal clues to narrow the focus, and pointing very persuasively towards a particular individual: the future writer, academic and poet Robert Graves (24 July 1895–7 December 1985).

Graves entered Gownboys house at Charterhouse in the Oration Quarter<sup>32</sup> 1909 as a Junior Foundation Scholar, leaving at the end of the Summer Quarter 1914 with an exhibition to St John’s College, Oxford. The Great War supervening, he then promptly took a commission in the Royal Welch Fusiliers. Further biographical details are largely beyond the compass, or the purpose, of this paper.

The general tone suggests that the author and ‘the Daviesite’ are young men, and close contemporaries, who have left school only

recently. For the purposes of this letter at least, the author presents himself more as schoolboy than as soldier: a schoolboy albeit with a singularly quizzical view of his alma mater. He appears primarily to be addressing recent Old Carthusians, still familiar with the school's day-to-day life, and boys still there.

That in turn suggests that the two left in the summer of 1914, at the end of the SQ, immediately before the British Declaration of War on 4 August, or not more than a quarter or two before, and perhaps even a little later. The Daviesite may very well have left later than the author as he seems more up to date regarding some difficulties in running *The Carthusian* during wartime, but he could not have learnt of these on his recent visit, with the school empty during the holidays. He and the author show a joint interest in the magazine's production and a knowledge of the minutiae which argue for previous close involvement.

The author is clearly familiar with some recent Charterhouse 'issues': most especially the feud between the Sixth and the 'Bloods', the sporting elite, alluded to by Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That*. With his reference to the 'lack of prudence' of some of the classical scholars he seems perhaps to hint too at the scandal of the acrostic poems linking two older Bloods' names to those of two younger boys, written by two sixth form members of Guy Kendall's<sup>33</sup> Poetry Society, whose publication in the July 1912 edition of *The Carthusian* led to the Headmaster Frank Fletcher's<sup>34</sup> suppression of the society that year. Graves, a keen member but innocent of any direct involvement in the scandal, was furiously upset.

He mentions too 'little School Tennis', a topic which particularly exercised Graves. As Graves tells us, in their last year at Charterhouse, seeking about for a stick with which to beat the school authorities, he and his co-editor of *The Carthusian* Nevill Barbour<sup>35</sup> hit on lawn-tennis, to which in reality they were not seriously devoted. They 'revealed the scandal that subscriptions to the two derelict tennis-courts had been, for several years, appropriated by the cricket committee'. Through their efforts these were renovated and a fund started which eventually provided

several more.

The author is also familiar with some recently departed 'characters' such as the school sergeant: 'stout Sergeant Harris the boxing instructor' as Graves describes him. It was with Harris's training and encouragement, and fortified by cherry whisky, that Graves won two cups in the school boxing competition in 1913. The author shows signs of a particular interest in boxing and fencing, which were far less regarded than football and cricket by the generality. Graves detested team sports; he appears to have concurred wholeheartedly with Kipling's jibe in 'The Islanders' at 'the flannelled fools at the wicket' and 'the muddied oafs at the goals'.

We deduce that the author was not a Daviesite himself, otherwise he would not have referred to his companion as such. Self-evidently, he writes excellently well, although his tone is not altogether attractive. There is an air of conceit, of studied insouciance, an undertow of almost psychopathic unconcern for the feelings of others. Will all his readers appreciate his not-quite-gentle mockery? Will the Daviesite like to read that the author once loathed him; will the Daviesite's friends and relations if he dies in the forthcoming battle, or if the author himself dies? Is this mere juvenile irony, wanting only greater maturity as a corrective, or does it bespeak some deeper character flaw? Is the author only 'playing at tigers', as Anthony Blanche accuses Charles Ryder in Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, or is he out for blood?

As to his army service, we know, because he tells us, that he is serving with British First Army on the Western Front. We know that he is in the infantry, as opposed to, for example, the artillery or the Army Service Corps, because he tells us he is stationed in the trenches. He hints at soon 'going over the top', 'perhaps next week'. In First Army in September 1915 that can only mean that he is to fight in the forthcoming Battle of Loos.<sup>36</sup> The entire strength of First Army was to be thrown into this battle, even to the Corps' infantry reserves. We know too that his battalion is stationed near a canal; in the Loos sector that can only be the

La Bassée canal: a broad, industrial waterway which marked the northern limit of the battlefield proper. All of that places him firmly in Second Division, which was then stationed on the canal and, in the battle, tasked to attack along both banks.

That in turn convincingly identifies the nearby town in the Pas-de-Calais as Béthune, where there was a popular drinking place, the Café du Globe, reserved for officers and for French civilians. Dr Travis Hampson, an officer in the R.A.M.C.<sup>37</sup> who served for a period in the Loos sector, records in his war diary: ‘During quiet times when round about Béthune, the meeting place for officers was the Café du Globe in the square of the town. Here at about 11.00 am one generally drank champagne cocktails at one franc a time – 10d.’ The Prince of Wales, later briefly Edward VIII, then Duke of Windsor, was also a subaltern in this sector; but by intention at least he was kept well out of harm’s way on the Army Staff. As Graves tells us in *Goodbye to All That*, his ‘favourite rendezvous’ was the Café du Globe. Graves ‘once heard him complain indignantly that General French<sup>38</sup> had refused to let him go up into the line’.

Béthune was then a major hub of military activity, including what is today known as R & R. Bernard Adams<sup>39</sup> served at Loos in the First Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers. In his memoirs *Nothing of Importance* (1917) he writes: ‘During an afternoon in Béthune one could do all the shopping one required, and get a haircut and shampoo as well. Expensive cocktails were obtainable at the local bar; there was also a famous tea-shop’, with ‘dainty tables’. There were: ‘chemists flaunting auto-strop razors, stationers offering “Tommy’s writing-pad” and tailors showing English officers’ uniforms in their windows, besides all the goods of a large and populous town’: all of this a mere five to six miles as the crow flies from the front line.

The Daviesite remarks on our author’s supposed death at Hooge, suggesting, although by no means solidly confirming, that the author, or his unit, may formerly have served there. Hooge was to the north in the Ypres salient, which was Second Army’s sector. It was a frequent trouble-spot but earlier in 1915 it had seen four

particularly fierce actions: on 2 June, 19 and 30 July, and 9 August. Involved in these were Third, Sixth and Fourteenth Divisions, of which Third and Fourteenth were later to make subsidiary attacks at Bellewaarde in connection with the Battle of Loos. Units were commonly redeployed and/or reconstituted to meet the exigencies of warfare but no constituent brigade or battalion of any of these divisions transferred to First Army at this period.

However, as part of the general build-up of forces in advance of the forthcoming battle, on 19 August 1915 Nineteenth Brigade, formerly part of Twenty-seventh Division, part of Second Army, transferred to Second Division, hence to First Army. Whilst with Second Army the Brigade had certainly seen action around Ypres, in the Second Battle of Ypres that April–May and subsequently. It was therefore by no means unlikely that an officer in that brigade might have served near Hooge, or indeed have died thereabouts, if not in any noteworthy action then in a trench raid or somesuch, or as part of the incessant, random background death toll from shell and small-arms fire.

Nineteenth Brigade then comprised the following battalions:

Second Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers;

First Battalion the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles);

1/Fifth Battalion the Cameronians (Scottish Rifles);

First Battalion the Middlesex;

Second Battalion the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders.

Second Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers became Robert Graves's battalion during the summer of 1915. That spring, after kicking his heels in training for longer than he could have wished, he was at last drafted to join First Battalion the Royal Welch Fusiliers, which was part of Seventh Division, hence of First Army, but on his arrival in France he was one of six Royal Welch subalterns seconded to Second Battalion the Welsh Regiment, part of Third Brigade, First Division (also part of First Army) which was already holding trenches near Loos. After a spell, two of the seconded officers were transferred back to the Royal Welch, then at the end of July 1915 the other four: two to First Battalion,

Graves and another to Second Battalion. Anyone dimly aware of Graves as a subaltern in the Second Royal Welch, but knowing nothing of these transfers, might have supposed that he had been with that battalion throughout, hence that he must have seen action around Ypres.

By Graves's account, at the time he rejoined the Royal Welch in early August 1915, Nineteenth Brigade was regarded by another junior officer as 'the luckiest in France. It has not been permanently part of any division, but used as an army reserve [...]. So, except for the retreat,<sup>40</sup> where it lost about a company and Fromelles,<sup>41</sup> where it lost half of what was left, it has been practically undamaged.'

There appears a close coincidence between the author's experiences and Graves's own. Whilst in the front line, the author inhabits a 'dry but somewhat verminous culvert in the canal bank'. Graves tells us that immediately after he transferred to Second Royal Welch, 'My dug-out at Cuinchy<sup>42</sup> was a rat-riddled culvert beside the tow-path.' Also, 'Cuinchy bred rats. They came up from the canal, fed on the plentiful corpses and multiplied exceedingly.' However, 'When [...] back in reserve billets in Béthune, I had a beautiful Louis XVI bedroom at the Chateau Montmorency with mirrors and tapestries, found the bed too soft for comfort, and laid my mattress on the parquet floor.'

The 'scrapen holes' into which the night watch roll off to sleep until breakfast feel like a quotation, perhaps biblical, but 'scrapen' does not anywhere appear in the Authorised Version of the Bible. Apropos Robert Graves's part-German ancestry, nor is it German. It appears to be a simple archaism, from middle and old English *scrapian* = scrape. A poem of Graves's, 'To R. N' (Robert Nichols),<sup>43</sup> his friend and fellow-poet, written from Frise on the Somme in February 1917 and published in *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1918), commences:

Here by a snowbound river  
In scrapen holes we shiver,  
And like old bitterns we

Boom to you plaintively

Had this perhaps survived as a dialect word, still used by some of his troops? Might it then have been picked up and used by some other Old Carthusian officer serving with a unit from a similar background, writing from the same area of the front about the same time? That would be a striking coincidence.

Another of Graves's poems in *Fairies and Fusiliers*, 'Letter to S. S.<sup>44</sup> from Mametz Wood', commences:

I never dreamed we'd meet that day  
 In our old haunts down Fricourt way,  
 Plotting such marvellous journeys there  
 For jolly old "Après-la-guerre".

'Après la guerre', literally 'After the war' but bearing the interpretation 'sometime, never',<sup>45</sup> was a phrase in common use in the British Expeditionary Force at the time, but its employment as a noun, here as in the letter, is sufficiently unusual to suggest a link.

Again, on a quiet day, the author watches 'a couple of our aeroplanes high over the lines and little puffs of white shrapnel marking their course back for miles.' Somewhat earlier, on 23 May, hence before this period, Graves and a friend 'lay on the warm grass and watched aeroplanes flying above the trenches, pursued by a trail of white shrapnel puffs.'

At first blush, 'Battle of the Slime-pits' appears no more than an apt generic description, suiting many a muddy Western Front battlefield, but the Loos valley, on chalk subsoil, remained comfortably dry through the summer of 1915, although heavy thunderstorms flooded some trenches on the eve of the battle itself. Genesis 14. 10, Authorised Version, tells us that 'the Vale of Siddim was full of slimepits', with the Revised Version substituting 'bitumen' as the proper interpretation of 'slime'. In context, Genesis also describes the Vale as a major battlefield, and tells us that it is now the 'Salt Sea', i.e. the Dead Sea.

The Loos battlefield was a coal-mining area, dotted with pit shafts and spoil-heaps. Perhaps then, this reference is more pointed than first appears; but if so our author was a singular scholar in having anything quite so obscure at his fingertips. Genesis 14 is prescribed by the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of England as the First Lesson at Evening Prayer on 10 January; otherwise it is well off the biblical beaten track. In *Goodbye to All That* Graves tells of an episode in Oxford in 1916, while he was there as an O.T.C. instructor, when he bested Augustine Birrell in a friendly disagreement over a similarly remote corner of the Old Testament. He was later to develop a particular interest in Hebrew mythology, on which he published scholarly papers and a book: *Hebrew Myths*, with Raphael Patai (1964).

Perhaps too, if his authorship is conceded, this is Graves, true to form, thumbing his nose at the army censor: telling those with eyes to see where he was.

At very least, the author was serving close by Graves himself, certainly in the same division, and very probably in the same brigade. With their battalions brigaded together they must surely have met, and if they did it is surprising indeed that the author makes no mention of this, although he finds his chance encounter with the Daviesite noteworthy. For his part too, Graves records no meeting with any other Old Carthusian at this period. They clearly had much in common. If they did not meet by chance, or on army business, they must surely at least have learnt of each other's existence during those last, precious weeks before the Battle of Loos, and have made time to enjoy a champagne cocktail or two together at the Café du Globe.

The suspicion grows to a near-certainty that the author is indeed Robert Graves himself: one-time co-editor of *The Carthusian*, noted school boxer, agitator on behalf of lawn-tennis, scholar, soldier, poet, gadfly. The style too is Graves's, including the careless infliction of hurt; or maybe deliberate? In *Goodbye to All That* Graves commits a far more heinous offence in this line than any throwaway expression of former loathing for an

ex-schoolmate. He describes an incident towards the end of his time at Charterhouse when he furiously confronted a master whom he accused of kissing his Platonic paramour,<sup>46</sup> a younger boy and fellow member of the school choir whom he names ‘Dick’.<sup>47</sup> The original allegation was made to Graves by another choirboy. When Dick confirmed the accusation the master ‘collapsed’, as well he might, undertaking to resign at the end of quarter on grounds of ill health. ‘That was in the summer of 1914; he went into the army and was killed the next year. I found out much later from Dick that he had not been kissed at all. It may have been some other boy.’

Three Charterhouse masters died in the war, all killed in action on the Western Front, of whom two resigned to take up army commissions over the summer of 1914; one of these died in 1917, the other in 1918. The third, who died in the summer of 1915,<sup>48</sup> had joined up earlier that year.<sup>49</sup> The curious may care to seek out their identities but it would be invidious to name them here. That Graves provided sufficient identification himself, thus besmirching the memories of three brave men, at least one of those unjustly, in a book first published only 15 years after the alleged event – while those memories were still fresh – was unforgivable.

As to ‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’, clinching Graves’s authorship beyond reasonable doubt is surely the author’s arch sign-off, ‘*Olim Togatus*’. The Latin means simply ‘formerly a toga-wearer’, but in ancient Rome the toga was the badge of citizenship, hence a reasonable constructive interpretation might be ‘formerly a [Roman] citizen’, or here ‘formerly a member of the school’, i.e. Old Carthusian, which we already know. However, a toga is a kind of gown, suggesting ‘formerly a gown-wearer’, i.e. in context ‘former Gownboy’: Graves’s house, a house with a high opinion of itself. Lending weight to this supposition is a carved inscription still to be read in Gownboys, ‘*Floreat Togati*’, ‘May [the] Gownboys flourish’. There is every reason therefore to suppose that a prideful Gownboy with a classical bent might playfully style himself ‘*Togatus*’.

If this is Graves, as it surely must be, his chosen title, borrowed from A. E. Housman,<sup>50</sup> now takes on added significance. Housman's poem does indeed tell of 'a dead Shropshire lad' asking anxious questions of his best friend about his former sweetheart, who proves eventually, in a delicious last-line dénouement, to have taken up with that very friend. At this time Graves's sweetheart was still his schooldays' crush, 'Dick'. They still wrote to each other, regularly and often.

A little earlier that summer Graves received an unsettling letter from his cousin, still at Charterhouse: 'He said that Dick was not at all the innocent fellow I took him for, but as bad as anyone could be.' This took Graves aback: 'Dick's letters had been my greatest standby all those months whenever I felt low; he wrote every week, mostly about poetry. They were something solid and clean to set off against the impermanence of trench life and the sordidness of life in billets.' Graves was on poor terms with his cousin, whom he suspected of stirring up trouble: 'I had a more or less reassuring letter from Dick. He [...] admitted he had been ragging about in a silly way, but [said] that nothing bad had happened. He said he was very sorry, and would stop it for the sake of our friendship.'

Graves permitted himself to be reassured, for the time being, but the doubt must have lingered: if human love, that great false constant of the romantic imagination, could waver after mere months apart, what of the separation of death? If he died, as was all too likely, whose sweetheart might Dick then become?

A. E. Housman's ploughman, whose fate here excites Graves's anxious empathy, evidently finds himself not in a Christian heaven, nor in any other such imagined paradise, but in that Homeric Hades of which Achilles's shade tells Odysseus, 'Better to be alive once more and a serf to the poorest peasant than king of kings among the dead.' Very likely that is the image Housman himself, a formidable classicist, intended to convey; and the classical resonance cannot have been lost on Graves. Are we to infer that he anticipates an equally hollow, regretful existence *post mortem*, still somehow sentient but no longer with any direct

knowledge of nor influence over the living? But whether so or whether Swinburne's 'sleep eternal, in an eternal night', if we live on effectively only through *κλέος*<sup>51</sup> and in the loving memory of our friends, as an influence, an inspiration, a source of comfort, what of Graves's own afterlife should even Dick prove untrue? Is this 'Letter from the Front' really a letter to Dick?

Adding further weight to that interpretation is his wistful concluding reference to his schooldays: his dream that 'it is Sunday morning before Chapel and he is walking arm-in-arm with someone around Cabbage Patch [...] a red anthem book under his arm'. Only boys in the school choir were likely to be carrying anthem books. With Graves and Dick both choir members, 'someone's' identity seems in little doubt.

If we are to believe Graves in *Goodbye to All That*, there was more ill-news, and this time much worse. 'A press cutting from *John Bull* reached me. Horatio Bottomley, the editor, was protesting against the unequal treatment for criminal offences meted out to commoners and aristocrats. [...] The article described in some detail how Dick, a sixteen-year-old boy, had made "a certain proposal" to a corporal in a Canadian regiment stationed near "Charterhouse College", and how the corporal had very properly given him in charge of the police.' He had 'merely been bound over and placed in the care of a physician – because he happened to be the grandson of an earl! [...] This news nearly finished me.'

But Graves is not to be believed, or at least his dating is the better part of two years out and it is difficult to avoid the suspicion that he has deliberately misplaced the episode for dramatic effect. In reality Dick's offence was committed aged seventeen, on the evening of Sunday 22 April 1917. He appeared in Godalming Magistrates Court on 27 April and the story eventually broke in *John Bull* on 2 June 1917. Graves appears to have received news of the affair only on 12 July 1917 during his convalescence from shell shock on the Isle of Wight, and about the same time as he also learnt of his friend Siegfried Sassoon's pacifist protest against the war: troubles enough.

Nonetheless Dick's standing vis-à-vis his schoolfellows in the autumn of 1915 was precarious, and at risk of further damage by the appearance of Graves's letter in *The Carthusian*. On his arrival at Charterhouse in LQ 1913, aged thirteen, only half out of childhood and with difficulties of his own, as he indicates in his memoirs, he had almost at once been taken up by this intense, unpopular young man, four years older, then a year later cast adrift on the stormy seas of adolescence when Graves went off to war. During the summer of 1915, as Graves's cousin hinted and as Dick himself later acknowledged, he had indeed been involved in a homosexual scandal, which saw him beaten by Frank Fletcher; he was fortunate not to have been expelled. Of that last, Graves was perhaps only half-aware; the rest he ought to have recognised.

Graves's authorship must surely have become an open secret; his original manuscript or a covering letter must have borne his name, and even for those not directly in the know, the code cannot have been hard to read. It is difficult to imagine that Dick escaped identification as the target of his closing remarks. As Graves tells us, their relationship had become sufficiently notorious within the school that it 'provoked a constant facetiousness', expressed against himself by his fellow-seniors; eventually in his last quarter this sparked a fracas which might have had him expelled, 'bunked'. That Dick was spared matching 'facetiousness' on the part of his own peers seems unlikely; adolescent boys in that closed world could be abominably cruel. It was one thing to maintain a private correspondence, which they appear both to have valued, quite another for Graves to publish an open reminder of their association a year on; which can scarcely have been guaranteed a welcome on 'Dick's' part.

In Graves's own estimation he was Dick's friend, mentor and protector; in *Goodbye to All That* he insists that his role in the relationship was sexually innocent. We have only his word for this, but given the customary nature and conduct of 'crushes' it is entirely plausible, and there is no evidence to the contrary. Nonetheless, some might view him less generously: as an emotional predator. Embarrassed? Proud? Confused? What did

Dick make of ‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’ and of its sentimental sign-off, so obviously directed at himself?

And what of Charterhouse? What was the effect of this reopening of recent wounds, the more so with some of the former protagonists in these schooldays spats, like Graves himself, undoubtedly now serving in the war; some perhaps already fallen?

Did Graves trouble himself over any of this? Seemingly not. Whether by accident or by design, his letter is by no means the mere *jeu d’esprit* it first appears. The author of *Goodbye to All That*, with its uneasy shadows and its careless hurts so liberally bestowed, seems already present *in petto*.

In his published memoirs *After Many Days* (1937) Frank Fletcher, Graves’s headmaster at Charterhouse from 1911, provides a further perspective: ‘The VIth at that time [immediately pre-war] contained several clever boys [...] but they were a warped generation.’ In Fletcher’s view this was because under his predecessor the sportsmen, the ‘Bloods’, had been permitted to dominate the school, to the detriment of the scholars. Of these, some had been left ‘morbid and cynical’; others had been driven to assert themselves ‘by eccentricities and ill-timed violations of recognised conventions’, to become ‘intellectual rebels, with an exaggerated idea of their own intelligence and a prejudice against a society which seemed to have given them inadequate recognition’. A crisper description of Graves himself at the time, as one of those ‘others’, could not be penned.

This arch disengagement Fletcher particularly regretted. ‘It was no part of my purpose to replace the arrogance of an athleticocracy by the conceit of an intelligentsia. [...] [M]ere ostentatious unconventionality is provocative and useless.’ That he could write thus, a quarter-century on and after a lifetime’s experience as a schoolmaster, suggests that the school had been going through no ordinary difficulties.

Whilst he was still at Charterhouse, Graves seems to have formed a grudging respect for Fletcher, but no great liking: feelings which Fletcher perhaps reciprocated. It was Fletcher who, in bidding Graves farewell when he left, perceptively advised him

that his truest friend was his waste-paper basket: just advice to any writer but perhaps recalling specifically some of Graves's more outspoken sallies in *The Carthusian*.

Later there appears to have been a degree of *rapprochement*: 'It is pleasant to remember that the most antagonistic of this small band, after he had spent one year in the army, and before the grimmer experiences of the war had reawakened his bitterer feelings, came back to Charterhouse expressly to apologise to me for the line he had taken at school, and to assure me that if he had his time over again he would not be such a "rebel".'

Beyond reasonable doubt that former rebel was Graves. By his own account, at school he was one of the bitterest, one of the most antagonistic, seething with barely-suppressed fury. As he tells us in *Goodbye to All That*, he went on leave immediately before the Battle of Loos, from 9 September 1915; he spent time with his family in London before going to Harlech on a short walking holiday. As emerges from other sources, on Wednesday 15 September, his last full day of leave, he travelled down to Charterhouse where he visited Fletcher and took the opportunity to apologise for his former difficult behaviour; Fletcher subsequently wrote to his father, commenting on the favourable impression he had made. Quarter had not yet begun and so he had no opportunity to see Dick, but they had enjoyed a brief reunion earlier that year, in mid-March. He stayed the night in Godalming with his friends the Mallorys<sup>52</sup> before returning to London the following morning; he caught the troop train to Folkestone en route for France that afternoon.

With battle shortly to be joined, and with who knew what personal outcome, he surely completed his manuscript before his departure, leaving it with Mallory to pass on to the editor of *The Carthusian*. He could scarcely count on an opportunity to work on it later, after his return to the front; then too it might be subject to the vagaries of the military censor. But the published letter is scarcely the work of a moment; it must have been complete, or all-but, before his potentially valedictory visit to Charterhouse and his interview with Fletcher, the entire scenario carefully planned.

‘Is my Team Ploughing ...?’ with its invocation of ‘Holy Charterhouse, once alternately loved and loathed, and now only loved’, teetering between the ironic and the irenic, now takes on yet another aspect: as a considered public peace offering, albeit a little way short of the private *mea culpa* he offered his Headmaster: a salute to Agapē, alongside a sly nod to Eros and a discreet genuflection to Thanatos; an *apologia pro vita sua* on the eve of battle. Under the influence of army life and despite his earlier self, his schooldays seem to be fast acquiring that nostalgic glow familiar to more ordinary ‘old boys’; with the bitterness largely gone, although there is still a distinctive residual piquancy. As further circumstantial evidence that Fletcher’s regretful visitor was indeed Graves: publicly at least, in *Goodbye to All That*, Graves alone later re-expressed bitter feelings of the type for which the visitor had earlier apologised.

Or at least, he seemed to do so, but was he frankly expressing his reawakened innermost self, or was that merely a further instance of his writing for effect, regardless? With Robert Graves, one can never be certain. Whether from carelessness, opportunism or pure devilment, he is never perfectly safe to take at face value.

### **Is my Team Ploughing?**

‘Is my team ploughing,  
That I was used to drive  
And hear the harness jingle  
When I was man alive?’

Ay, the horses trample,  
The harness jingles now;  
No change though you lie under  
The land you used to plough.

‘Is football playing  
Along the river shore,

With lads to chase the leather,  
Now I stand up no more?’

Ay, the ball is flying,  
The lads play heart and soul;  
The goal stands up, the keeper  
Stands up to keep the goal.

‘Is my girl happy,  
That I thought hard to leave,  
And has she tired of weeping  
As she lies down at eve?’

Ay, she lies down lightly,  
She lies not down to weep:  
Your girl is well contented.  
Be still, my lad, and sleep.

‘Is my friend hearty,  
Now I am thin and pine,  
And has he found to sleep in  
A better bed than mine?’

Yes, lad, I lie easy,  
I lie as lads would choose;  
I cheer a dead man’s sweetheart,  
Never ask me whose.

A. E. Housman (1859-1936), from *A Shropshire Lad*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My great thanks are due to Ann Wheeler, until last year Archivist at Charterhouse School: in general for her guidance around the archives, and for looking out for items of interest; in particular for

looking over the draft of this paper and identifying some School references which had escaped me; but most particularly for pointing out the true significance of ‘*Olim Togatus*’, which I had taken to indicate merely ‘Old Carthusian’ but which, properly interpreted as ‘Former Gownboy’, effectively clinches Graves’s authorship.

**Eric Webb**, a one-time pupil at Charterhouse School, is a medical doctor in clinical practice.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Bernard, *Nothing of Importance* (London: Methuen, 1917; repr. Crawley: Strong Oak Press/Tom Donovan, 1988)
- Brophy, John and Eric Partridge, *Dictionary of Tommies’ Songs and Slang, 1914–18* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2008)
- The Charterhouse Register 1872–1931* (Guildford: Biddles, 1932)
- Edmonds, James Edward, *Military Operations France and Belgium, 1915, Battles of Aubers Ridge, Festubert, and Loos* (London: Macmillan, 1928; repr. London: Imperial War Museum, 1995)
- Fletcher, Frank, *After Many Days* (London: Robert Hale, 1937)
- Graves, Richard Perceval, *Robert Graves, The Assault Heroic 1895–1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986)
- Graves, Robert, *Fairies and Fusiliers* (London: Heinemann, 1917; repr. North Hollywood: Aegypan, 2007)
- Graves, Robert, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929; rev. edn London: Cassell, 1957, Penguin, 2000)
- Graves, Robert, *Goodbye to All That and Other Great War Writings*, ed. by Steven Trout (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007)
- Graves, Robert and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths* (London: Cassell, 1964)
- Hampson, Travis, *A Medical Officer’s Diary and Narrative of the First World War*, ed. by Travis Philip Davies (2001)
- < <http://web.ukonline.co.uk/xenophon/contents.htm> >
- Housman, A. E., *A Shropshire Lad* (London: Harrap, 1977)
- O’Prey, Paul, ed., *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946* (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
- Pharand, Michel W., *Robert Graves and the Post-Catastrophic Comedy*

of 'But It Still Goes On' (2005) <<http://libro.dobunkyodai.ac.jp/research/pdf/treatises06/04MichelA.pdf>>  
 Vandon, George, *Return Ticket* (London: Heinemann, 1940)  
*The Long, Long Trail* <<http://www.1914-1918.net>>

---

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Daviesites, Robinites: some of the eleven Charterhouse School houses at that date.
- <sup>2</sup> Floreat: the school's long-established if unofficial motto is '*Floreat aeternam Carthusiana domus!*', 'May our Carthusian home flourish forever!'
- <sup>3</sup> Ch'ouse: Charterhouse, a contraction still in common use.
- <sup>4</sup> Lessington: one of the school's sports grounds.
- <sup>5</sup> Bridge: the school's private bridge over Charterhouse Road.
- <sup>6</sup> Gymnasia: the plural is hyperbolic. 'Gym', housed in a large wooden hut, very temporary-looking, remained in daily use until the opening of the school's new sports centre in the 1990s.
- <sup>7</sup> Armouries: hyperbolic again, *The Carthusian* of July 1915 reports building of the new Armoury and of Brooke Hall (see note 8) in progress.
- <sup>8</sup> A new playroom for the Beaks (i.e. masters): the 'staff common room', known as Brooke Hall, in reality more akin to a small club, complete with sitting-room, dining-room and bar, whose building commenced early in 1915.
- <sup>9</sup> Maiden Aunt, Pink Production, *Car.*: the school magazine, *The Carthusian*. It had a pink cover and appeared monthly during Quarters, price sixpence.
- <sup>10</sup> Tizzy: sixpence (see note 9.)
- <sup>11</sup> See note 9.
- <sup>12</sup> Mr. A. Lindsey: the school printer.
- <sup>13</sup> Meteorological report: although at this time *The Carthusian* did indeed publish meteorological reports, the sense here suggests a colloquialism, perhaps for 'House News' or somesuch.
- <sup>14</sup> See note 1.
- <sup>15</sup> Mr. Stokes: John Laurence Stokes, the school librarian.

<sup>16</sup> See note 9.

<sup>17</sup> Minnies: German minenwerfer (trench mortar) shells.

<sup>18</sup> Torps: torpedoes. The bomb fired by the German Krupp Trench Howitzer, another variety of mortar, like a 'Minnie' visible in flight, was sometimes referred to as a torpedo, recalling that this was once an alternative term for a sea-mine.

<sup>19</sup> Aeroplanes: even so early in the war, aircraft were demonstrating their value in photo-reconnaissance and artillery spotting. For the time being the British Royal Flying Corps enjoyed a measure of air superiority, although that was soon to change.

<sup>20</sup> Shrapnel: shrapnel shells are burst by a pre-set time fuse, sending metal balls flying lethally in all directions. To have shot down an aircraft, even one of the slow-flying spotter aeroplanes of the day, using field artillery firing shrapnel, with aim, deflection, elevation and fuse-timing all constantly changing, would have required remarkable skill, or luck.

<sup>21</sup> Dead Shropshire lad: referring of course to A. E. Housman's poem 'Is my Team Ploughing?', which supplies the author's title.

<sup>22</sup> Harris, Singleton and Wright: all gym instructors and/or involved in the running of the O.T.C. (see note 26). *The Carthusian* in its editorial for October 1914 (the first edition published since the declaration of war) wishes Sergeants Singleton, Harris and Wright all success in their renewed activities at Aldershot. Presumably they were ex-regular army N.C.O.s, still on the reserve list, who had been promptly recalled to the colours on the declaration of war.

<sup>23</sup> Old iron: the meaning is obscure. Perhaps Harris habitually wore a large number of campaign medals, or badges, or a heavy iron watch-chain hung with various ornaments.

<sup>24</sup> Brave Belgium: in attacking France in August 1914, following her notorious Schlieffen Plan, drawn up long before with precisely this eventuality in view, Germany marched her northern armies through neutral Belgium. It was this violation of Belgian neutrality, of which Britain was one of the guarantors along with France and with Germany herself, which supplied the formal British *casus belli*.

<sup>25</sup> Bunked: expelled.

<sup>26</sup> C.O.T.C: Charterhouse Officers' Training Corps. On leaving school, boys who had been members of an O.T.C. were deemed to have received sufficient military training to be commissioned as officers forthwith.

<sup>27</sup> m.g: machine-gun, sometimes also known, using the signallers' phonetic alphabet of the time, as an 'Emma-G'; cf. Toc-H, Talbot House.

<sup>28</sup> Fug Shop: the carpenter's workshop.

<sup>29</sup> Stinks Building: Science Block, of course!

<sup>30</sup> Cabbage Patch: contemporary School vernacular now long-forgotten, probably the ground properly known as Green, the First Eleven cricket pitch, around which Carthusians still walk of a summer's Sunday evening before chapel, still counter-clockwise too but no longer arm in arm, unless perhaps in these co-educational latter days with Carthusiennes!

<sup>31</sup> A pink carnation in his button-hole: a sixth form privilege. In *Goodbye to All That*, Graves describes the furore when at chapel one Sunday three members of the Sixth peremptorily assumed the privilege of wearing 'light grey flannel trousers, butterfly collars, jackets slit up the back, and the right of walking arm in arm', by long School tradition reserved to the 'Bloods'. Adding insult to injury, each also wore a pink carnation in his lapel.

<sup>32</sup> Quarter: school term. The Charterhouse Quarters were then Oration Quarter, OQ (autumn) Long Quarter, LQ (Lent) and Summer Quarter, SQ, which is now known as Cricket Quarter, CQ. In reality LQ is the shortest, but formerly seemed the longest as it was not broken by an Exeat (half-term).

<sup>33</sup> Guy Kendall: then a form master at Charterhouse (a hash-beak in Carthusian patois), later headmaster of University College School, Hampstead.

<sup>34</sup> Frank Fletcher (1870–1954): headmaster of Charterhouse 1911–1935.

<sup>35</sup> Nevill Barbour: David Nevill Barbour entered Charterhouse OQ 1908, left SQ 1914. He too won a place at St John's College Oxford, and a scholarship, trumping Graves's exhibition. He served in the war, in the Ninth Royal Lancasters, and survived.

<sup>36</sup> The Battle of Loos: the Battle's initial assault, originally planned for 8 September, was progressively put back until 25 September, by which time the Germans were well aware of what was afoot. As eventually determined by the British Battle Nomenclature Committee it concluded on 8 October. However, there was a renewed British assault with further fierce fighting 13–14 October, for which Graves's battalion was hastily brought up in reserve, with further sporadic actions throughout that month. Only on 4 November 1915 did Sir Douglas Haig, First Army's commander, finally inform Sir John French, his C. in C., that he could do no more.

Loos was the largest British action in the war thus far; it also saw the first British use of poison gas: chlorine. Out of total engaged British forces of around 170,000, including the subsidiary attacks and reserves and reliefs brought in as the battle progressed, there were 60,000 casualties, of whom 24,000 died: 40 per cent. The Second Royal Welch, Graves's battalion, took 311 casualties, killed and wounded, officers and other ranks, out of an attacking strength of around 700. This was unexceptional; many other battalions lost more, with several reduced to mere handfuls of men left alive and unwounded by the time they were withdrawn from the line.

<sup>37</sup> R.A.M.C.: Royal Army Medical Corps.

<sup>38</sup> General French: in reality Field Marshal Sir John Denton Pinkstone French (1852–1925), C. in C. of the British Expeditionary Force on the Western Front August 1914–December 1915. His refusal to permit the heir to the throne anywhere near the front line comes as no surprise.

<sup>39</sup> Lieutenant John Bernard Pye Adams (1890–1917): remarkably, Adams, Graves and Siegfried Sassoon all saw service together in First Battalion Royal Welch Fusiliers. Adams had been with the battalion about six weeks when Graves and Sassoon arrived in late November 1915. *Nothing of Importance* was the first written of their three accounts of their war service, in 1916, and the first published, in September 1917, although by then Adams had been dead for six months: died of wounds. Both Sassoon and Graves regarded the book highly.

<sup>40</sup> The retreat: the original British Expeditionary Force's general retreat following the Battle of Mons on 23 August 1914.

---

<sup>41</sup> Fromelles: there was heavy fighting around Fromelles in the course of the British attack on Aubers Ridge on 9 May 1915, which was repulsed with heavy losses, but Nineteenth Brigade was nowhere near; it was still with Second Army in the Ypres sector. However, Second Battalion the Welsh Regiment, to which Graves was later temporarily attached, was certainly involved, as part of Third Brigade. This appears to be one of Graves's multitudinous inaccuracies, which so infuriated knowledgeable readers on *Goodbye to All That*'s first publication. It is nonetheless instructive that with casualty figures of over 50 per cent since the outbreak of war just a year earlier Nineteenth Brigade was still regarded as relatively 'lucky'.

<sup>42</sup> Cuinchy: a small village five miles east of Béthune, on the south bank of the La Bassée canal; opposite on the north bank stood another, Givenchy, but by now, as Bernard Adams records, 'Both [were] as completely reduced to ruins as villages can be, the firing line running just to the east of them.'

<sup>43</sup> Robert Nichols (1893–1944): another friend of Siegfried Sassoon and Rupert Brooke. Nichols, like Graves, saw action at Loos, as an artillery officer. His war service ended when he was invalided home with shell shock in 1916.

<sup>44</sup> S.S.: Siegfried Sassoon (1886–1967) and Graves were fellow-officers in the Royal Welch Fusiliers and, for a time, close friends. It was chiefly through Graves's persuasion that Sassoon accepted admission to Craiglockhart Hospital with 'shell shock' in 1917, and through that admission that these two met Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) who also became a patient there that year. Later the relationship cooled and the publication of *Goodbye to All That* supplied the *coup de grâce*. Sassoon was offended by Graves's treatment of him and by the book's many factual errors, but chiefly perhaps he was jealous of its success.

<sup>45</sup> *Après la Guerre*: according to Brophy and Partridge, 'A magical phrase used by soldiers jokingly for the indefinite and remote future, and as a depository of secret sentiment, longing for survival and for the return of peace.'

<sup>46</sup> Platonic paramour: in my own day at Charterhouse (the 1960s) known simply as a 'crush', a common enough public school phenomenon, in both boys' and girls' schools, until co-education swept all of this away.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Dick’: George Johnstone (1899–1949), often known by his family nickname as ‘Peter’ Johnstone, later third Baron Derwent. He entered Saunderites in LQ 1913, leaving at Easter 1917 immediately following his court appearance. (See above.)

<sup>48</sup> Died in 1915: not, as claimed by the error-prone *Charterhouse Register*, in 1916.

<sup>49</sup> Masters died: a fourth master who also joined up in 1914 survived.

<sup>50</sup> Alfred Edward Housman (1859–1936): poet and classical scholar.

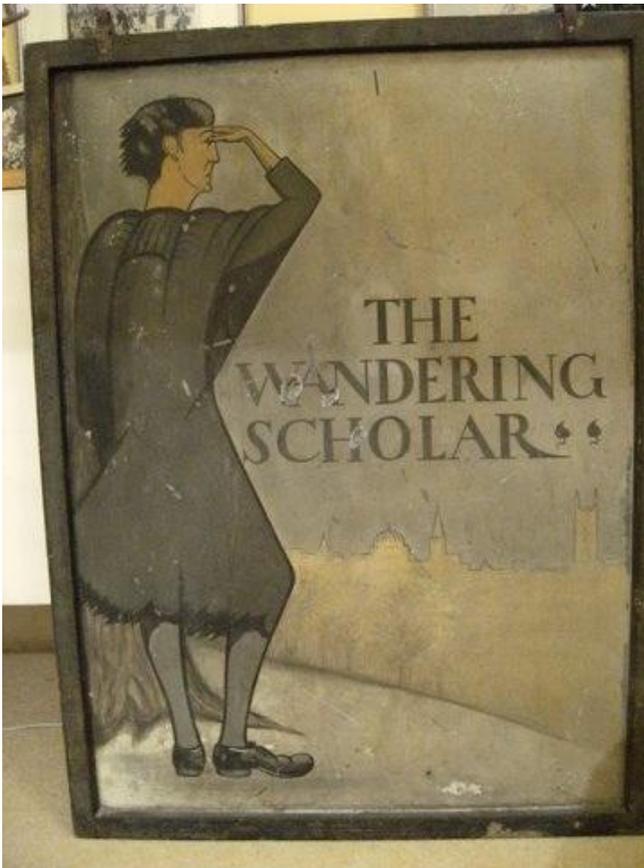
<sup>51</sup> κλέος: repute.

<sup>52</sup> George Herbert Leigh Mallory (1886–1924): at Charterhouse, where he was appointed a master in 1910, Mallory introduced the young Robert Graves to rock climbing. From 1915 until the war’s end he served in the Royal Garrison Artillery. In 1924 with Andrew Irvine (1902–1924) he died climbing on Mt Everest.

# Graves and the Grocery

*Philip Stewart*

Robert Graves and his wife Nancy Nicholson lived on Boars Hill from late in 1919 to June 1921, in what is now called Dingle Cottage, at the bottom of John Masfield's garden. In October 1920, Nancy opened a grocer's shop in partnership with the Hon. Mrs Michael Howard. Graves often helped out behind the counter,



*The shop signboard, almost certainly painted by Nancy Nicholson. The Wandering Scholar is looking across fields to the 'dreaming spires' – All*

*Saints spire, St Mary's, the Radcliffe Camera, Magdalen Tower. It was found in woodland near Dingle Cottage, and had apparently been made into part of a children's playhouse. The image is painted on two metal sheets mounted back-to-back in a wooden frame; on the top are two stout eyes from which to suspend it. Expertise must have gone into the choice of paints, which survived exposure to the elements for some years. One side is brighter but has three small craters, as if hit by air-gun pellets; the other side is more scratched and pitted. (Photo: Philip Stewart.)*

but it was not his enterprise. It occupied a wooden shed, which soon had to be expanded to make room for more stock. At first the grocery did very well, thanks largely to curious visitors, who came up from Oxford in the hope of buying cheese from the hands of the poet. However, business soon slackened and they began to lose money. They tried to get the shop taken over by an Oxford firm, but Mrs Masefield persuaded the owner of the land not to agree, as she felt it would lower the tone of the neighbourhood. In April 1921 the building was destroyed, as it had not been designed with a view to being dismantled and re-erected elsewhere. They ended up with a huge debt, which was partly paid by the Nicholson parents and partly by the sale of four chapters of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, generously donated by T. E. Lawrence. The Graveses left Boars Hill in disgust.

I have often wondered where the shop stood. Even in the 1970s no one seemed to remember. After all, more than fifty years had already passed, and it had lasted only six months. All I had to go on was Graves's statement in *Goodbye to All That* that 'a neighbour rented us a corner of his field close to the road'. That, together with the statement that Mrs Masefield persuaded the owner not to let it to an Oxford firm, ruled out John Masefield's 'three-cornered field' (now the Oxford Preservation Trust wood south of the Ridgeway). I have followed various false trails, among others a vain search for the front page of the *Daily Mirror* which, according to Graves, carried the headline 'SHOP-KEEPING ON PARNASSUS'.

Recently, the poet's son William sent me copies of an article in the *Daily Mail* of 8 October 1920 and of photos in the previous

day's *Mirror*. Mrs Howard is quoted as telling the *Mail* reporter that she and Nancy 'conceived this idea in my garden opposite'.

Page 2

## POETS' SHOP.

### SPELLS BEHIND THE COUNTER.

There is a little shop at Boar's Hill, near Oxford, where you can not only buy everything from a collar-stud to a saucepan, but—if you happen to be passing just at the right time—you may receive your purchase from the hands of a distinguished poet.

For this is the shop opened by the Hon. Mrs. Michael Howard and Miss Nancy Nicholson for the benefit of the colony of poets and scientists that has grown up at Boar's Hill, and the fashion seems to be to take turns behind the counter. Here is a list (without prejudice) of some of the people who live there:

Dr. Robert Bridges, the Poet Laureate.  
Mr. John Masefield,  
Mr. John Galsworthy,  
Professor Gilbert Murray,  
Sir Walter Raleigh, and  
Miss Lillah McCarthy.

"You see we are nearly four miles from the nearest stores in Oxford," Mrs. Howard told a *Daily Mail* representative yesterday, "and poets as well as peasants want to buy candles and cheese, paraffin and sweets, at a handy place. Miss Nicholson and I conceived this idea together in my garden opposite, and in less than a month we got the ground, built the shop, and found out what to get and where to get it.

"Next week we shall send round from house to house to see if we can supply them with groceries. Several women have offered to come and take a hand in serving behind the counter."

## BUSY DAYS IN POETS' VILLAGE.

Famous Residents Go to a Pretty Wedding.

VISIT TO THE STORE.

Hon. Mrs. Howard and Charm of Commercial Travellers.

From Our Special Correspondent.

BOAR'S HILL, Thursday.

When you have been twenty-four hours in Poets' and Peasants' Land you begin to realise what an extraordinary "live" place it is for a baby village sitting atop a wind-blown Oxfordshire hill.

I discovered yesterday the quaintest all-sort shop just opened by the Hon. Mrs. Michael Howard and Miss Nicholson, daughter of the well-known artist.

This morning a motor-car and a motor-cyclist came into collision, and no one was hurt. This afternoon a fashionable wedding took place at Sunningwell, a couple of miles away.

#### PEASANT'S DILEMMA.

Nevertheless, I began to notice a certain emptiness about Boar's Hill at half-past one.

Not a poet loitered in the lane, and the only peasant in the vicinity was in the Poets' and Peasants' shop wondering whether to buy a pennyworth of brandy balls or a ten-and-sixpenny patent clothes washer.

"I suppose you know that Charles Petrie and Ursula Dowdall are being married at Sunningwell this afternoon?" asked Mrs. Howard, wrapping up the sweets. "Everybody's going except poet shopkeepers like me.

The bridegroom is the younger son of the late Sir Charles Petrie, and the bride the eldest daughter of the Hon. Mrs. Dowdall."

And at Sunningwell I found the prettiest wedding taking place in a prettier church than ever was painted in a picture.

#### CONGREGATION OF GENIUS.

A bride in fawn chamoisee, trimmed with Limerick lace, crowned with a Gainsborough picture hat of fawn and gold, adorned with a sweeping plume, was attended by bridesmaids in tunic dresses of Chinese yellow silk, trimmed with fur, and hats of autumn leaves.

And in every pew and corner of the church a far-famed poet or a scientist whose learning has set the world agape.

Not being a guest, I returned with the peasants, and had a further conversation with Mrs. Howard and Miss Nicholson.

The Hon. Mrs. Howard believes that her little store full of soap and cheese and kettles and saucepans and potato peelers and whatnots will one day grow into a great big store, full of carpets and mangles.

#### COMMERCIAL TRAVELLERS.

Some time or another, she observed, this part of the world might develop—into a garden suburb, perhaps. Then there would be telephones and electric light, and even a policeman!

"Then great poets will not sell your baking powder or buy your toffee!" I suggested.

"You leave the poets alone," cried Miss Nicholson. "A distinguished poet certainly bought some toffee here the other day, but we want to tell you about the commercial travellers."

"I'd never met one before I opened the shop," said Mrs. Howard, "and I had no idea they were so nice. Even when I criticised the stuff he brought, he was still nice."

"So we had to buy it," said Miss Nicholson. "Of course," said I. "Such are commercial travellers."

SAILOR KNIGHT 'POETS AND PEASANTS' SHOP



Captain Sir F. W. Young on board *Vindictive*, after successfully refloating her at Ostend. He has been made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in recognition of this work.



Mrs. Michael Howard serving behind the counter of the Poets' and Peasants' Shop at Boar's Hill, Oxfordshire. Business is quite brisk.



Lucan the famous dispatch.



Miss Nicholson ready to execute an order for any article not in stock. The business is most go-ahead, and no effort is spared to give satisfaction.



How that customer smiles. He sure want is



*Illustrations in the Daily Mirror, 7 October 1920*

With the help of the staff at the City Library, I have found where

she lived: in Elcot Lodge, now Hunter's Chase. The field opposite her garden would have been what is now the garden of Hilcote House, which is shown as a field in the 1920s Ordnance Survey



*The site of the shop is behind the close-board fence. Masefield's house is on the right. (Photo: Philip Stewart.)*

25-inch map. The southernmost corner of the site matches up with the pictures in the *Daily Mirror*, which show a makeshift bridge to take shoppers up across a still-existing ditch to the door of the shop. The photos are clearly taken facing into bright sunlight, with sharp shadows falling slightly to the left, as they would at that place early on an October afternoon.

If I am right, the shop was just next to the Masefields' house, which would explain why Mrs Masefield was so agitated about it. The two properties were separated only by Matthew Arnold's 'track by Childworth Farm', which reaches the Ridgeway at this point. The lives of three poets meet at this historic junction. Perhaps it should be commemorated in some way.

**Philip Stewart** took Oxford degrees in Arabic and in Forestry. After translating an Egyptian novel and working for seven years as a forester in Algeria he returned to the University and taught in various faculties. He has lived on Boars Hill since 1975, and one of his hobbies is studying the poets connected with it.

# Robert Graves and the Scholars

*Norman Austin*

Robert Graves has won wide distinction as a poet and as a novelist. He also produced two studies of mythology, *The White Goddess* and *The Greek Myths*, which appear, indeed purport, to be works of monumental scholarship. These two studies may be able to claim a wider readership than all his other literary works, yet Robert Graves and classical scholarship have about as much affinity as oil and water. When I told a German friend that I was to talk of Graves and classical scholarship at an academic conference on Graves, he laughed and said: ‘Oh, is Robert Graves *salonfähig* now?’ Is Graves presentable in learned societies? Let Graves himself answer the question: ‘Scholars blush and turn their heads away when my ideas are mooted.’<sup>1</sup>

Many classicists may have a copy of *The Greek Myths* on their bookshelves, but its author’s name rarely appears on the programmes of learned conferences. A search of the classical journals would disclose few references to the poet who claimed to have penetrated to the very heart of ancient Greek mythology. Most such articles are reviews of his books, and they all advise us that Graves, though perhaps a genius, is a very eccentric genius indeed.<sup>2</sup>

The eminent mythologist, Joseph Fontenrose, used to warn the students in his large undergraduate courses on mythology at Berkeley against taking Graves as an authority. Woe to the student who forgot the warning and borrowed a piece of Gravesian misinterpretation for his or her term paper.

The divide between Graves and the scholars is not due solely to the natural antipathy of scholars towards a goat let loose in the sheepfold. The authorities on whom Graves depended in *The Greek Myths* are themselves dated. Who reads Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, or Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*? The theories of the Cambridge school of

anthropologists and of the nineteenth century scholars of religion and myth have all been problematised. Most problematic of all is what Graves called ‘the central secret’ of the Neolithic religion in the Mediterranean, which Graves claims to have stumbled on, that, as Graves writes, ‘the concept of fatherhood had not been introduced into religious thought’; hence there were no gods, but only ‘The Great Goddess [. . .] regarded as immortal, changeless, and omnipotent’.<sup>3</sup>

It is hardly true to say that Graves ‘stumbled’ on this secret since his thesis of the family as the first paradigm for religious consciousness, with power invested in the hearth and the Mother, could be taken almost verbatim from Jacob Bachofen’s *Mutterrecht*, published in 1861. But ‘stumbling’ is perhaps justified in the sense that Graves came upon this hypothesis in the course of a truly labyrinthine personal search for the occult meaning of certain Celtic stories, rituals, and poems. That objection aside, the thorn here is that the theory of the one universal Goddess by its very nature defies validation since it purports to represent a stage of consciousness prior to the appearance of written texts. Once written texts appear, so Graves argues, the Neolithic Goddess religion had already been seriously corrupted by the northern invaders bringing their patriarchal forms. Without texts, how can we say how this ancient Mother Goddess was regarded?

Graves writes that his conclusions should have been ‘a subject for wide and deep research by university teams of specialists’.<sup>4</sup> If this challenge has gone unmet, we should not be surprised. Scholars have their own agendas. Even though scholarship has moved farther in his direction that even Graves himself might have suspected, the standoff between Graves and classical scholars remains much as it was when Graves first published *The White Goddess*. Let Fontenrose serve again to illustrate why scholars and Graves have difficulty finding common ground. When Fontenrose tells the story of the serpent Python, slain by Apollo when he established his cult at Delphi, he states in a single sentence that Python had guarded the oracular shrine that had

belonged to Ge (or Gaia, the Earth). It is a piece of information, no more, though in the course of his *Python* he will argue that it is a major variant of the Combat Myth, which is for Fontenrose one of the most ubiquitous and fundamental myths of the struggle between order and chaos in ancient Near Eastern mythology. For Graves, however, Apollo's slaughter of the serpent that guarded Earth's shrine at Delphi is prime evidence for what he calls the war of 'the busy, rational cult of the Solar God Apollo' against the Moon-goddess.<sup>5</sup> He links Apollo's victory over Python with the Apollo cult's rejection of 'the Orphic tree-alphabet in favour of the commercial Phoenician alphabet', with the capture of numerous shrines sacred to the Goddess, and with violent suppression of the Goddess religion, so that, in his words, 'the great raging Ninefold Mountain-mother of Parnassus was at last converted into a choir, or ballet, or troupe of nine tame little Nymphs, "the Muses", with Apollo as their art-director and manager'.<sup>6</sup>

Even scholars prepared to go half-way or more with Graves will balk at the theory of an original Orphic alphabet, and hesitate at the hypothesis that the nine Muses of classical Greek poetry were once a single orgiastic Mountain-mother.

Since *The Greek Myths* is so widely used as a reference tool, it may be of some value to study Graves's *modus operandi* in that work, using for our paradigm the Aphrodite unit (§18), which he entitles 'Aphrodite's Nature and Deeds'. In this work Graves subdivides each unit on a mythological character into three sections. In the first section, which I shall call the 'Narrative', Graves recounts the major stories told of that mythological figure by the ancient poets and writers. In the second section, which I shall call the 'Bibliography', Graves lists the ancient sources for the stories told in the Narrative. In the third section, which I shall call the 'Commentary', Graves offers his own interpretation, viewing the myth through the filter of his Goddess theory. The Narrative, therefore, purports simply to retell the ancient stories of that figure, whereas the Commentary allows Graves to offer his own narrative. Each section has its own strengths and weaknesses.

The Narrative section of his Aphrodite unit is the work of a good storyteller: forceful, lively, spare, yet full of detail. It has *brio*, as we would expect from Graves the novelist and poet. The problem, however, is that the narrative is too perfect. Aphrodite's story, as Graves tells it, is absolutely seamless. Many stories from various regions and periods are woven into a single tapestry. The back cover of the 1992 Penguin edition claims that Graves 'used a novelist's skill to weave a crisp coherent narrative of each myth', echoing Graves's own words, when he defines his method as 'to assemble in harmonious narrative all the scattered elements of each myth, supported by little-known variants which may help to determine the meaning, and to answer all questions that arise, as best I can, in anthropological or historical terms'.<sup>7</sup> This kind of compilation is certainly useful, as much for classical scholars as for the general reader, but it gives little sense of the bewildering variants and the complexity of the Aphrodite myth in antiquity.

An even more serious problem in the Aphrodite unit, however, is that the Narrative renders Aphrodite into a character in a French bedroom farce. Graves need not look far, to be sure, for this comic Aphrodite. His first story in the Aphrodite Narrative is taken from the song sung by Demodokos in Homer's *Odyssey*, which tells of Aphrodite caught in adultery with her lover Ares by her ugly but clever husband Hephaestus, who weaves a net to snare the illicit lovers. Everything in the *Odyssey* tale accentuates Aphrodite's shame and humiliation. The male gods stand around the lovers' bed to joke at the spectacle of the lovely Aphrodite caught and exposed to public disgrace by her cuckolded husband, and it is an opportunity for some lewd male jokes. The goddesses feel the mortification so keenly that they hide themselves away.

Graves devotes the largest part of his Aphrodite Narrative to this story of Aphrodite's sexual promiscuity and subsequent humiliation, and exploits the story's comic and satirical possibilities. This satire, to call it by its proper name, occupies one third of Graves's whole Aphrodite Narrative. The other stories that follow are told in more summary form, with noticeably less attention to story-telling effects. Demodokos' Aphrodite publicly

humiliated for her lust is the keystone for his whole Aphrodite unit. Aphrodite, as Graves portrays her in this section, is certainly not a deity deserving a moment's worship from any serious person.

This is not, of course, Graves's Aphrodite. For Graves, Aphrodite is one persona of the Great Goddess herself, who is anything but a figure of fun. But here is how, in the opening sentence of the Narrative, Graves introduces the Aphrodite of the ancient classical poets to the modern reader: 'Aphrodite could seldom be persuaded to lend the other goddesses her magic girdle which made everyone fall in love with its wearer; for she was jealous of her position'.<sup>8</sup> This assertion is, in fact, quite untrue. In the one instance in ancient literature when Aphrodite was asked for her magic girdle, she granted the request graciously and without hesitation. The episode occurs in Homer's *Iliad*, when Hera requests the loan of Aphrodite's girdle so that she can seduce Zeus into sexual intercourse on Mt Ida, and thus distract his attention from the war on the Trojan plain below.<sup>9</sup>

To accomplish her seduction, Hera first anoints and dresses herself, then repairs to Aphrodite to borrow her girdle, inventing a facile pretext that she is on her way to reconcile their primordial ancestors, Okeanos and Tethys. Here is how Aphrodite responds to Hera's request, as told in the eloquent and archaic translation of the *Iliad* by Lang, Leaf, and Meyers: 'Then laughter-loving Aphrodite answered her again: "It may not be, nor seemly were it to deny that thou askest, for thou sleepest in the arms of Zeus, the chief of gods."' <sup>10</sup>

Aphrodite then unfastens her girdle, 'wherein are all her enchantments', and lays the garment in her arch-enemy's hands with this gracious response: 'Lo now, take this girdle and lay it up in thy bosom, this fair-wrought girdle, wherein all things are fashioned; methinks thou wilt not return with that unaccomplished, which in thy heart thou desirest.'<sup>11</sup>

We could hardly find a better intimation in classical literature of Aphrodite's true archaic character as the great Nature goddess. This is the goddess the Roman poet Lucretius was to celebrate

with magnificent eloquence centuries later as Venus, mother of Aeneas, whom he invokes to bless his great epic poem, *De Rerum Natura*. But this Aphrodite is not to be seen in Graves's Narrative, which emphasises instead her all too human jealousy and vanity. Here is how Graves concludes his Narrative of 'Aphrodite's Nature and Deeds': 'The Fates assigned to Aphrodite one divine task only, namely to make love; but one day, Athene catching her surreptitiously at work on a loom, complained that her own prerogatives had been infringed and threatened to abandon them altogether. Aphrodite apologized profusely, and has never done a hand's turn of work since.'<sup>12</sup>

So the ancient goddess is framed in Graves's narrative: a beautiful and promiscuous woman, publicly humiliated at the beginning of the story for her sexual transgression, and a lazy tart at the end. In between these two versions of Aphrodite we glimpse, in the other stories Graves tells of her, as in the Venus and Adonis story, a different Aphrodite, but she is almost completely occluded behind the more superficial portrait of Aphrodite that is the centrepiece of the Narrative.

The second section of the Aphrodite unit, the Bibliography, is an impressive roster of ancient sources. Cited here are the most famous poets and writers, and mythographers from the later Greco-Roman world, together with commentaries and ancient scholiasts to various literary works. These bibliographical references present the same problem: they create an illusion of a seamless facade, giving, as in the Narrative, a false sense of coherence. The ancient testimonies span centuries, even millennia, from the Homeric poems of the eighth century BC, to scholarly commentaries of the late pagan period of Greco-Roman culture. How is an amateur to evaluate one source against another? How determine the relative merit of a scholiast's note to a passage in an ancient literary work? Anyone who publishes a handbook on ancient myth must forego a certain degree of complexity, given the vastness of such a project, but Graves would have done his readers a better service had he hinted in the Narrative and Bibliography of his mythological units at the complexity of the

problem of establishing the canonical version(s) of any myth. To smooth away all irregularities, to paper over every crack and fissure, is something akin to the modern-day reconstructions of ancient temples using but a few scattered columns and other architectural fragments.

The third section of Graves's Aphrodite unit, the Commentary, is the most compelling. Here Graves casts aside his scholarly apparatus and the hallowed classical authorities and we are given a goddess not to be found in the ancient texts at all, but one reconstructed from possible inferences, affinities, and leaps of the imagination. This goddess is the construct of modern anthropology and comparative religion, an idol, we might say, drawn from the pages of James Frazer, Max Muller, Jacob Bachofen, Jane Harrison, with a certain bravura synthesis by Graves himself. But this section is virtually *terra incognita* to most classicists. Classicists will read the Narrative to refresh their memory on certain myths, and they will be grateful for the sources listed in the Bibliography. But they part company with Graves when he seems to have jettisoned the canonical methods of historical research and interprets the myths according to his own intuition or, in the case of Aphrodite, in accordance with the theory of his White Goddess.

Here is how, in the Commentary, Graves introduces 'his' Aphrodite: 'The later Hellenes belittled the Great Goddess of the Mediterranean who had long been supreme at Corinth, Sparta, Thespieae, and Athens, by placing her under male tutelage and regarding her solemn sex orgies as adulterous indiscretions. The net in which Homer represents Aphrodite as caught by Hephaestus was, originally, her own as Goddess of the Sea [. . .] and her priestess seems to have worn it during the spring carnival; the priestess of the Norse Goddess Holle, or Gode, did the same on May-Eve.'<sup>13</sup>

The disjunct between the Aphrodite of the Narrative and the Aphrodite of the Commentary is remarkable – the one a caricature, said to be the construct of the ancient poets; the other, the great Mediterranean sea-goddess, as reconstructed by Graves

with the aid of comparative literature and religion. Adultery in the Narrative becomes ritualised promiscuity in the Commentary, with promiscuity now given a positive value, as the orgiastic dance in celebration of the mysterious self-generative powers of Nature. When we reach the Commentary, we come to see that the disjunct between the two Aphrodites was deliberately crafted for its shock value. In the Narrative Graves concentrates on those stories or features of the Aphrodite myth that will paint her in the most superficial colours. He will not here ‘dwell on her graciousness’, to borrow a phrase from Graves himself, because he needs the silly woman of the Narrative in order to deconstruct her and reconstruct for us the true Aphrodite. He needs the contrast to be extreme to document his thesis that true myth had been corrupted by the masters of the written text, those offspring of the patriarchal invaders who had overthrown the White Goddess.

Following Graves, as he reconstructs the true Aphrodite myth, we are informed that she is not only the sea-goddess but ‘the nymph goddess of midsummer’. In this form she mates with Anchises, the father of the Trojan hero Aeneas. She is now a savage queen who kills the sacred king ‘as a queen bee destroys the drone, by tearing out his sexual organs’. For this Aphrodite we are supplied with no testimony from the ancient sources, because none are to be found. Continuing further, we now find Aphrodite assimilated to Cybele, ‘the Phrygian Aphrodite of Mt Ida as a queen bee’, whose rites include the ecstatic self-castration of her priests in memory of her lover Attis.<sup>14</sup>

Now we are told that Anchises was a sacred king killed by a thunderbolt. This is no ordinary thunderbolt; it is, in Graves’s words, ‘a ritual thunderbolt’, since in Graves’s understanding of myth, all myth is the expression of a religious ritual. Anchises, the sacred king, is thus ritually killed after ‘consorting with the Death-in-Life Goddess’. Now Graves asks us to extend our imagination in a wide reach to include figures that are no part of the Greek pantheon – Isis, Osiris, the Phoenician Tammuz. Then we are led even farther afield, beyond anthromorphic equivalences, to scan

the whole world of nature. Before Graves has concluded his version of Aphrodite, in the Commentary, we have learned the significance in the Neolithic Goddess religion of the pear-tree, the bee, the mountain, the boar, the Palladium, the net, the goat, the serpent, the lion. We are told of the Goddess's sacred year divided in three parts, and are treated to a discourse on bearded goddesses and 'womanish gods like Dionysus' as hybrid forms emerging in the transitional period when the Goddess religion fell captive to the patriarchal religion of the invading Hellenes.

Others have noted Graves's dual nature. In one persona he is the epitome of the Apollo-ruled man of reason, his mind packed with detail, always sorting, theorising to the top of his bent. This Apollo-persona is dogmatic, even pugilistic, driven by a moral imperative to maintain Apollonian standards of excellence in a world too easily prone to sentimentality and other forms of weakness.<sup>15</sup> His other persona despises the Apollo-persona. This second persona, his alter ego so to speak (a term Graves himself would sternly repudiate), still speaks with the authority of the Apollo-persona, but in a new key. Now the pugilistic male has submitted of his own strong, free will, though not without complaint, to the awesome demands of the Goddess. We think of his Orpheus crying: *'I am oppressed, I am oppressed, I am oppressed'*.

Oppressed, yet submitting, this Graves becomes the poet. And 'poet' is a term strictly defined in his personal *Gradus ad Parnassum*: he is the male who has submitted to 'the wild Mountain-mother of Parnassus,' a Goddess indifferent, indeed antagonistic to, rationalism, as uncouth and licentious as Apollo is moderate and sober.

This persona Randall Jarrell called Graves's Anima (much to Graves's disgust) – the projection of his unconscious and feminine self, whose moral imperative was not to uphold the laws of the Apollonian patriarchy but to record the true, original, poetic experience, which is to be found only by direct participation in the ecstatic dances of the great Mountain-mother.<sup>16</sup>

I would suggest that Graves expresses in his Aphrodite unit not

two but three personas. As his Goddess is tri-form, so is her most devoted modern male priest. He is boy, man, and sage. Put another way, he is the youthful satirist, the adult scholar, and, after his conversion, the mature poet. In the Narrative, where he gives us the Aphrodite of the patriarchy, Graves is the well-polished son of the British Empire, well educated in the Classics, schooled in the forms of classical rhetoric and argument. He knows how to research his sources, how to organise a mass of material, how to separate the incidental from the essential.

The Narrative bears the imprint of Graves's English schoolmasters on every page. Yet in this magisterial voice we detect another voice, the voice of a young ventriloquist, the cynical British schoolboy.<sup>17</sup>

This is the clever schoolroom satirist, doodling caricatures in his copy book while the school master orates on the glory that was Greece, etc. This bright, rebellious lad finds Virgil a sanctimonious bore, and not even Homer can escape his scorn.<sup>18</sup>

This is a boy who was force-fed the Classics by pedantic schoolmasters from an early age, and in rebellion he found himself a satirist.<sup>19</sup>

This satirist, who finds comedy and satire abounding throughout Homer's *Iliad*, has produced his own satire in his Aphrodite portrait. The goddess of the Narrative is a cardboard figure stripped of her divinity and utterly belittled, the construct, we are led to believe, of those corrupted ancient poets and writers, who had forgotten their calling as Muse-poets, those whom Oxford calls 'The Greats', the poets read with solemn reverence in the English classroom. Graves uses the gravitas of his English schoolmasters to ridicule the very texts that receive their deepest genuflections.

In *The Greek Myths* Graves gives us his definition of myth, separating it first from what it is not: it is not allegory, not aetiological explanation, not satire, not fable, romance, propaganda, anecdote, melodrama, saga or fiction. 'Yet genuine mythic elements', he continues, 'can be found embedded in the least promising stories.' How curious, then, when Graves us the

‘classical’ Aphrodite, as he claims it was transmitted by the ancient poets, he leaves out those genuine mythic elements, giving us not a myth (by his definition), but merely an entertaining story. We cannot help sensing, as we read the Aphrodite Narrative, that Graves himself, a member after all of the very patriarchy that he despises, takes his own personal pleasure in the tale he has spun of a frivolous classical deity. He has entertained himself.

In the second section of his Aphrodite unit, the Bibliography, Graves speaks, if we may say so, in his Master’s voice. Nothing is so solid as a textbook for establishing a man’s authority, and the authority here is that of the scholar. Whatever handbook Graves may have relied on, Graves presents his bibliographies in such a way as to have us believe that he has like Theseus followed Ariadne’s thread through every turn in the labyrinth of Greek mythology. This is the apparatus of the University man. Does a reader question Graves on a point of detail? Has such a reader read, for example, the scholiasts on Homer’s *Iliad*, or the late mythographer Nonnus, as Graves seems to have done? Valuable as the Bibliography is for its wealth of reference, it also has a rhetorical function, to serve as a fortress from which Graves can wage his battle of the books with any who dare to question his premises.<sup>20</sup>

In the third section, the Commentary, Graves speaks with yet another voice. The material is strangely different from the material presented in the Narrative and referenced in the Bibliography; the sources here are different too. Here, where Graves reclaims the archaic myth from its contaminators, and reinstates the true myth, Graves still speaks with the authority and certitude of the Master, but the authority springs from a different source. Born and bred in a male-dominated society where gender roles were strictly differentiated, where women, as in the ideal portrait praised by Pericles in his Funeral Oration, were to be seen little and heard less, educated in the English public school where the female presence was entirely excluded, except for the cameo appearances of the housekeeper and perhaps the Master’s wife, Graves one day walked out of the cloister and discovered the Feminine.<sup>21</sup>

The shock of this encounter with the hitherto ignored, despised, or hated Feminine led Graves in due time to write *The White Goddess*, and *The Greek Myths* are the continuing account of his conversion. In the Narrative Graves gives us, as it were, the public school version of Aphrodite, a silly goddess, to be treated with levity or contempt. Indeed, the *Odyssey's* story of Aphrodite caught in adultery Graves would almost certainly have read in the schoolroom, and we can surmise that English schoolmasters, listening to their boys parse Homer's syntax and scan his hexameters, would not have enlightened them as to the true nature of this goddess whom Homer treated with patriarchal scorn. The Commentary, on the other hand, issues from the man who has had his conversion on the Damascus Road, the blinding vision in this case being the vision of the One True Goddess. The voice in the Commentary is still dogmatic (St Paul did not abandon dogmatism after his Damascus Road experience). It is the voice of the male, but now merged with the authority of the poet's Anima, which borrows his magnificently trained magisterial male persona to promulgate in our time the mysteries of the Goddess, once revered throughout Europe and the Mediterranean, but for millennia excluded from consciousness. This is the voice of the sage, opinionated certainly, yet motivated by a greater vision of a spiritual truth that had been suppressed in Graves himself and in his male-dominated, male-dominating culture.<sup>22</sup>

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates gives us the interesting story of the Palinode, a poem written by the seventh century lyric poet Stesichorus. Stesichorus, so the story goes, once wrote a Helen poem, which Helen herself (in her deified persona, since the historical Helen had been dead many centuries) read as a vicious slander. She took offence at the insult and blinded the poet. Stesichorus, coming to his senses, rewrote his Helen poem. He wrote the so-called 'Palinode', literally, a recantation. In this revised Helen story, Stesichorus asserted that Helen had never been to Troy at all but that an *eidolon* (an image) had been given to Paris when he was visiting Sparta. Paris, all unsuspecting that he had been bedded with a mere replica of Helen, sailed to Troy,

and the Greeks and Trojans fought at Troy for ten years not for a woman but for her phantom. Helen, it seems, was satisfied with this recantation, and Stesichorus's eyesight was restored.

The polarity in Graves's treatment of Aphrodite mirrors in a remarkable way the conversion that Socrates attributes to Stesichorus in his treatment of the Helen myth. Stesichorus in his first Helen poem, we may infer, had portrayed Helen as poets had inherited the tradition from Homer, Helen the dangerous wanton, a beautiful curse like Hesiod's Pandora. But then, blinded, but being *mousikos*, as Socrates calls him, i.e. being a poet gifted by the Muses – a Muse-poet Graves would call him – Stesichorus saw his error and repudiated the whole epic tradition, thus exonerating Helen and, it seems, re-instating her as the goddess who was worshipped as a goddess through the whole historical period.

Graves treats Aphrodite in the same way. First he gives us the Aphrodite of the poetic tradition, the patriarchal Aphrodite, deliberately excluding anything that might seem at all worthy of respect. But being, like Stesichorus, *mousikos*, a true Muse-poet, he was vouchsafed a vision of the true Goddess, and this Goddess he now celebrates and venerates in the Commentary as the Goddess of all Nature. If the Aphrodite in the Narrative is the patriarchy's 'blasphemy', to use the word Socrates had used of Stesichorus's first Helen poem, the Commentary is Graves's personal Palinode to the Great Goddess, to redress the wrong done her in the Narrative.

Sir James Frazer, though one of the greatest students of ancient religion in our time, was not himself a religious man. His *Golden Bough* was the work of an agnostic investigating the forms and rituals of ancient religion as manifestations of primitive superstition. Yet a profound effect of *The Golden Bough* is the aura of the numinous that haunts his description of objects and persons, rituals and customs. Graves, coming to ancient religion via such scholars as Frazer, Bachofen and Harrison, and through his own highly tuned intuition, discovered the numinous for himself, not only as magic associated with ancient religion, but as a still-living presence in his own life. Once he had experienced the

numinous, Graves knew his mission. It was to record and re-create the numinous in his poetry as fully and vividly as his poetic powers would allow. His project became to re-invest myths that had been de-sacralised with the presence of the sacred. Penetrating through the outer layers of the 'story', Graves strives to return us to 'myth', to restore what Martin Buber calls the I-Thou relations with the world. If some call this presence God, Graves preferred to name it the White Goddess.<sup>23</sup>

*The White Goddess*, however eccentric, is of historical interest for our own time, as a milestone in the evolution of the modern Goddess movement. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, the anthropologist T. M. Luhrman reviews *The Triumph of the Moon*, Ronald Hutton's study of the history of modern British witchcraft.<sup>24</sup> Luhrmann gives his review the witty title 'Hello Corn Dolly'. Hutton's achievement, he writes, is to demonstrate that the practice of witchcraft in present-day Britain is 'not a weird social accident but [. . .] the embodiment of a mainstream centuries-long emotional impulse at the heart of British culture: a romantic rejection of modernity that finds wisdom and beauty in the rural life'. This impulse springs from a rejection of two aspects of modernity. First, science and technology have eroded, when they have not absolutely eradicated, our I-Thou relations with the world, leaving us feeling as if we are but mechanical robots in an atomised and mechanical universe.<sup>25</sup>

If we yearn to heal this ruptured relationship the form available to us is the patriarchal version, with God as our Heavenly Father. But this is yet another way to talk of our alienation, since our earthly home is under the rulership of the Devil himself. These two aspects of modern culture, fused into a single image, Graves calls the Apollo cult. Whether we consider our culture from the perspective of art, religion, or science, every document has been inscribed with what Jacques Lacan calls *le nom du père*, 'the name of the father'.

The Goddess theory that has been evolving for the last century and longer, even in the most sophisticated European thought, is propelled by the desire to reject the de-sacralised, de-personalised,

over-masculinised world-view to which the Apollo cult has brought us. Adherents of the Goddess theory seek wisdom and beauty in Nature, as Luhrmann notes; even more important, however, they seek the personal, transformative encounter with the real dynamic presence of Nature, whether it be mild or savage.<sup>26</sup>

Since Nature has been reduced to a system of mechanics in the course of our scientific revolution, its vital spirit all but outlawed 'in the name of the father', many thoughtful people who yearn for a living encounter with Nature are compelled to find it 'in the name of the mother'.

Luhrmann goes on to say that 'around 1800, a sacred earth mother emerges in Romantic literature, as the embodiment of nature and the moon. By the end of the nineteenth century, the 'corn goddess' was established in British anthropology, Classics, and prehistory as the dominant religion in all early societies, with much folklore in modern society understood as its misinterpreted remnant.'<sup>27</sup>

Given that Graves's White Goddess, however personal the vision from which she emerges, is but another modern instance of this Goddess archetype of the Romantic poets, an archetype already well established in academic and literary circles before Graves, it may be of some value to trace the connection between Graves's Goddess and the Romantics' archetype by a brief analysis of certain key documents in the history of the modern Goddess movement.

We can begin with the Faust legend, first told in the mid-sixteenth century in Germany. This is some distance from the Romantic poets, to be sure, yet the role that Helen plays in the story is one of our earliest signs of the Goddess religion striving to re-emerge from its long exile. Helen, the absolutely forbidden icon at the heart of the Faustian quest, is the first glimpse of the archetype that was to flower into *La Belle Dame sans Merci* in the poetry of the Romantics in the ensuing centuries. Helen is the single most romantic image of the Feminine in all Western thought, whether pagan or Christian. In the medieval Christian

world Helen was even more romanticised than in the pagan past, a pagan icon declared not only immoral but illicit, prohibited 'in the name of the father'. In the original German Faust-book, Mephistopheles conjures up the shade of Helen for Dr Faustus and Faustus and Helen even marry, though it is an ersatz marriage, being the work of the Devil, and Helen eventually vanishes, and Faustus is left to face his eternal exclusion from the face of God for having, above all other crimes, dared to unite himself to the most false, most illicit form of the banished Feminine.

In Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, composed at the end of the sixteenth century, Helen is given a larger and, we might say, a more romantic role. Faustus first conjures up the shade of Helen in response to the pleas of certain scholars who, once vouchsafed this vision of absolute beauty, depart in monkish ecstasy. Shortly thereafter, Faustus demands that Mephistopheles produce Helen for him, to be his paramour. He wants not the mere image that dumbfounded the other scholars but Helen in her true and essential Being. Seeing Faustus on the point of repentance, Mephistopheles, to seal his doom, acquiesces and sends up Helen from the dead for Faustus to embrace and kiss. With that kiss, Faustus surrenders up his eternal soul but in that brief moment the prize seems worth the penalty, even when the penalty is to be banished from the presence of God forever. In that kiss Dr Faustus believes that he has found a new kind of immortality through Helen, just as Menelaus was made immortal by his marriage to Helen in Homer's ancient tale.

Ellis-Fermor has written of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* that 'the central idea of the play is an idea of loss'.<sup>28</sup> She goes on to say that 'Marlowe does not tell us precisely what this is, for the plain reason that he did not know. The catastrophe is too recent [. . .]. But the passionate agony of the play is an agony of loss and it finds fitting expression in the medieval idea of a lost soul.'<sup>29</sup> If we may continue this scholar's line of thought, we might add that if the play circulates around the idea of a lost soul, it is also a play of a man struggling against all the strictures of his society to regain the image of the lost Goddess. This quest is tragic, since for Faust,

a Christian scholar, Helen represents the absolute taboo. Like Graves, Marlowe grew up in a society so exclusively male that the opposite sex, as Graves writes in his autobiography, was ‘despised and hated, treated as something obscene’.<sup>30</sup> The exclusion of the female was perhaps even more marked in Marlowe’s world than in the Georgian society in which Graves grew up. When the German Faust-book was being written, woman in their thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, were being tortured, drowned, and burned alive, ‘in the name of the father’, for being witches; that is, human incarnations of the dread and prohibited Goddess.

Today we can see the nature of Marlowe’s problem more clearly than he could. In *Dr Faustus* he found the perfect story, in which a scholar (like himself) condemned his own soul to eternal hell for daring to search out and make manifest the illicit Goddess. Through the figure of *Dr Faustus* yearning for the forbidden Helen, Marlowe represents his own struggle to burst through the taboos of his own culture, which made consorting with the Goddess the unforgivable sin. The excluded Feminine was, of course, as seductive as it was deadly. The world in Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* is a Manichean battlefield. The enemy is Woman, and her name is Helen. *Dr Faustus*’s self-immolation on the altar of the false goddess Helen is the tragedy of a poet so alienated from his Muse that death or, if we prefer, suicide, was the only available form of redemption.

In 1832 Goethe’s *Faust Part Two* was published posthumously, Goethe having finished it the previous year. We are at this point well past Elizabethan consciousness and into the Romantic sensibility. The contrast between Marlowe’s Helen and the Helen of Goethe’s *Faust Part Two* marks the great divide between the medieval period and the modern with respect to the excluded Feminine. In Marlowe *Faust* must be eternally damned for the stolen kiss, but in Goethe’s *Faust*, the poet – for now the protagonist, as in all Romantic poetry, is the poet himself – in discovering Helen rediscovers himself

In Goethe’s poem, when *Faust* demands that *Mephistopheles* conjure up Helen from the dead, *Mephistopheles* informs him that

this action is far more hazardous than ordinary necromancy. In fact, Mephistopheles explains, Faust must perform this necromancy himself. To accomplish his desire Faust must penetrate to the realm of the Mothers. Mephistopheles, urbane though he is, is embarrassed, so he confesses, to be talking of such mysterious entities. In time, he defines this realm as the place of absolute emptiness, pathless, never seen by human eyes. It is the pure void, where Being first swirls into form. Reaching this realm is a task almost beyond human capacity, but Mephistopheles gives Faust a golden key that will open the forbidden desolate territory to him.

Why Mephisto's embarrassment as naming the Mothers? And why are mothers so proscribed that they have come to signify the absolute void? Goethe's Mephistopheles is more sophisticated than Marlowe's. He is no longer Devil but daemon, not Faust's enemy but, in fact, his therapist, whose work is to forward Faust's consciousness. In Goethe's revision of the Faust legend, Faust must reach the same point of self-annihilation that is Faust's fate in Marlowe's play, but in the Romantic revision of the medieval tale, Faust succeeds in his mission: he finds Helen and brings her back from the dead. This is the successful version of the Orpheus story; here the poet (i.e. Faust) is not destructive to himself or his beloved in his descent to the underworld, as Orpheus was; instead, his journey is regenerative.

Goethe's *Faust Part Two* is much more lucidly the journey of the human mind into its own consciousness; its objective is more obviously therapeutic, to heal the rupture in human consciousness between the licit and the illicit.

If Mephistopheles is embarrassed even to mention the Mothers, this is Goethe's recognition that even for Goethe the Goddess was still so taboo that she could scarcely be named, and then only in an ironic manner, and so stripped of her powers that she must stand as the signifier, in theology and philosophy, of absolute Non-Being. In Goethe the Faustian quest to recover the exiled Feminine, though understood as a terrifying psychological experience, is no cause for damnation. Far from being annihilated

by the vengeful father God for trespassing into forbidden territory, Goethe's Faust finds his redemption in Helen. Her function in Goethe's telling is to assist the poet in reintegrating the Anima back into his consciousness.

One generation after Goethe's *Faust*, Jacob Bachofen's *Mutterrecht*, which put forward the hypothesis that matriarchy was the basis of early religions, marked the entrance of the Goddess theory into the Academy. Another generation, and Classics-trained anthropologists like Frazer and Jane Harrison, and in time psychologists like Erich Neumann, while not always espousing the Goddess theory in its most extreme form, were working the same soil. Deeply impressed by Frazer's emphasis on the myth of the Great Goddess and her repeatedly-sacrificed sacred consort, and by Harrison's analysis of the evolution of goddesses in ancient religion, in 1948 Graves joined the club when he published *The White Goddess*, assisting in his own way to escort the Goddess back in triumph from her long exile.<sup>31</sup>

Since Graves was not a scholar but a poet, and an idiosyncratic poet at that, his thesis was easily dismissed as poetic flamboyance. But just as he was publishing his bold polemic, 'three giants of British archaeology' as Luhrmann calls them – Gordon Childe, O. G. S. Crawford, and Glyn Daniel – 'asserted that New Stone Age cultures across Europe and the Near East venerated a single female deity'.<sup>32</sup> If this was not yet a mainstream theory, it had at least become a theory to be taken seriously, now presented by most reputable scholars in the Academy. Then, another generation on, in 1974, Marija Gimbutas published her study of Neolithic religion, *The Gods and Goddesses of Old Europe*, in which she argues, with a wealth of archaeological data, for the Goddess theory first promulgated by Bachofen a century earlier.<sup>33</sup>

When Graves published *The White Goddess*, his hypothesis of the one Goddess was still a minority view. Even though the corn goddess, as Luhrmann notes, was acceptable in certain academic circles, Graves's peculiar arguments seemed to be an example of scholarship either trampled underfoot or run amok. Now, half a century later, the case is very different. Graves himself would be

astonished to discover how deeply the Goddess theory has infiltrated into the Academy. The Goddess, when she is not actually worshipped, is a topic of intense and serious investigation in most departments of Classics across the country, and in many courses in archaeology, history, religion, anthropology. Graves was a prophet before his time. Like the Old Testament prophets of Jehovah, Graves may be too loose at times with the thunderbolt, Jehovah's pre-eminent weapon of persuasion. But like Jeremiah of old, Graves spoke with the urgency borne of the conviction that his mission was to speak for the long-forsaken God. In this case, the Goddess.

While others were propounding the theory of an original Goddess in a more academic fashion, Graves distinguished himself from such theorists by the very force of his personal conviction. Convictions so intense have a two-fold effect: they either sweep all opposition off the field, including fellow travellers; or they incorporate the most disparate pieces of data into their argument. Globalism on this scale wins either way.

To return to our question: Is Robert Graves now *salonfähig*? No, not entirely, but his hypothesis is no longer outright heresy. A great number of specialists, in fact, in many different disciplines, are at work at the agenda that Graves claimed that he had bequeathed to them, though many of them may have read neither Graves the poet nor Graves the mythologist. Scholarship is moving at its own speed, in its own way, with its own methods, in the direction Graves had pointed to in 1948.

*University of Arizona, Tucson*

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Robert Graves, 'The White Goddess', *On Poetry: Collected Talks and Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), p. 230. Hereafter referred to as *Essays*.

<sup>2</sup> See Jay Macpherson's review, 'The Greek Myths', *Phoenix*, 12 (1958), 15–25, for one of the most penetrating critiques of Graves's method and ideological slant in his treatment of myth. Macpherson calls *The Greek Myths*, 'in spite of the tremendous suggestiveness of many things in it a crank book'. George Steiner, 'The Genius of Robert Graves', *Kenyon Review*, 22 (1960), 354, writes that most of Graves's academic opponents 'see in Graves a dangerous amateur, possibly even a charlatan, who imposes upon reality a world of private fantasies'.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1962), p. 13. Hereafter referred to as *TGM*. For his 'stumbling' on the secret, see Graves, *Essays*, p. 230.

<sup>4</sup> Graves, *Essays*, p. 231.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Graves, *TGM*, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Graves, *TGM*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 14. 197–223.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, trans. by Lang, Leaf, and Meyers, rev. edn (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 279–80.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Graves, *TGM*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>13</sup> Graves, *TGM*, p. 71.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Randall Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess: Part II', *Yale Review* (1956), 467–79, gives us an incisive analysis of the duality in Graves's psychology. The Apollonian persona he calls 'Graves or the Father of the Regiment [. . .] anti-sentimental to the point of insolence'. Robert H. Canary, *Robert Graves* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 94, writes that the Goddess myth provides 'for the Graves who was his father's son [. . .] a series of opportunities for his puzzle-working intellect. For the Graves who was his mother's son, it provides that the intellect shall ultimately be placed in the service of the female Muse.'

<sup>16</sup> Jarrell, 'Graves and the White Goddess', 474–77. See Graves, *Essays*, pp. 235–47, for his quite violent repudiation of Jarrell's psychoanalytic interpretation of Graves's vision of the Goddess. But cf. also Graves, *TWG*, p. 502: 'No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the

sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of “Kill! Kill! Kill!” and “Blood! Blood! Blood!”

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (New York: Blue Ribbon Books, 1930), pp. 13–14: ‘The most useful and at the same time the most dangerous gift that I owe to my father’s side of the family [. . .] is that I am always able, when it is a question of dealing with officials or getting privileges from public institutions which grudge them, to masquerade as a gentleman.’ Note also p. 25, where he remembers his youthful self at a preparatory school: ‘Here I began playing games seriously, was quarrelsome, boastful, and talkative, won prizes, and collected things.’

<sup>18</sup> Graves, *The Anger of Achilles: Homer’s Iliad* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), p. 13, writes: ‘The *Iliad*, and its companion piece, the *Odyssey*, deserve to be rescued from the classroom curse which has lain heavily on them throughout the past twenty-six centuries, and become entertainment once more.’ In Homer he finds a fellow satirist (p. 16): ‘[...] these iron-age princes – descendants of the Dorian invaders who drove his own ancestors overseas – whom Homer satirized in Mycenaean disguise as Agamemnon, Nestor, Achilles, Odysseus. The Homeridae, being sacrosanct servants of Apollo, could risk satire, so long as they remained serene and unsmiling throughout their performances, pointed no finger, cocked no eye, tipped no wink.’ And further, pp. 20–21: ‘When I “did” Book 23 [of the *Iliad*] at my public school, the ancient classroom curse forbade me to catch any of the concealed comedy in the account of Patroclus’ funeral games, which distinguishes them from Anchises’ tedious funeral games in Virgil’s *Aeneid*.’ Keith M. Aldrich, ‘Graves vs. Homer,’ *Prairie Schooner*, 34 (1960), 394–96, writes of Graves’s *Iliad* that it is an ‘outrageous sortie into the field of translation’, and a ‘gross misinterpretation of the *Iliad*’.

<sup>19</sup> Philip Burton, ‘The Values of a Classical Education: Satirical Elements in Robert Graves’ Claudius Novels’, *Review of English Studies*, 46 (1995), 192–218, writes that Graves was strongly influenced by Samuel Butler and his satirical attacks on the Classics. He notes, p. 196, that Graves’s *Iliad* shows the persistence of Butler’s influence: ‘the thesis on the character of the *Iliad* advanced in the Introduction is a radical re-evaluation on a scale worthy of his mentor’.

<sup>20</sup> See Macpherson, ‘The Greek Myths’, 15, on the limitations of Graves’s bibliographies.

<sup>21</sup> Here is how Graves describes sex in the public school context (*Goodbye to All That*, pp. 26–27): ‘In English preparatory and public schools romance is necessarily homo-sexual. The opposite sex is despised and hated, treated as something obscene. Many boys never recover from this perversion.’

<sup>22</sup> See Graves, *Essays*, p. 235, for a good example of Graves’s use of the magisterial persona when he attacks Jarrell for claiming that Graves’s Goddess is but the projection of his own Anima.

<sup>23</sup> It is instructive to compare Fontenrose and Graves again in this respect. Fontenrose’s *Python* is a colossal compendium of the Near Eastern and Greek variations on the great Combat Myth between the forces of order and chaos. It includes the most astounding, even bizarre, stories of monsters, and monstrous actions, the stuff of dream, fantasy, and nightmare. But never in the course of Fontenrose’s exposition does he allow the least shiver of the numinous to ruffle the text.

<sup>24</sup> T. M. Luhrmann, ‘Hello Corn Dolly’, *Times Literary Supplement* (19 May 2000), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Macpherson, ‘The Greek Myths’, 24, on the Goddess in modern poets: ‘[I]n her origination and continuing appeal she is a product of a genuinely religious attitude, and represents an attempt in mythical terms to account for sophisticated man’s alienation from the life of nature’.

M. C. Kirkham, ‘Incertitude and the White Goddess’, *Essays in Criticism*, 16 (1966), pp. 57–72, calls the White Goddess poems ‘religious poetry’, and writes (p. 71): ‘Graves’ romanticism feeds on and therefore cultivates the intense and the extraordinary in experience.’

<sup>26</sup> On this presence in Graves’s poetry, see Robert Davis, ‘The Pastoral Vision of Robert Graves’, *New Perspectives on Robert Graves* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), p. 218: The ur-myth of the pastoral ‘suggests, ultimately, that the primary task of the pastoral imagination may be defined as a remembering of, and return to, the mother. [. . .] The goal of this immense feat of pastoral reconciliation is to place the experience of sympathy, connectedness, destiny, shared love, and suffering at the center of human subjectivity.’ Note also Robert Creeley, ‘Her Service is Perfect Freedom’, *Poetry*, 93 (1959), 396: ‘The Goddess [in Graves], whether characterized as the ultimately personal, or impersonal, wife, mother, queen, or simply the generically “unknown,” is the most persistent other of our existence, eschewing male order, allowing us to live at last. The obedience of a poet’s

gratitude for this is the authority which you hear in his poems, and it is obedience to a presence which is, if you will, that which is not understood, ever; but which he characterizes as all that can happen in living; and seeks to form an emblem for, in words.’

<sup>27</sup> Luhrmann, ‘Hello Corn Dolly’, 36.

<sup>28</sup> Una M. Ellis-Fermor, *Christopher Marlowe* (London: Methuen, 1927), p. 61. This essay is reprinted as ‘Faustus’ in *Christopher Marlowe’s Dr Faustus*, ed. by Irving Ribner (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1966), pp. 63–86.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, p 27.

<sup>31</sup> Graves’s interpretation of the Judgment of Paris as an iconic representation of the tri-form Goddess choosing her beloved is based directly on a vase painting discussed in Jane Harrison’s *Prolegomena* (pp. 292–99). At numerous points Graves has taken over Harrison’s hypothesis of the indigenous myths taken and revised by the conquerors. His discussion of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Aegisthus and Orestes, in *The Greek Myths*, and his argument that the Orestes story shows the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy, are directly dependent on Harrison’s that Clytemnestra once was a ruler in her own right, but the story was revised when the conquerors brought Agamemnon and his family into the drama. For the influence of Frazer on Graves, see John B. Vickery, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), p. 1: Graves ‘may be viewed as the living writer most deeply affected not only by *The Golden Bough* but by the whole corpus of Frazer’s writings’.

<sup>32</sup> Luhrmann, ‘Hello Corn Dolly’, 36.

<sup>33</sup> Gimbutas revised this book and republished it in 1981, with the title changed to *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1981). Her original study was published in 1974.

# The Claudius Novels and Imperial Family Melodrama

*Peter G. Christensen*

In her forty-page attack on the television series *I, Claudius*, Sandra R. Joshel claims that ‘a familial narrative of empire in which good men are endangered by scheming women pursuing their desires, political and sexual, arrived in the United States amid a crisis of American empire and society that put women and family in the spotlight’.<sup>1</sup> For Joshel, *I, Claudius* was perfect home viewing for Reaganite America after Vietnam and Watergate, since it was, in terms of genre, a ‘family drama with a particularly symbiotic relationship between family, empire, and the medium of representation’ (p. 133). Although she does not say much about Graves’s novels themselves, she appears to hold them in the ideological contempt that she has for the television series, which is not surprising, since the series was a faithful adaptation of the books, and the first novel was particularly closely followed. She suggests that Graves’s particular version of the Roman Empire was generated by a ‘moment of crisis for the British empire that included the loss of Ireland in 1922–23, the growth of the Indian Congress party in the 1920s and the 1930s and the total failure of the expected recovery of the imperial economy during the Depression’ (p. 124). She presents Graves as a man so obsessed with the disintegration of British life that he could not see the point of T. E. Lawrence’s objection to his waste of time on a sickening novel about a non-heroic character (p. 125).

Joshel thinks of the Claudius novels as imperial family melodramas in the guise of historical fiction. In a way she is correct, but her verdict on the Claudius novels is too harsh, and so in this essay I will analyse Graves’s use of his sources to construct a family melodrama of conspiracies in the palace. This genre was a reasonable one to choose because of 1) the incomplete nature of the sources, 2) the acceptance of the past as past and not as a

staging of problems of the present day, and 3) the desire to give prominence to a conspiracy theory.

Firstly, the Claudius novels are indeed imperial family melodramas, since there is little else that they could be, given the spotty nature of surviving source materials from the early first century. Graves did not have much written prose of any kind from the period from Augustus to Nero, and, as Ronald Syme points out in *The Augustan Aristocracy*, we do not even have an oration extant between *Pro Marcello* and Seneca's 'Sermon to Nero' *De Clementia*.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the Claudius novels mimic the lost materials written by members of the imperial family itself. They replace Claudius's autobiography, a work which perished, as did Augustus's *Res Gestae*, Tiberius's personal writings, and Agrippinilla's memoirs. In addition, the historical records that we do have, left by Suetonius, Tacitus, Dio Cassius, Seneca and others, leave gaps in the biographies of rulers which need to be closed by reasoned speculation.<sup>3</sup>

So the novelist is put in a situation similar to the historian's of having to make hypotheses to connect events, knowing that such hypotheses can never be proven. Graves wrote the Claudius novels as part of a larger project of using fiction actually to investigate and solve historical problems such as the nature of Claudius's death. For example, later, in 'New Light on an Old Murder' in *Food for Centaurs* (1960), he insists that Claudius was poisoned by Agrippinilla and explains how it was done.<sup>4</sup> Of course, in his first- person narrative, Claudius could not completely account for his own death. Graves as 'editor' had to resort to the four different source versions of his death, which left the nature of the poisoning open.

Graves had to set his readers straight that he had done much more than create a pastiche of ancient historians – the furious Tacitus and the gossipy Suetonius. In his preface to *Claudius the God*, Graves says that some reviewers had claimed that he had 'merely consulted' Tacitus and Suetonius, 'run them together and expanded the result with my own "vigorous fancy"'.<sup>5</sup> It is true both that the two novels make set pieces of events that were

already set pieces for Tacitus, and that the novels cover approximately the same period as the *Annals*, but big chunks of the *Annals* simply have not come down to us. Graves denied this accusation of pastiche, citing his use of two dozen other sources. Although the main outline of the story he told was derived from Tacitus, as supplemented chiefly by Suetonius, followed by Dio Cassius, Josephus and Seneca, Graves had to mix annal and biography in order to find a connecting thread that stressed cause and effect over the *post hoc, ergo propter hoc* shape of incomplete records.

Indeed, although some of the appreciation has come long after the publication of the Claudius novels, Graves has been given praise by historians. For example, Arthur Ferrell, writing in his 1991 biography of Caligula, credits Graves with being more accurate about Caligula than was his biographer of 1934, J. P. V. D. Balsdon. Ferrell claims that Balsdon's book was 'essentially a whitewash'. For Ferrell, even Anthony Barrett in the much more recent standard biography of Claudius's predecessor, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (1989), ill-advisedly presents Caligula as an intelligent man who never became insane (p. 9).<sup>6</sup> Back in 1960, B. Walker in her book on the *Annals* of Tacitus claimed that the story of the trial of Piso after the death of Germanicus as told by Graves is a 'brilliant transposition' of the story in Tacitus. She adds, '[I]t is no disparagement of that literary *tour de force* to say that the drama in this and many other episodes derives directly' from Tacitus's story of the decline of the Julio-Claudian Emperors in general.<sup>7</sup>

Graves even brought newly-edited documents to wider circulation through his novels. Beyond using the classical historians and biographers, Graves capitalised on three texts by Claudius published or republished in the 1920s, all of which put Claudius in a good light. The three documents are translated in full by Graves (as they later were by Victor M. Scramuzza): the letter to the Alexandrians on religion (Charlesworth Item 2, pp. 3–5; Scramuzza 64–66); the speech from 48 AD on the Senate and the Gauls (Charlesworth Item 5, pp. 8–11; Scramuzza 99–101),

and the document on the franchise from 46 AD (Charlesworth Item 4, pp. 7–8; Scramuzza 129–30).<sup>8</sup> The first of these was first published by H. I. Bell in 1924 in *Christians in Egypt*.<sup>9</sup> The second, the so-called Lyons Tablet, which was paralleled by material in *Annals* 11.24, appeared in H. Dessau's work of 1926.<sup>10</sup> The third was also published by Dessau in 1926. Graves followed in the wake of Michael Rostovtzeff and Philippe Fabia, who in the 1920s had both published books that gave a more sympathetic presentation of Claudius than had been usual.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, however anxious Graves may personally have been about the British Empire, he did not use Rome as a stand-in for either the British Empire on the one hand or the Third Reich on the other. One of the reasons why the Claudius novels have been relatively neglected by literary critics derives from the fact that unlike many other historical novels from the 1930s they are not disguised or displaced attacks on fascism with the Roman Empire playing the role of Nazi Germany. One may sense in Claudius's praise of Britain and denigration of Germany an allusion to Britain's opposition to the political situation in Nazi Germany and its threat to Europe, but it is hardly more than a small observation on Graves's part.

In the 1930s, other political novels about Rome had a special appeal if they dealt with the end of the Republic or with Nero, since they could be fitted into the framework of the failure of democracy in Europe after World War I or the rule of a mad dictator. Here we can mention for example the novels of Phyllis Bentley on Julius Caesar (*Freedom, Farewell*, 1936), Edith Pargeter on Nero (*Hortensius, Friend of Nero*, 1937), Jack Lindsay on Catullus (*Brief Light*, 1939), and most notably Naomi Mitchison on Nero (*The Blood of the Martyrs*, 1939).<sup>12</sup> A more puzzling and moderate figure like Claudius did not suggest himself as the subject for this kind of novel. In Central Europe, including Germany, the same trend was also apparent. Other novels treating the Julian Caesars, particularly Caligula and Nero, written or translated into English in the decade around the Claudius novels include Dezso Kosztolányi's *The Bloody Poet: A*

*Novel about Nero* (1927) [*Nero, a véres költo*], Hanns Sachs's *Caligula* (1931) [*Bubi, Die Lebensgeschichte des Caligula*], and Lion Feuchtwanger's *The Pretender* (1937) [*Der falsche Nero*].<sup>13</sup>

For some readers, Graves's two novels seem less a call for a democratic stance against dictatorship than a quietist retreat to an interior, personal freedom in an evil, brutal, unredeemable world. However, this type of symbolic reading also seems stretched, since Claudius is hardly someone whose political position approximates that of Graves's contemporary readers. Because the Roman Empire already served as the object of emulation in the 1930s, Graves did not need to turn it into a disguised copy of Mussolini's Italy, for example. In treating Imperial Rome as Imperial Rome, Graves could show that attempts such as those of Mussolini to imitate the Roman Empire were vainglorious attempts at copying something corrupt. The Claudius novels as melodrama reveal the palace as a place where power is being exerted in a network of personal intrigue. Not all historians had such clear-sightedness. In the early 1930s many scholars treated the Roman Empire too sympathetically, and it was left to Sir Ronald Syme, hating the dictators of the 1930s, to take Augustus, his successors, and the fake Principate to task in *The Roman Revolution*, which appeared a few years after the Claudius novels.<sup>14</sup> Without being didactic, Graves's novels made the dictatorship of Augustus's Roman Revolution apparent.

Graves was actually in the vanguard of historical re-evaluation of Claudius. The same year that he published *I, Claudius*, Arnaldo Momigliano's historical study, *Claudius the Emperor and His Achievement* (1934, revised in 1961), appeared in a translation/alteration from the 1932 Italian original. In the 1961 edition, Momigliano remembered how Ronald Syme had quipped that his 1934 book on Claudius showed the exaggerated sympathy of an ancient pedant for a modern one.<sup>15</sup> Interest in Claudius continued with a second biography in 1940, *The Emperor Claudius* by Victor M. Scramuzza, a work which published in translation Claudius's speeches and letter to Alexandria (see above), but after it there were no more full-scale biographies in

English until Barbara Levick's, fifty years later.<sup>16</sup> In 2001, in *Sick Caesars*, the eminent classicist Michael Grant returned to the problem of Claudius's personality, taken up as early as 1916 by Thomas de Coursey-Ruth.<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, the surviving sources for Julian Rome suggest a palace melodrama because of the spread of what we can call 'disinformation'. Graves developed this line of action with considerable insight. Tacitus, Suetonius and Dio Cassius had to concentrate heavily on the palace because of certain political factors, and Graves manipulated these sources to stress Livia's conspiracy to kill or make powerless those members of the imperial family sympathetic to Republican government. Tacitus is well known for stating that it was a challenge for him to write the *Annals* since the records of the times of Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius, and Nero were falsified out of cowardice during the lives of the Emperors, and after their deaths, feelings of hatred distorted the way that they were remembered by the historians immediately following them.<sup>18</sup>

Since the memoirs of Agrippina the Younger are lost for good, as is Claudius's own autobiography, we have to make do to a large extent with the three major sources. Of these three, Dio explains the problem of writing a history of the Principate/Empire very well in his fifty-third book of the *Roman History*. Although Dio is more sympathetic to the establishment of the Principate than Tacitus, because he felt that it gave citizens more real protection than was achieved under the Republic, he presents the new problem of secrecy affecting both society and the historian. In the old days of the Republic, issues were recorded in the public records, although not without bias. However, they were open to discussion and people learned about the matters at hand.

But from this time on most things started to become secret and concealed, and though some things might happen to be published they are not trusted, as being capable of confirmation. For there is a suspicion that everything is said and done in accordance with the wishes of the powerful and their henchmen. Consequently,

many things that did not happen are spread about and many things that incontestably did happen are not known and virtually everything is broadcast differently from the way it happened. (Dio Cassius 53. 19.1–4, translated in Barrett, p. 196; cf. Dio Cassius 53. 22. 3–4 and 54. 15. 2–4)

Given these bleak conditions, one would expect unconfirmed conspiracies to abound, and Graves ably capitalises on the situation, in his handling of Messalina's activities in the palace in *Claudius the God*, for example.

Dio Cassius even felt the need to organise his discussion of Claudius's reign to fit the Emperor's personal life. Christopher Pelling claims that when Dio Cassius began writing on the Early Principate, he departed from the annalistic year-by-year type of history that he had used for the Republic and combined it with a biographical mode, most obvious at the beginning and end of each Emperor's reign. Thus his technique became a 'hybrid, a cross between a Suetonius and a Tacitus'.<sup>19</sup> Dio Cassius divides Claudius's reign into a Messalina period and an Agrippina period. For Pelling, the Emperor's motives are upstaged, as many actions initiated by the wives and freedmen are described (p. 117). Pelling compliments Dio for seeking to go beyond individual personality and trying to find 'overarching explanatory strands'. Dio is interested in the whole imperial system as well as its Emperors (p. 123). Such strands can also be woven into the palace melodrama.<sup>20</sup>

Since Tacitus began the *Annals* with the reign of Tiberius, it turns out that the most complete account of the reign of Augustus that we have comes from Dio (83), from whose history certain passages about the constitutional positions of Augustus have been much analysed, notably by Fergus Millar.<sup>21</sup> Although Dio accepted the Empire as the only secure form of government for his day, according to Millar, 'this does not prevent him from writing in an ironical, not to say cynical tone of the political structure which Augustus erected'. He knew the political structure was just a façade for Augustus's one-man rule (p. 97). Graves uses this

knowledge to show an imperial family trying to conceal from the Senators and the people the degree to which government had become a front for personal rule.

Through his use of Suetonius, Graves found suggestions on how this policy was achieved. Suetonius was even less concerned with liberty than Cassius Dio. Andrew Wallace-Hadrill writes that ‘there are signs that he felt a warmth toward the Principate, which Tacitus never betrays’.<sup>22</sup> Graves relies on Suetonius rather than Tacitus and Dio Cassius when he resorts to using the statement that Augustus ‘considered restoring the republic after Actium and in 23 BC, but he thought better of it in view of the risk both to himself and the state’ (see Suetonius 57–58, [i. e. *Augustus* 28. 1–2] and Wallace-Hadrill, p. 111). Graves takes at face value Suetonius’s very generous view of the Augustus’s regime, and Suetonius misses out the charade of the restoration of the Republic which was claimed by Augustus in his lost *Res Gestae* (but quoted in part by some ancient sources and used by Suetonius and Dio Cassius). For Wallace-Hadrill, ‘Suetonius’s Augustus can get credit for the idea of resigning, and [he] escapes criticism for the falsity of his pretence’ (p. 111).

In choosing to use Suetonius’s idea of a beneficent Augustus, Graves gives Claudius and Augustus a common bond which puts them at odds with Livia, who is not just openly hostile to the former Republic but also conspiring to make sure that there will be no new one. However, it would seem that all the characters in the novel exaggerate the possibility of such a return. The Senate was completely cowed, as we can see if we look only at their actions after Caligula’s murder. In order to give a context for Claudius’s own hopes for a return to the Republic, Graves had to create an Augustus who was less cynical and autocratic than he actually was.<sup>23</sup>

To magnify the conspiracies around Claudius, Graves had to turn his protagonist into a passive figure who did not take part in conspiracies himself. In the case of the assassination of Caligula and the confusing events which brought Claudius to power, Graves made good narrative use of an inconsistency in the sources

concerning the degree to which Claudius was involved in the overthrow of Caligula, in order to stress Claudius's surprise at being made Emperor. Because, as is well known, the books devoted to Caligula's rule and the first years of Claudius, as well as the last years of Nero, are missing from the *Annals*, and because neither Dio Cassius nor Suetonius offers more than a brief account of Claudius's accession to power, historians have had to turn to the works of Josephus to understand how this came about. Here a major role is given to Herod Agrippa, a friend of Caligula.

In fact, in the opening pages of *Claudius the God*, which offer an account of the career of Herod Agrippa, Graves calls the attention of the reader to the change in the use of source material. The source problem, however, is even more complicated than Graves states, since, as Barrett points out in *Caligula: The Corruption of Power*, Josephus in the *Jewish Antiquities* relied on two different sources, which cannot be completely reconciled.<sup>24</sup> According to one of them, the Praetorian Guard had a plan of action to maintain their privileged position after the murder, and they had decided the one good choice was Claudius. However, in the details of the events at the palace a second source is used, one which implies that the events were, in the words of Barrett, 'more spontaneous, even accidental' (p. 173). In the second version, Claudius was hiding in an alcove of a room in the palace, where he was found by a soldier named Gratus. The Praetorian Guard only then decided to make him Emperor. Both Suetonius and Dio, as Barrett notes, used this second source, which stresses the chance discovery of Claudius that made him Emperor – what Suetonius called an astonishing accident (pp. 173, 296).

Graves adapts the second source in Josephus to great effect and thus sidesteps the question of whether Claudius took part in the assassination plans, as Josephus's first, less detailed source indicates. Clearly, the second source was far more vivid for a novelist. Graves's use of it allows him to avoid to a large degree a problem raised by Barbara Levick in 1990 in her biography of Claudius.<sup>25</sup> Claudius in Levick's view was looked upon as a usurper, and Graves tries to turn attention away from this fact by

positing Claudius as a figure who would have liked to restore the Republic. Unfortunately, Claudius in the novels can only imagine the restoration of the Republic through a palace coup led by his son. In so thinking, he is simultaneously shrewd and naïve. He is shrewd because he recognises that politics have indeed become palace melodrama and naïve because there is no class of people who can be rallied to make the attempt more than a palace flare-up.

In the years before Claudius became Emperor, Livia not only opposed the Republic but also instituted a government behind the scenes, setting a model for Tiberius and Caligula. Graves's most ingenious stroke of plotting is to combine all the accusations against Livia as a poisoner, make them all true, and add even more crimes. Nicholas Purcell (105) sums up the ancient sources that make claims for Livia as poisoner (for Marcellus, see Cassius Dio 53. 33. 4; for Gaius and Lucius, Tacitus 1.3, Cassius Dio 55. 10a. 10; for Augustus, Tacitus 1. 5, Cassius Dio 56. 30. 1–2; Aurelius Victor *epit.* 1. 27; for Agrippa Posthumus, Cassius Dio 57. 3. 6; also, for Livia's pleasure at the death of Germanicus, see Dio Cassius 57. 18. 51).<sup>26</sup>

Graves fleshes out all the accusations, adds Livia's own first husband Tiberius Claudius Nero to the list of victims, and indicates her plans for the murder of her son Nero Drusus and the latter's son Germanicus. This tactic enables him to exaggerate the idea of a conspiracy at work. According to Adrian Quinn, a conspiracy is 'a highly selective and convoluted model finding evidence anywhere, even in the very lack of evidence'.<sup>27</sup> Thus the lack of any conclusive evidence for Livia's poisonings cannot be used to discredit her. The mind connects fragments which make no sense in isolation, as everything is tied together in a conspiracy theory, and evidence itself becomes a nebulous concept (p. 123). By adding poisonings of which Livia was not accused in the extant writings, and by bringing- into Livia's plots characters such as Livilla, Caligula and Plancina (and unwitting helpers such as the Chief Vestal Virgin), Graves creates a startling narrative structure in Livia's conspiracy to make Tiberius the Emperor and

herself a goddess, a structure that adds extra zest to Tacitus's trajectory of progressive decadence. The conspiracy also provides a historical explanation for Claudius's having Livia named a goddess.

Although some historians have concluded that Livia might have been a poisoner and others have categorically denied it, the crucial fact remains that these accusations circulated and they reveal the mindset of the day, which was that real power was employed behind the scenes and not in government machinery. While one line of research takes the widespread accusations of Livia and Agrippinilla as poisoners to be a clear indication of Roman misogyny, and even of Graves's complicity in such misogyny, it overlooks the nature of conspiratorial poisoning itself, whether the accusation is against Livia or Messalina or Agrippinilla. For example, Nicholas Purcell and Cristina G. Calhoon both dismiss the idea of Livia as poisoner.<sup>28</sup> Purcell feels that it simply cannot be true because 'the *princeps femina*, the historical figure, had to be attacked appropriately, and the historiography of imperial poisoning developed from the tradition of *matronae uenificae* in response to that need' (p. 95). However, Purcell has no evidence, and with no evidence conspiracy is always a narrative possibility.

Discussing the question of the validity of accusations of poisoning during this period, Anthony A. Barrett, in the foreword to his revisionist biography *Agrippina, Mother of Nero*, writes that whether Agrippina the Younger was guilty of poisoning Claudius or not, the fact remains that this *topos* became part of her reputation. For Barrett it is generally 'wasted effort' for modern researchers to sift through and evaluate the ancient sources to reach a scholarly conclusion about the true cause of an alleged death by poisoning. Instead, we must remember that even now 'with the help of science, the opportunity for exhumation, police investigation and a systematic court procedure, it is notoriously difficult to determine the truth in poisoning cases' (p. xv). Questions about these deaths, in short, can never be solved.

Given this view that 'we can never know for sure', it would seem beside the point to claim that Graves is stretching credibility

when he presents so many poisonings in his Claudius novels. Instead, the novels take part in underlining if not exaggerating the suspicions that the Roman ruling class had about the moral character of powerful women, and they give us a feel for the period. This atmosphere is more important than whether Graves is ultimately right or wrong in his comments in 'Food for Centaurs' about the way that Claudius died.

The political implications of Livia's conspiracy are neither conservative nor liberal. Instead they suggest an absurd world. When Messalina starts to develop her secret plots around Claudius, our sadness that he is a duped cuckold pales in comparison to our admiration of her convoluted plots. Given how naïve he is, she gets an extra thrill with extra risks until she is downed by Claudius's freedmen. The existence of a plot by Livia that extends all the way from 38 BC until her death in 29 AD, that is, 67 years, leads the readers into a labyrinth of evil which is remarkable even for mystery and suspense novels.

In conclusion, the Claudius novels should not be read (as an extrapolation from Joshel's evaluation of the television series implies) as if Graves were demonstrating that that powerful women who do not accept their place in life destroy their men and their families, weaken the nation, and lead to imperial collapse. This attitude would imply that the Empire was worth preserving. However, Graves' clearly marks the Empire as the site of concealed, extra-legal government, and it is nothing to be admired. The bloody course of history goes on, and no one can control it, because power is exerted behind the scenes and beyond regulation. The expression of public political views is meaningless here, and a fatalistic view of the world filled with auguries and prophecies is easy to fall into. Surrounded by conspiracy, Claudius relies on the sibyl and on predictions to get his bearings, and to construct a counterplot to the conspiracy of Agrippinilla and Nero. However, Britannicus will not play his part. Like everyone else, Claudius has given up on public action. For him, plotting behind the scenes offers the only possible hope. Thus, although the Claudius novels do not fit into the main trend of 1930s historical

novels set in Rome that serve to spur resistance to dictatorship, they do reflect the liberal horror at extra-legal government by and through conspiracy.

**Peter G. Christensen** taught English and Comparative Literature at the University of Wisconsin and Cardinal Stritch University, Milwaukee, WI. He died on 3 September 2007.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Joshel, Sandra R, 'I Claudius: Projection and Imperial Soap Opera', in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, edited by Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), pp. 119–61 (p. 127).

<sup>2</sup> Syme, Ronald, *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 445.

<sup>3</sup> Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, translated by Catharine Edwards (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, translated by Michael Grant, seventh edition (London: Penguin, 1989); Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, edited by Herbert Baldwin Foster, translated by Earnest Cary, 9 vols (London: Heinemann, 1925; reprinted 1955); Seneca, *Apocalocytosis. Divi Claudii (The Pumpkinification of Claudius)*, translation, introduction, and notes by Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> Graves, Robert, 'New Light on an Old Murder', in *Food for Centaurs: Stories, Talks, Critical Studies, Poems* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), pp. 201–08.

<sup>5</sup> Graves, Robert, *Claudius the God and His Wife Messalina* (London: Barker, 1934; reprinted New York: Random House, 1962), p. v.

<sup>6</sup> Ferrill, Arthur, *Caligula: Emperor of Rome* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), p. 9; *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (London: Batsford, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Walker, B., *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History*, second edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1960), p. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Charlesworth, M. P., ed., *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1951); Scramuzza, Victor M., *The Emperor Claudius* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940)

<sup>9</sup> Bell, H. I., *Jews and Christians in Egypt* (London: British Museum, 1924).

<sup>10</sup> Dessau, Hermann, *Geschichte der römischen Kaiserzeit*, 2 vols (Berlin: Weidmann, 1924–1930).

<sup>11</sup> Rostovtzeff, Michael I, *A History of the Ancient World*, translated by J. D. Duff, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926); Fabia, Philippe, *Le Table claudienne de Lyon* (Lyon: Audin, 1929).

<sup>12</sup> Claudius had been popular as a subject of historical novels around 1900. For example, see Alfred Jarry's *Messaline* (1901) [*The Garden of Priapus* (1932)], Prosper Castanier's *L'Orgie romaine* (1901), and Nonce Casanova's *Messaline, roman de la Rome impériale* (fifth edition, 1902). Even today the reign of Claudius is the subject of historical fiction in France, in Barbara Wood's *Séléné* (1990) and Jacqueline Dauxois's *Messaline* (2002).

<sup>13</sup> If we take a brief look at another complex two-volume historical novel, published in 1935 and 1938, Heinrich Mann's *Die Jugend des Königs Henri Quatre* and *Die Vollendung des Königs Henri Quatre*, despite surface similarities we are in different territory. Both treat rulers from their childhood to their murders, and both men became rulers after the early deaths of members of the royal family. Both characters are basically sympathetic although they make serious mistakes. Predictions surface in both novels. Henry IV has Nostradamus; Claudius has the Sibyl. Powerful women affect both men. Claudius has Livia to contend with; Henry IV has Catherine de Médicis. However, political parallels linking Henri Guise to Hitler and the Duc de Mayenne to Goering (Linn 107) make Mann's novels more immediately political in their message than Graves's.

<sup>14</sup> Syme, Ronald, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939; reprinted New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

<sup>15</sup> Momigliano, Arnaldo, *Claudius the Emperor and His Achievement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934; revised edition, New York: Barnes and Noble, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> Levick, Barbara, *Claudius* (London: Gatsford, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Grant, Michael, *Sick Caesars* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2000); De Coursey-Ruth, Thomas, *The Problem of Claudius: Some Aspects of a Character Study* (Baltimore: Lord Baltimore Press, 1916).

<sup>18</sup> See Barrett, Anthony, *Agrippina, the Mother of Nero* (London: Batsford, 1997), p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Pelling, Christopher, 'Biographical History? Cassius Dio on the Early Principate', in *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greeks and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire*, edited by M. J. Edwards and Simon Swain (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 117–44 (p. 117).

<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, Pelling writes, Dio was not good at psychological penetration, and he quips, 'It might seem to demand some perversity to make Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, and Nero as drab as Dio manages' (p. 135), a view he shares with earlier critics such as Reinhold and Swan in discussing Augustus's personality. Nor does Pelling find much subtlety in Dio's view of Claudius, writing: 'The strange mix of good and bad under his administration is explained very simply: the good bits come from him, the bad bits come from the wives and freedmen, and it is as simple as that' (p. 136).

<sup>21</sup> Millar, Fergus, *A Study of Cassius Dio* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 83.

<sup>22</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, Andrew, *Suetonius: The Scholar and His Caesars* (London: Duckworth, 1983), p.111.

<sup>23</sup> Graves's Augustus is, however, less noble than the one created by John Williams in his National Book Award-winning historical novel *Augustus* (1972). At the close of this novel, Augustus at the end of his life is far more concerned that Rome will be destroyed by time and the outside barbarians than by the autocracy of the Principate itself. For him, 'Roman law tempers the disordered cruelty of Roman custom' (p. 299). At least Graves's Augustus is not so blind to the Constitutional problem of disguised one-man rule.

<sup>24</sup> Barrett, Anthony, *Caligula: The Corruption of Power* (London: Batsford, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Levick, Barbara, *Claudius* (London: Gatsford, 1990).

<sup>26</sup> Purcell, Nicholas, 'Livia and the Womanhood of Rome', in *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Parker* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 112–32. *Society*, no. 212 [n. s. 32] (1984), 78–105 (p. 105).

<sup>27</sup> Quinn, Adrian, 'Tout est lié: The Front National and Media Conspiracy Theories', in *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and Human Sciences*, edited by Jane Parish and Martin Parker (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), pp. 112–32.

---

<sup>28</sup> Purcell, 'Livia and the Womanhood of Rome'; Calhoon, Cristina G., 'Livia the Poisoner: Genesis of a Historical Myth' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of California, Irvine, 1994).

# **‘You may not believe it, for hardly could I’: Robert Graves and the Bible**

*Anne Mounic*

True religion is of natural origin and linked practically with the seasons though it implies occasional states of abnormal ecstasy which can be celebrated only in the language of myth.

Robert Graves, ‘Answer to a Religious  
Questionnaire’

The task of writing on the connections between Robert Graves’s work and the Bible is not as easy as one might expect. Although the biblical influence is fairly obvious in the prose and poems, with quotations and reminiscences peppered throughout, Robert Graves remained highly critical of the biblical heritage, especially as transmitted by Christianity, while being acutely aware of the necessary connection between poetry and the divine. He was also convinced that a poet needs a common ground of existential figures known to his readers in order to ensure genuine communication with them. This question, as will be seen, raises the delicate issue of the relationship between the poet and the community, with the risk in our time of poetic solipsism.

Graves was aware that the Bible, despite its wide range of interpretations within the Jewish world, is a book that is the foundation of a community. It provides a common ground of references, a representative history of a spiritual kind, unceasingly tracing the existential metamorphoses of the Word back to its ontological root – God as the secret Name of the unknown energy of being, the principle of life. God’s unpronounceable Name is the limit ascribed to human knowledge and wisdom, as Ecclesiastes says (8. 17): ‘though a wise *man* think to know *it* [the work of God], yet shall he not be able to find it’.<sup>1</sup> Yet this Name is also a way of naming what cannot be conceived by reason, or by the intellect – that is, Life.

Another point to be taken into account is that Graves's viewpoint, although absolutely coherent throughout when considering his overall outlook, underwent an evolution through the decades. The 'God Called Poetry' of his younger years (*Country Sentiment* (1920)) became the Muse and Goddess, White, under Laura Riding's influence, and then Black in the mature years. Moreover, the poet's early taste for fairy tales left more and more room for the darker side of the marvellous when he referred to primitive magic and, with acute anguish, confronted his strong desire to live with the violence that life keeps in store – a paralysing awareness in 'The Shout' (1924), a short story deeply marked by the trauma of war, growing into the appalling statement in *The White Goddess* (a book written during the Second World War): 'No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the acrid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward, with a monotonous chant of: 'Kill! kill! kill!' and 'Blood! blood! blood!''<sup>2</sup>

Graves's strong taste for the mystery of life and death ('I am all for religious mysteries, as is natural to a poet'<sup>3</sup>) is counterbalanced by a highly critical sense of reality ('The concept of the supernatural is a disease of religion'<sup>4</sup>) verging on positivism, if we follow this definition derived from Auguste Comte's philosophy: a doctrine based upon the knowledge of facts. Graves claimed affinities with his great-uncle Leopold von Ranke, the famous German historian who lived almost exactly one century before him (1795–1886). Von Ranke insisted on the study of historical facts (how things had really happened), on the critical reading of documents, and, with his Protestant outlook, was sure that history was a manifestation of God. He dismissed the notion of progress since he thought that each generation in history was in relation with God Himself. This biblical conception of history could not but appeal to Graves. Besides, his historical handling of myth is deeply rooted in a nineteenth-century apprehension of myth and religion, with Frazer and his *Golden Bough*, to which he

frequently refers. When considering his account of Jesus's life, we may also think of Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863), which he criticises in *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (1953), since Renan 'would not apply his knowledge of Hebrew to dispersing the prejudices with which he had been imbued at the seminary of St Nicholas du Chardonnet'.<sup>5</sup> Graves and Podro mention other attempts: David Friedrich Strauss's *Leben Jesu* (1835), 'the first scholarly attempt to free the Gospels of their supernatural element'<sup>6</sup> and Joseph Klausner's *Jésus de Nazareth* (1928).

Graves also denounces dogma, following in Nietzsche's steps. The German poet and philosopher advocated what he called *Gaya Scienza* and rejected Christianity. Yet Nietzsche's views on this subject are not in fact so clear-cut.<sup>7</sup> Without expatiating on this, one may nevertheless recall Nietzsche's outlook on tragedy as a combination of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, the mysterious inner upsurge of undivided life and its transfiguration into individual beauty as a process of 'redemption through illusion', as he says in *The Birth of Tragedy*: 'Apollo I see as the transfiguring genius of the *principium individuationis*, the sole path to true redemption through illusion. While in the mystical triumphal cry of Dionysus the spell of individuation is broken and the path is opened to the Mothers of Being, to the innermost core of things.'<sup>8</sup> In this passage he connects 'Dionysian mirth' with the Faustian world of Mothers, one of Goethe's representations of what he called the 'demonic', or ambivalent creative energy linking together in its depths the inner and the outer worlds. Nietzsche's view of the double nature of poetic language is behind Graves's demand for a balanced proportion of individual rhythm and traditional metre in a poem and his conception of language as evinced in 'The Cool Web' – an instrument blunting sharp feelings. Dogmatic language would lead to a complete suppression of Dionysian depth and therefore to a drying up of life and poetic inspiration. However, poetic language deprived of its inherited rules would not serve the poet's purpose but reduce his voice to a solipsistic account of his psychological torment.

Graves finds himself confronted with two tasks: reconciling

religion and the intellect,<sup>9</sup> and stripping from his reading of the Bible the features he disliked – what he calls ‘patriarchal’ rule: ‘But I am not a pessimist, and will now explain why: quoting, by your permission, from the now discredited Judaeo-Christian Bible.’<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the reference to Hitler in Chapter 26 of *The White Goddess*<sup>11</sup> sounds to me disturbing and out of place, although I recognise that it is also subtly ironical. But this is much too subtle for the Nazis.

Frazer’s viewpoint is also discussed in Chapter 26, and an essential dimension of the Bible is stressed – the central significance of the individual, which is what Kierkegaard highlighted in his work.

Firstly, I am going to consider the works, articles, and chapters in books which Graves devoted entirely to biblical questions. Then I shall examine how he strives to debunk dogma, before analysing how he remained truly dedicated to the Bible: considering the poet as prophet, choosing as his central existential myth that of Jacob wrestling with the angel (*Genesis* 32) and viewing the poet’s task as a way of giving rhythm, meaning and resonance to man’s existence – which is what the Bible does.

### *The Major Works*

We find biblical references throughout Graves’s works. However, some of his books are more particularly dedicated to biblical subjects. *King Jesus*, a novel on Jesus’s historical life, was published in 1946. It was written at the time when the poet was working on *The White Goddess* and it develops the mythic pattern: ‘Yet the history of Jesus from his Nativity onwards keeps so close to what may be regarded as a pre-ordained mythical pattern, that I have in many instances been able to presume events which I have afterwards proved by historical research to have taken place, and this has encouraged me to hope that where my account cannot be substantiated it is not altogether without truth.’<sup>12</sup> In this formulation, we notice Graves’s indebtedness to Von Ranke’s

method but we also gather that when the facts do not bear out the poet's intuition, he is not at all daunted by what could have been deemed as a hindrance.

As Martin Seymour Smith says in his biography,<sup>13</sup> Graves's view was later altered by Joshua Podro's suggestions and the collaboration of the poet with the scholar of Judaism gave birth in 1953 to that enormous, ambitious book, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*. In it the authors reconsider Jesus's sayings in the light of Judaism. The book sold with great difficulty and has not yet been reprinted,<sup>14</sup> but Graves developed the same themes<sup>14</sup> in various other works afterwards, in articles such as 'Paul's Thorn' (*5 Pens in Hand*), in which he summarises the theory that Paul, reading the Bible in Greek, misinterpreted it; or in an article initially published in 1956 under the title, 'Jewish Jesus, Gentile Christ', and then as 'Don't Fidget, Young Man!' in *5 Pens in Hand*. In both articles, he asserted Jesus's Jewishness, claimed that Paul was the 'perverter of the original Nazarene Gospel'<sup>15</sup> and thought that Jesus had survived his Crucifixion, an idea he had in common with D. H. Lawrence ('The Man Who Died').

Yet I believe it is a pity that this book has not been re-printed. It reveals another aspect of Graves's 'honest' research (the adjective 'honest' recurs throughout *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*), since here, instead of assimilating the biblical lore with primitive myth, Graves and Podro endeavour to strip the four Gospels of their Greek distortions, additions, or misinterpretations. It is a way – usual with Graves – of getting rid of dogma by seeking to retrieve access to the origins. It is also a way of debunking Christian anti-Semitism.

The two authors denounce the 'attempts to dissociate Jesus from Judaism [...], to prove that he debarred the Jews from the Kingdom of God in favour of the Gentiles',<sup>16</sup> and point out the 'deliberate misdirection against the Pharisees of denunciations originally intended for the Herodians and Sadducees' and 'misdirection against the Pharisees of denunciations intended for the "feigned Pharisees"'. These distortions are ascribed to 'miscopying' and 'misunderstanding of the Aramaic original', the

connection with ‘inappropriate contexts’, the ‘running together of different sayings’ and deliberate distortion: ‘invention of sayings and incidents which would authorise second-century Church practice’, as well as ‘iconotropy’, that is, misinterpretation of images.<sup>17</sup>

The authors aim at restoring ‘the original Nazarene Gospel’, which was ‘terse, factually accurate and intellectually satisfying to those chosen students of the Law and the prophets for whom it was primarily intended’, until ‘Gentile heretics pirated it, mistranslated it into pedestrian Greek, recast it, and then subjected it to a century-long process of emendation and manipulation’. The book is made up of several distinct parts. In the Foreword, the general argument is outlined. The Introduction has three movements: first, the personality of Jesus is considered, then the ‘Pauline heresy’, and finally the ‘process of Gospel-making’. Then the different episodes are quoted in their concordance within the four Gospels, the veracity of facts and original sources being commented upon. Lastly, the ‘Nazarene Gospel’ is ‘restored’, preceded by a ‘Summary of Critical Principles’.

Graves and Podro strove to reveal the historical Jesus: ‘In allegory, Jesus may be God; in history he must be man.’<sup>18</sup> For them, Jesus abided by the Pharisaic tradition, which was wholly oral, hence the problems raised by the written account – made years later, after the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD – of his sayings, which were for the most part *midrashim*, i.e. comments on the Bible, whether *Numbers*, *Leviticus*, *Deuteronomy*, or any of the other books. The Gentile Christians ‘transformed Jesus’s teaching into a Greek mystery-cult’.<sup>19</sup> ‘Christianity was unmistakably a “daughter” religion – but what daughter would side with her mother’s alien oppressors, jeer at her calamities and declare herself the sole inheritress of the family title and culture?’<sup>20</sup>

The two authors both claim their independence and remain humble: ‘It happens that neither of us has a chair, post, or pulpit to lose. Working when and how we please and consulting our own libraries, we acknowledge no spiritual authority, except the still,

small, nagging voice of conscience – a survival from our early Scriptural education – which urges us to tell the truth as we know it. We are, in fact, amateurs or irregulars, well aware, from recent analogues in medicine and warfare, of the deep mistrust our book will arouse among those whose livelihood depends on a careful observance of theological etiquette.<sup>21</sup> The way they describe themselves tells much about their deep concern – to do justice to Judaism by overcoming ancestral prejudices: ‘One of us grew up as a devout Eastern European Jew and passed his childhood in terror of Christian pogroms; the other an Irish bishop’s grandson, born in the same year, grew up as a devout Anglican and soon learned to abhor the Jews ‘who crucified Jesus’. It is less remarkable than may appear that we arrived eventually at a common point of view: both developed a historical conscience and ceased to hold orthodox beliefs long before we came to know each other in England during the recent war. We knew that an enormous effort was needed to wipe out the traditional misrepresentations of Jesus acquired in childhood. Comparing notes, we realised how much each could learn from the other.’

Several important questions are tackled in this book, such as the question of faith and the modern world, the Christian belief in the absolute truth of the Gospel and the miracles counterbalancing our ‘crudely mechanical views of existence’.<sup>22</sup> ‘Life is not considered worth living in the West if completely controlled and behaviouristic; and the Gospel message combines evidence of miracles with an insistence on the individual’s right to be master of his own spiritual fate. It is said: “Look what has happened to personal liberty in Godless Russia! Destroy belief in the authenticity of the Gospels and you destroy belief in a man’s right to think or act for himself.” This is not, of course, so: the most important contributions to modern imaginative literature and scientific discovery have been made by agnostics and atheists.’ Through describing the personality of Hillel, ‘a Jewish lay-teacher of the first century B.C.’,<sup>23</sup> the authors give a definition of religion (in keeping with Graves’s outlook): ‘He regarded the Godhead as a mystery, notoriously beyond definition, which it was most

improper for theologians to discuss in public. While conceding the need for strict ceremoniousness in obedience to the law, he insisted that love for one's neighbour was the sole beginning and end of religion.'

In this book it seems that Graves restored the Jesus he was predisposed to like – an 'honest' individual striving after an ideal denied in everyday life. To a certain extent, if we bear in mind the fact that in the summer 1916 he had himself recovered from 'his death-like coma' and that in 1929, saying 'Goodbye to All That', he went to Majorca, self-exiled, we may say that with this Jesus he could identify. 'We hold also that he officially died on the Cross, but afterwards, when he recovered from his death-like coma, and found that the Kingdom of Heaven had not come, it was gradually borne upon him that his sacrifice had been premature. He therefore tried to expiate his error by self-exile from Palestine, intending to return only when the "Day of the Lord" finally dawned.'<sup>24</sup> And this shows how personal was Graves's concern with the Scriptures.

Another book followed, *Hebrew Myths*, written with the American Hebrew scholar Raphael Patai, and published in 1964. What prevails here is Graves's method of revising the Bible ('putting it right', one of his favourite phrases) to find there remnants of the so-called matriarchal age in which he believed. He had already published a short essay about *Genesis* in 1955, *Adam's Rib*.

I do not mean to go into these works in detail, but to try and capture Graves's overall perception of the Bible so as to measure its impact on his poetics and his poems. The essays he published in various books in the sixties and seventies will be useful for this purpose.

*'But I am not a pessimist...'*

From the very beginning, Graves constantly refers to the Bible. Chapter 7 of *On English Poetry*, his first book of criticism, is called a 'parable', a direct reference to the Gospel, and deals with

the relationship of poet and reader, 'The parable of Mr. Poeta and Mr. Lector'. Nevertheless, as I have suggested above, the subject is not irrelevant to our purposes since it deals with the capacity of words to be shared and create a common human ground. In the same volume, in the chapter called 'Poetry and Primitive Magic', Graves writes: 'Bad poetry is simply the work of a man who solves his emotional problems to his own satisfaction but not to anybody else's.'<sup>25</sup> Another chapter with a clear biblical reference is 'My Name is Legion, for We Are Many' (Matthew 5. 9) on the poet's manifold personalities – another significant element of Graves's myth-making.

Later, in 1965, the title *Mammon and the Black Goddess* provides a synthesis of the poet's outlook. Mammon is the Aramaic noun for material riches, sometimes used as a proper name. In Matthew 6. 24 (in the Beatitudes), we may read this warning: 'Ye cannot serve God and mammon.' Part of this title therefore points to the Scriptures and the second half of it to myth, namely Gravesian myth.

In this collection of lectures, two titles contain direct biblical references, 'Nine Hundred Iron Chariots' and 'The Poet in a Valley of Dry Bones'. The first title belongs to Judges 4. 3: 'he [Jabin, King of Canaan] had nine hundred chariots of iron; and twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel.' From these twenty years of oppression in Canaan, Israel is released by Deborah, the prophetess who judges her people. 'And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey which thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the Lord shall send Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh.' (Judges 4. 9.)

In this lecture, given at MIT in May 1963, Graves explores the gap between scientists and poets ('It is politely assumed that scientists have souls as well as minds'<sup>26</sup>) and pleads for humanity and the inner life: 'The difference is, roughly, that the scientist concentrates on analysis and classification of external fact even if fact be beautifully disguised as mathematical relation; whereas the poet concentrates on discovery of internal truth. To a poet,

analysis and factual classification are a reputable pursuit only so long as they serve a natural human need – which they often do in medicine, geology, or botany; not when they become obsessive and inhuman.<sup>27</sup> He attacks the effect of such a widespread outlook on everyday life, and one thinks of Blake's reply (reported by Alexander Gilchrist) to someone showing him *The Mechanic's Magazine*: 'Ah, sir, these things we artists HATE!'<sup>28</sup>

Graves advocates the leap of the Imagination which Coleridge had already described in *Biographia Literaria* (Chapter VII) and distinguishes between true originality ('a leap taken by the mind across a dark gulf of nothingness into new regions of scientific thought'<sup>29</sup>) and the routine of poetical originality: 'the routiners must pretend to possess it, by embellishing their poems with rhetorical tropes borrowed from abstractionism, psycho-analysis, and undigested foreign literature'. The gap, he then suggests, may be bridged by the 'original scientist' who 'may find some analogy between his experiences and a poet's'. Graves's strong individualism comes across: 'The poet is, on the whole, anti-authoritarian, agoraphobic and intuitive rather than intellectual; but his judgments are coherent.' Defining the genuine poet as a Muse poet, he shifts to another distinction: 'I left out an element from my proposition about scientists and poets standing at opposite extremes of contemporary thought: namely, that mankind is composed of men and women; and that woman's thought now oscillates between two extremes – quasi-male and authentic female.'<sup>30</sup> Should the world be ruled only by the male principle, the poet asserts, it would be as if only one propeller were going round in a plane. This means that with the help of the Muse, he recovers his unity of being – a form of plenitude. And it is not only the case for the poet but also for the individual as such. Graves refers to Goethe, criticising him because, even if he emphasised 'the value of intuition and of contemplating', he described it as 'the bright beam that joined him to God'<sup>31</sup> – a male God.

Then the poet as critic resorts to the 'now discredited Judaeo-Christian Bible' from a paradoxical point of view, which is, I

think, quite characteristic of him: ‘The Bible was edited, during or shortly after the Exile, by a monotheistic and misogynous Guild of prophets; they set themselves to delete all favourable reference to women who controlled men by their intuitive wisdom. Only one such case somehow escaped the censors: that of Deborah.’<sup>32</sup> And he concludes: ‘No release from the present impasse can come, in my view, except from a Barak who has put himself under Deborah’s orders. *Barak* means ‘lightning’, but is associated with *báraka*, or ‘blessedness’ that comes from divine Wisdom.’<sup>33</sup> Love, then, is unity of being, assimilated to ‘creative Nature’, *natura naturans* rather than *natura naturata* (a point made in the seventeenth century by Spinoza, who thought that God was Life’s creative energy): ‘Nor must love be read as grand-scale international philanthropy; but as a personal understanding between Barak, the male mind, and Deborah, the female mind. This alone can lift humanity out of the morass where intellectual arrogance has sunk it and develop the so-called supernatural powers of which both sexes are capable.’ We shall see that this outlook, although advanced with caution and in the light of paradox, is genuinely biblical.

The next lecture, given in Oxford in 1962, refers to Ezekiel 37. The prophet is led to a valley full of dry bones, which the Word of God restores in their flesh and breath. The Word of God, again, is the Word of the living. Graves takes this as a metaphor of craftsmanship, which is ‘self-taught’<sup>34</sup> and does not mean sheer technique, which only implies creating a puppet, ‘articulating the skeletons with wire’<sup>35</sup> (as in Hawthorne’s tale, ‘Feathertop: A Moralized Legend’): ‘When one treats poetry in this sort of way, the notion of technique falls away: all that remains is the poet’s service to the Muse, his unwavering love of whom, for all her unpossessibility, assures his work will be truthful... Every dictionary is a valley of dry bones. The poet is inspired to breathe life into them (as Ezekiel did when he prophesied), and convert them into language.’

This lecture inspires two impressions, apparently contradictory.

The reader feels that the biblical test is reduced to individual use and scope; yet, at the same time, with the Bible in mind, the poet lifts poetry to a higher level, at a stage where the individual's inner life shares in the divine. Graves writes, at the beginning of the last lecture in this collection, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess': 'Poets, like prophets and saints, claim to live by certain unshakeable principles. But just as the sole judge of saintliness or prophetic truth is God – not popular awe or fallible Church councils; so the sole judge of poetry for the professed poet, is the Muse-Goddess – not textbook critics or auditors of publishers' net-sales.'<sup>36</sup>

In 'Technique in Poetry', he refers to a myth quoted in *Hebrew Myths* – God creating Eve and inviting Adam to 'watch while the divine fingers built up a woman's anatomy from primeval sludge. [...] This technical demonstration caused Adam such disgust that, when the first Eve stood up in all her beauty and smiled at him, he turned his back on her.'<sup>37</sup> Then he says: 'I inherit Adam's mistrust of creative technique.' This shows Graves's minute interest in the Bible – a will to trace the text back to its origins – and it also highlights his strong desire to 'inherit', that is, to participate in these origins and to actualise them – the past becoming the future within the unit of the present moment.

From this study of a few of Graves's writings, it is, then, fairly clear that, although critical of the distortions superimposed on the text by the dogma, Graves could not repudiate the Bible. In 'The Uses of Superstition' he writes: 'Yet though determined against the validity of most Church doctrines, I should find it both needless and uncomfortable to abjure many superstitions which are part of my cultural heritage, chief of which is the idolatrous respect paid to a Bible. I could never (except to save life), bring myself to stand on a family Bible, or even lay another book on top of it.'<sup>38</sup>

I shall now endeavour to probe the meaning of such a paradoxical outlook.

*'the honest agnostic'*

In 'The Bible in Europe', an essay he published in *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* in 1973, Graves writes that 'the honest agnostic who feels his mind becoming split into two irreconcilable parts, the religious and the practical, feels obliged to leave the Church for the protection of his sanity'<sup>39</sup>. His aim, through the knowledge of mythical facts, is to strive to reconcile 'religion and the intellect':<sup>40</sup> 'But if certain writers find that ethics and ritual alone are insufficient and that something more is needed for their spiritual well-being, they should try to make scholarly sense of the Gospel and see to what religious conclusions that leads them; and if they find that it cannot be re-stated in a manner acceptable alike to the historian, the anthropologist and the poet, they should be content to let it go down the flume, and turn elsewhere.'

Graves would not 'turn elsewhere', hence his re-writing of the Gospel (*The Nazarene Gospel Restored*) and his quest for 'a historical grammar of poetic myth' (*The White Goddess*). The quest, nevertheless, is constantly placed under some sort of vivid tension, as though the desire to wonder at the mysteries of life were always confronted with the demands of the intellect; as though in order to conquer the right to indulge in the mysteries of life's experience, Graves needed to satisfy his inherited positivism.

On the one hand, as is obvious in his address to the MIT scientists, he stated that if the intellect alone was working, the plane was flying with a single propeller going round, which produced a lack of unity and balance. On the other hand, he admitted that the Muse was not to be possessed as a secure gift, which is exactly what Ecclesiastes suggests: we know nothing of the mysteries of life and death. There is a limit to the capacities of reason and even of wisdom.

Yet, although Graves never talks in philosophical terms, we can state that he never accepts the Kantian denial of any possible metaphysics. On the contrary, he shares Bergson's confidence in the powers of the intuition. Although his view of the Bible seems

to have evolved from distrust to quasi-acceptance, thanks to his coming back to the Hebrew origins of the text and tradition, his praise of intuition in spite of his positivist intellect is a characteristic of his work throughout.

In his 1925 collection of essays entitled *Poetic Unreason*, he talked of ‘The Illogical Element in Poetry’: “‘Illogical’ I am using here in a narrower sense as meaning poetry which does not conform with those principles of logic which govern what I have been calling intellectual as opposed to emotional thought. This logic is a system wholly deduced from the broadest and most impersonal analyses of cause and effect, capable of empiric proof.’<sup>41</sup> The poet calls ‘logical’, more or less, what I defined above as his positivism (the ‘empiric proof’). He opposes ‘emotional thought’ to ‘most impersonal analyses of cause and effect’. The important word here is the adjective ‘impersonal’. What Graves means to withstand is the concept, abstract knowledge and generalisations, what Blake as an artist ‘HATED’, favouring what he called the ‘minute Particulars’. Yet Blake also thought that individual dreams as such did not reach the poetic goal of embracing the deeper significance of life’s experience. Graves, influenced by the new concepts of psychoanalysis and psychology through his acquaintance with W. H. R. Rivers, deemed that individual dreams reflected the metamorphic character of Romantic poetry: ‘in Romantic poetry the conflict is expressed in the illogical but vivid method of dream-changings’.<sup>42</sup> However, he also asserted, in the chapter of *Poetic Unreason* called ‘Poetic Genius’, ‘Poetic or other genius is a term most intelligible hitherto in the context of mankind’s struggle for the divine.’<sup>43</sup> The verb ‘struggle’ tells us much about the conflictual nature of this aspiration.

Graves’s criticism of religion is twofold: firstly, dogma, whether Protestant or Catholic, does not satisfy his intellect: ‘Nevertheless, the Catholic Church has made no doctrinal change of importance since the counter-Reformation; nor has the Protestant Church

since the Reformation, and in neither Church has there been any official attempt to revise even the glaringly unhistorical passages in the Gospels. Intellectuals who turn Catholic and submit to Church discipline have to admit that their confessor knows not only his sacred, but his profane, history better than they do. They must, in fact, surrender their critical rights, and cease to be intellectuals.<sup>44</sup>

Dogma, moreover, impedes any kind of metamorphosis. Transcending time, it also denies its creative, and human, significance. Therefore it cannot be true to life and even less respond to the individual's existential needs. Graves speaks of Christianity as turning into 'a militant State religion' in the fourth century AD, and asserts: 'Totalitarianism is not the antonym of Christianity, as the questionnaire suggests – the Spain of Philip II was both totalitarian and Catholic.'<sup>45</sup>

Therefore, although the intellectual and poetic claims seem to be at variance, we may now begin to grasp their coherence. In both cases, from the intellectual or from the poetic standpoint, Graves defends his rights as an individual, using for himself the two 'propellers', his intellect and his intuition, for an ever-renewed, balanced unity of being. In his definition of religion, he is in the tradition of English poetry, a poetry celebrating the immediate world of reality, a poetry of things and feelings: 'True religion is of natural origin and linked practically with the seasons though it implies occasional states of abnormal ecstasy which can be celebrated only in the language of myth.'<sup>46</sup>

And this celebration of agrarian rites and biblical references is not alien to the great poetic tradition leading from Langland (Piers Plowman, identified with Christ) through Chaucer's idealised ploughman to Blake: 'we sit down within / The plowed furrow, list'ning to the weeping clods'.<sup>47</sup> The divine can be reached through the earthly labour of everyday life. In Chapter 59 of *On English Poetry*, Graves denied that poetry should only be a 'gentle recreation like cutting out "Home Sweet Home" from three-ply wood with a fretsaw, or collecting pressed flowers'.<sup>48</sup>

His case against 'mystical Catholics'<sup>49</sup> was not always clear-cut.

Catholic Mallorca seemed to him closer to his ideal than 'moralistic' Puritanism, as he suggests in his 1961 Foreword to *The White Goddess*: 'I am nobody's servant and have chosen to live on the outskirts of a Majorcan mountain-village, Catholic but anti-ecclesiastical, where life is ruled by the old agricultural cycle.'<sup>50</sup> Moreover, he deemed the Virgin Mary worship to be a remnant of the old matriarchal rule of the Goddess. He strongly attacked the Puritans, and Milton as their representative, in *Wife to Mr. Milton*, opposing the folklore of Merry England, as staged by Shakespeare in such a play as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to the stiff Puritan morality. The poet who had entitled one of the chapters of *On English Poetry* 'The Gadding Vine' (from 'Lycidas', 1637, line 40), speaks on behalf of Mary Powell, stating with irony: 'My husband was never wanton with me either in word or act, nor ever lay with me but with the express intention of procreation, and that very seldom.'<sup>51</sup> Graves's own assessment recalls Blake's criticism of Milton, described as having 'part of his mind sunk in a superstitious awe of God'.<sup>52</sup>

However, the most convincing feature of Graves's criticism of Christian biblical dogma is his view of the linguistic issue. He states it in his own provocative way, but this is in line with *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*: 'The Pharisees, a high-minded and puritanical Jewish sect, whose religious rules Jesus ordered his disciples to follow (Matthew 23. 13–15) while at times condemning certain unworthy members of the sect – who because of St. Paul's later quarrel with them are consistently misrepresented by Gospel editors – agreed that one of Israel's worst calamities was when the seventy-two Jewish scholars of Alexandria translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. This version, now called *The Septuagint* ("The Seventy"), is the basis of our Christian Old Testament. Its publication in the reign of King Ptolemy Philadelphus about the year 288 BC allowed a national religious document – the true meaning of which, it was held, only trained Doctors of the Law could expound – to be studied by ignorant foreigners who might, and did, quote its verses in ridicule of the Jewish Faith.'<sup>53</sup>

Paul being Greek, Graves says, and knowing neither the Hebrew

nor the Aramaic that Jesus spoke, misinterpreted both messages. This point is not wholly misconstrued. What Paul advocates in Galatians 3. 11 – ‘But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, *it is* evident: for, the just will live by faith’ – is based upon an incomplete interpretation of the word ‘Torah’, which covers a wider range of meanings than simply the strict notion of ‘law’, as is usual in Hebrew. ‘Torah’ in its first meaning is derived from the verb meaning ‘to throw’. Then it means ‘gold’ and ‘light’, and thirdly ‘teaching’, ‘transmission’ and ‘doctrine’.<sup>54</sup> Therefore the ‘Torah’ should not be considered outside time but in a movement, as teaching ‘thrown’ through time. It is then antithetical to the eternal fixity of dogma. The Greek word used by Paul is *nomos*; the word stresses the notion of inherited custom, of tradition. Then it comes to mean a ‘rule of conduct’ and then a ‘law’. The word used for ‘faith’ is *pistis*, which means ‘trust in others’, then ‘trust or credit’ from a commercial point of view, faithfulness, and then ‘faith, belief’.

Graves also makes his point about the Vulgate, Jerome’s Latin translation from the Hebrew (*circa* 391–405 AD), which was in its turn ‘furtively translated into German, Dutch, English, and other vernacular languages. A great mass of uneducated people were thus freed to interpret the Scriptures as they pleased, and form dangerous new heretical sects. The Pharisees had been right in deploring the Septuagint. Without it, Christians would have persecuted no Jews; but, also, without vernacular Bibles there would have been no Lutheranism and no protracted religious wars fought between Catholics and Protestants.’<sup>55</sup>

Certainly, as a cause of war, the linguistic question is not as relevant as the political issue of who is wielding temporal power and who wants freedom from it – or to take over. Nevertheless, Graves stresses two significant points related to the poetic significance of the Bible: ‘Faithfulness to their own Scriptures keeps the main body of religious Jews far more closely united than the Christians have ever been. [...] The Christian Bible, in contrast, suffers from a lack of linguistic cohesion.’<sup>56</sup> In opposition, we may highlight the danger of poetic solipsism in a world which no longer

acknowledges, or is even ignorant of, a common body of myth. Edwin Muir was also aware of this issue in modern times when he remarked: ‘The old story was quite simple. It followed some figure – Odysseus, or Ruth, or King David – through time; and it remains the most pure image that we have of temporal life, tracing the journey which we shall take.’<sup>57</sup> Moreover, this disenchanted world is, as Wordsworth notices in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, a prey to boredom, due to ‘the encreasing accumulation of men in cities, where the uniformity of their occupations produces a craving for extraordinary incident’.<sup>58</sup> The Romantic poet, with great insight, speaks then of ‘this degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’.

Graves’s second point is that the Hebrew Scripture is poetry as such: ‘Finally, the Bible lay under the great disadvantage, compared with the Jewish Scriptures and the Koran, of not being a national historic document. Its geographical names and the names of its leading characters conveyed little to non-Jewish converts, and being a translation of a translation of a translation, rather than an original text, it lacked the insistent poetic rhythms which made a great part of the Hebrew Scriptures, and all the Koran, easily memorizable.’<sup>59</sup> And it is true that, traditionally, the biblical text cannot be read only through the eyes. The reader must move his lips when reading it, which means that each reading of the biblical verses is an actualisation of the text in the present moment.<sup>60</sup> The Bible speaks for life (‘A living dog is better than a dead lion’, Ecclesiastes 9. 4) and, as Blake wrote in *Milton*, ‘Time is the mercy of Eternity.’<sup>61</sup> For both poets, the poet is a prophet. What does this mean?

### *Poet and Prophet*

‘The poet is not a schizophrenic – with his mind torn in two parts – but a *deuteropotmos*: a “second-fated” one who has, as it were, already died and conversed with the oracular dead, thus being gifted with the spirit of prophecy.’<sup>62</sup> Graves uses a Greek word and implicitly refers to the world of Hades to introduce this notion of prophecy – the world of myth rather than biblical lore – but we shall see that there is no contradiction here. First of all, the word

*deuteropotmos* is worth analysing: *deuteros* means ‘second’, or ‘what comes next’, ‘what comes after’; *potmos* is ‘what is decided by fate’, hence ‘death’. What is interesting here is the notion of repetition, ‘once more once’, as a jazz singer might say, and on another plane of life, since *Hades*, etymologically, is the world of the invisible. We move beyond the phenomenal world into another sphere of apprehension and knowledge.

Later, in the same 1965 lecture in Oxford, Graves recounts a moment of illumination in his childhood, at the age of twelve. ‘I was sitting on an iron roller behind the school cricket pavilion, with nothing much in my head, when I received a sudden celestial illumination: it occurred to me that *I knew everything*.’<sup>63</sup> He clearly states that he discovered, at that very instant, the power of intuition, the necessary ‘propeller’ which should go round beside the intellect: ‘This is still with me, for I now realize that what overcame me that evening was a sudden awareness of the power of intuition, the supra-logic that cuts out all routine processes of thought and leaps straight from problem to answer. I did not in fact know everything, but became aware that in moments of real emergency the mind can weigh an infinite mass of imponderables and make immediate sense of them. This is how poems get written.’<sup>64</sup>

One thinks here of the German Romantics, of Coleridge, and, again, of Blake:

The Spectre is the reasoning Power in Man, & when  
separated  
 From Imagination and closing itself as in steel in a Ratio  
 Of the things of Memory, It then frames Laws and Moralities  
 To destroy Imagination, the Divine Body, by Martyrdoms &  
Wars.<sup>65</sup>

Like Blake and the Romantics, Graves claims consideration for what has been left aside in the age of reason, rejecting poetry into the narrow field of aesthetics, detached from existential, and temporal, to use Muir’s word, realities.

[...] but the Sublime is shut out from the Pathos  
 In howling torment, to build stone walls of separation,  
compelling  
 The Pathos to weave curtains of hiding secrecy from the  
torment.<sup>66</sup>

This split of imagination and reason, of the pathos and the sublime, means true disenchantment, a state of boredom demanding more and more ‘extraordinary incident’, to use Wordsworth’s phrase. Living with only one propeller going round is to condemn the writer and poet to a ‘degrading thirst after outrageous stimulation’, to please his readers.

Graves describes the immediate power of intuition in the following way: ‘I nevertheless held the key of truth in my hand, and could use it to open any lock of any door. Mine was no religious or philosophical theory, but a simple method of looking sideways at disorderly facts so as to make perfect sense of them.’<sup>67</sup> He then calls this an ‘embarrassing gift’. Indeed, since, as in Hades, there is no visible, or palpable, reality to give evidence of the knowledge thus provided. The eye sees shades only, the hands reach but ‘thin air’, as Shakespeare said, but this knowledge within discloses itself through rhythm; it is the soul in act and in the making (this is not very far from Keats).

In *L'évolution créatrice* (1907),<sup>68</sup> Bergson, a strong critic of Kant, showed that knowledge implied two faculties, the intellect and intuition, the former giving a knowledge of matter and intuition providing direct access to life from within. Intuition is immediate participation in life and communication with the rest of the living through a dilation of individual consciousness. Metaphysics is founded on such a theory of knowledge, which is based upon the working together of what Graves called the two ‘propellers’. How can this be related to the Bible?

The biblical narratives give a mythical account of life in the historical process of becoming. Life cannot be thought of outside duration, Bergson writes,<sup>69</sup> and this is what Virginia Woolf effectively showed in *Mrs Dalloway*, that we cannot conceive real

time, but we have a living experience of it because life overflows our intelligence. Graves talks of ‘looking sideways at disorderly facts’. In *The White Goddess* (Chapter 19), he uses the word ‘slantwise’, thus defined: ‘Poets will know what I mean by slantwise: it is a way of looking through a difficult word or phrase to discover the meaning lurking behind the letters.’<sup>70</sup> The knowledge thus acquired, slantwise, is intuitive and cannot exist outside the flow of time; however, ‘To think in temporal terms is a very complicated and unnatural way of thinking.’<sup>71</sup> It is most unnatural to the intellect since it means thinking in movement, the present moment being situated, so to speak, at the crossroads of the past and the future, what Graves called ‘analeptic’ and ‘proleptic’ thought. Intuition, he says, is ‘memory of the future’ and the poem is such synthesis within the present moment of ecstasy, ‘a suspension of temporal criteria’. The poet asserts, like the philosopher, that such intuition of time evades the concept: ‘But an interesting feature of prolepsis and analepsis is that the coincidence of the concept and the reality is never quite exact: gamma coincides with Zeta, but not so closely that either loses its identity.’<sup>72</sup> The intellect can conceive fixity only. It therefore deals with concepts, and dogma, for people counting only on this propeller, is a strong temptation – revealing some sort of laziness.

The Bible derives its meaning from a particular quality of Hebrew grammar related to the tense of verbs. The past and the future co-exist in the letter *vav*, called ‘conversive’ since it can convert the past into the future and vice versa. This is the language of prophecy, this conversation with the ‘oracular dead’, the figures of the past speaking the word of the future, and it is true that when Ulysses or Aeneas descended into Hades, they wanted to know about their future lot.

This means that what is called messianic time, as Gershom Scholem put it, is the time of the conversive *vav*, that is neither the past, or what has been accomplished, or the future, or what remains to achieve, but their inversion.<sup>73</sup> The biblical language is the language of the mind at grips with otherness, or transcendence, what is out of intellectual grasp or beyond the human will (of which

Ecclesiastes says that we cannot find it even through wisdom), the language of experience spiritually embraced.

A door opens into another temporal dimension, as in Graves's 'Red Ribbon Dream'. The spirit wrestles with Death-in-Life within duration, in the everlasting process of becoming. This feature is also a characteristic of the Greek god Hermes, or the Latin Mercury, whom Graves describes, in Chapter 13 of *The White Goddess*, as the god of poetry. To deceive Apollo, whose herd he had stolen, Hermes inverted the animals' footprints and his, in order to confound his pursuers. The god that Stevie Smith called her 'ambassador' is a guide of the souls into the Underworld and the speaker of a language without any visual counterpart or representation, the *askopon epos*<sup>74</sup> of Aeschylus's *Libation-Bearers*.

The language of prophecy therefore is that of hope against fate, of life in its mysterious temporal reality. It is the language of creation, of utopia certainly, this place of no-place, of no tangible reality to respond to the sheer thought of it, the sole projection of the mind on what might be. The words then are living entities because there is no other testimony of this science of the invisible.

We also find a biblical element in the syncretic title of Graves's utopia, *Seven Days in New Crete* (1949). New Crete refers to Graves's myth but seven days is the biblical time of Creation. Graves's utopia is rooted in the world of the origin, in the inverted time of the human spirit. In this novel, Graves voices the ironical hope that wars could be converted into sporting events. He satirises our civilisation and its positivism, considering our mythic past in his own light: 'I did not bother to put him right. The post-Exilic Jews had shown an equal disregard for historical fact, in ascribing all ancient religious poetry to King David and all ancient amatory verse to King Solomon, and in rewriting their national annals for the purpose of moral edification.'<sup>75</sup> (A Blakean outlook again.)

In Chapter 19 of *The White Goddess*, Graves quotes his own poem 'On Portents', published in *To Whom Else?* in 1931, during his Laura Riding period. It is worth paying attention to these lines:

If strange things happen where she is,  
 So that men say that graves open  
 And the dead walk, or that futurity  
 Becomes a womb and the unborn are shed,  
 Such portents are not to be wondered at,  
 Being tourbillions in Time made  
 By the strong pulling of her bladed mind  
 Through that ever-reluctant element.<sup>76</sup>

The French poet Claude Vigée speaks, with reference to poetry, of ‘spiritual violence’<sup>77</sup>. This is a phrase I would like to use here to refer to ‘the strong pulling of her bladed mind’, and I would say that the Goddess is not only for Graves the female conversion of the transcendent principle (Jehovah) but also the actual presence of the human desire to grasp and undergo life’s experience at the same time. The ‘ever-reluctant element’ is Time itself, real otherness. Through this spiritual wrestling, the individual mind dilates so as to communicate with the rest of the living and reach the proper realm of life.

When he referred to Hitler in Chapter 26 of *The White Goddess*, Graves also quoted Frazer: ‘Sir James Frazer attributed the defects of European civilisation to “the selfish and immoral doctrine of Oriental religions which inculcated the communion of the soul with God, and its eternal salvation, as the only objects worth living for”’. This, he argued, undermined the unselfish ideal of Greek and Roman society which subordinated the individual to the welfare of the State.’<sup>78</sup> Again we stumble against the issue of temporal power and the position of the individual. Kierkegaard showed that the Bible encouraged the individual to go beyond the ethical stage without denying it, but nevertheless asserting his own choice before God.

Thus the question of what Max Weber, inspired by Schiller, called ‘disenchantment’, is transcended through the acknowledgement of intuition, but it is also an ethical issue. The individual is no longer ‘disenchanted’, and subject to boredom, when he creates himself in duration, in the present moment of the ethical and personal choice,

when facing the truth of life (what Kierkegaard called God, what Graves calls the Goddess) and one might again quote Bergson, who talks of continual self-creation. Graves insists on this aspect: ‘Then why not say ethics [...]? Because ethics are held to derive from revealed religion, notably the Ten Commandments [...]’.<sup>79</sup>

In *The White Goddess*, Graves strove to deduce the character of the Goddess from the letters of the Tetragrammaton, which he manipulated analogically with mythical facts in Chapter 16, ‘The Holy Unspeakable Name of God’. YHVH, the Tetragrammaton, on which he wrote a poem,<sup>80</sup> is the God of the inner soul, the God within. It is submitted to conjecture in the Bible. When Moses, in the episode of the Burning Bush (Exodus 3. 13–14), asks the angel of God for his Name, the translation again raises a problem: ‘I am what I am’ is not correct, and we should ‘put it right’. As Claude Vigée, as well as Henri Meschonnic, has pointed out, the Hebrew *ehye asher ehye*, which is the angel’s reply, means: ‘I shall become what I shall become’,<sup>81</sup> which implies the notion of self-creation in time rather than the idea of immovable eternity suggested by the present tense. Now Claude Vigée adds that the Cabalists, in the *Zohar*, the Book of Splendour, through calculating the numeral value of the Hebrew letters involved (Graves proceeds in a similar way in *The White Goddess*), came to the conclusion that the Name of God was ‘Maybe’ or ‘Perhaps’: ‘Un ‘peut-être’ qui fonde aussi bien toute l’expérience poétique!’ (A ‘Maybe’ which also founds the whole of poetical experience!)

This understanding opens a door into time, a door leading to the human re-appropriation of duration, time becoming the inner duration of self-creation, the inner experience of personal achievement. Graves draws this door in the shape of a dolmen, showing its sacred value, in *The White Goddess* (Chapter 12), and says in Chapter 16: ‘Have we not already stumbled on the secret? Was the Name not spelt out by the seven vowels of the threshold, cut with three times nine holy nicks and read sunwise?’<sup>82</sup> The access to messianic time is provided by the rhythm of poetic language.

This account of human experience is not idealistic (Graves

dismisses the one-sided character of classical Apollo and connects it with the chaotic figure of Dionysus, as Nietzsche had done) but highly realistic. The continuous becoming of the human soul means unceasing wrestling with the unknown, the Transcendent, the 'ever-reluctant element'. The central biblical figure for this existential struggle is Jacob wrestling with the angel. It is a major episode in the Bible; Jacob is a central figure in Graves's myth.

### *Jacob and his Rival*

In Chapter 18 of *The White Goddess*, 'The Bull-Footed God', Graves associates Jacob, 'the heel-god', with Samson, Dionysus, Llew Llaw and Hercules, among others, and connects these figures with time, or more precisely with the dialectics of life and death apprehended within the rhythm of the sacred year. His purpose is not to dismiss biblical lore but to highlight its existential (or mythical) relevance once all dogmatic belief has been ruled out: 'Poets who are concerned with the single poetic Theme, cannot afford to draw disingenuous distinction between "sacred history" and "profane myth" and make the usual dissociation between them, unless prepared to reject the Scriptures as wholly irrelevant to poetry. This would be a pity, and in these days of religious toleration I cannot see why they need accept so glaringly unhistorical a view of the authorship, provenience, dating and original texts of the Old Testament, that its close connection with the Theme is severed. In the following chapter I will knit up a few more broken strands.'<sup>83</sup>

In doing so, he makes of Jacob and all the connected figures living symbols of existential wrestling, the work of 'Contraries' as Blake would say, but not of 'Negations'; or how the poetic Word becomes flesh, the living entity restored in the valley of dry bones. Contraries work together and create a human being who, even injured, *is*, while negations leave the individual aside on behalf of abstraction, of the concept. This is certainly why (and here we may think of Tolstoy) Graves asserted that 'a crusade against Communism can be launched only in the name of religion'<sup>84</sup>.

With this article in view, I asked Claude Vigée if he would translate the passage of the Hebrew text (Genesis 32) and explain to me the choice of words and their complex meanings. He was kind enough to do so and I am very grateful to him. This passage is of major importance to him, as the foundation of his poetics. In *La lune d'hiver*, he writes: 'Jacob, homme-temps, se fait origine du messie innombrable que réalisera, à travers l'histoire, sa descendance. Le poète célèbre, par tout acte de création, la répétition de ce mystère, dont il propose dans l'œuvre un simulacre. Tout poème, en se réalisant hors de l'absence, du chaos, de la solitude, mime le combat de Jacob avec l'ange.'<sup>85</sup>

Graves says that 'Jacob wrestles all night with an angel at Peniel and is lamed by him so that the sinew in the hollow of his thigh is shrunken.'<sup>86</sup> In Genesis 32. 25, the word used to refer to the wrestling implies that the wrestlers are clasping each other. In the verb *aveq*, we find the same root as in *avaq*, for 'dust'. As Claude Vigée said, 'nothing glorious in this', which reminds the reader of Graves of the uncouth dance around the crucified Naked King.

The word used to describe the adversary is *ich*, which means man in the sexual meaning, and an effect of ambiguity as to who is who is created throughout with the use of the pronoun 'he', which can mean both Jacob and the other. Therefore Jacob, wrestling thus with his *alter ego*, is given a name, Israel, a compound of two elements: 'wrestling' (*isra*) and 'God' (*el*). *Isra* means withstanding and mastering. And this occurs *with* God, *against* God and *face-to-face* with Him, at the same time. Jacob resisted when confronted with Elohim, the God of the Creation and the Law, of cosmic exteriority, of time and space and of the political and social order. The original text stresses the fact of Jacob's *capacity* against his opponent (32. 29), who will not disclose His own Name but blesses him instead. The other, with no Name, is Jacob's (now Israel's) blessing, such blessing being obtained through a personal act, a direct connection with God. This interaction of contraries suggests a dialectical view of Time as an everlasting process of Life and Death, a process of self-creation, or becoming: *ehye ascher ehye*.

Moreover, the whole passage is written in the past/future of the

convertive *vav*. It comprehends the whole temporal pattern of past and future as realised in the present moment, but in the end (32. 32), when Jacob is said to ‘limp’, the present is used. The verb used for ‘limping’, *tzolea*, is connected with the noun meaning ‘salvation’ (*hadzala*). There is salvation in the ordeal itself, that is in life’s wrestling with the ‘ever-reluctant element’. Jacob is really the symbol of human achievement in time. The injury itself has been interpreted as castration by the Talmud.

The translation Graves gives of the passage in *Hebrew Myths* is close to the original text. The poet favours a historical interpretation: Jacob thus became ‘chief’. Yet Graves does not expatiate on the existential, or poetic, significance of the episode.

It is interesting nevertheless to add a few remarks on Jacob’s questioning of God. The verb *lichol*, for ‘to ask’, implies a link with what is missing, with the void, and the *Sheol* (derived from this root), or the Hebrew equivalent of Hades, is the world of questioning. Jacob’s wrestling with time is a questioning of the unknown. In the question is the blessing, but also the meaning itself. Kierkegaard was right to distinguish between tragedy, submitted to Fate, and the Bible, the subject’s questioning of life and participation in its essence. The notion of disenchantment is then irrelevant since the individual finds the meaning of his life in his own self-creation and personal achievement, in his inner self, and not in any outer belief. As Graves noted, it is a case of *natura naturans*, life creating life.

Intuition connects the individual with others, not only his contemporaries, but also the dead and the unborn (see ‘On Portents’). Graves, like Blake and Traherne, perfectly understood the biblical message in this respect. The process of being is a shared process of self-creation but it also means an injury and a limp, which denies the possibility of intellectual, or conceptual, arrogance. This is why Graves asserts that he can think only ‘in broken images’<sup>87</sup> – his way of fighting against the positivist temptation: ‘When the fact fails me, I approve my senses.’ It is also a way of tackling life’s mystery in the soul: ‘I in a new understanding of my confusion.’ The poem is built upon the

opposition of 'He', a third person, 'ever-reluctant' in his idolatry of 'clear images', and 'I' – an instance of wrestling against the angel of the intellect.

In the same way, the poet compares himself to the butterfly who 'Will never now, it is too late, / Master the art of flying straight', but has 'A just sense of how not to fly'. Relying on his intuition and lurching 'by guess / And God and hope and hopelessness', he finally turns what could have been a fault from the conceptual point of view into a 'gift'.<sup>88</sup> This is the blessing Jacob received with the injury and the denial of an answer to his question about the name. The 'flying-crooked gift' is the coming to terms with the possibility of experiencing life without being permitted access to the knowledge of it. This is the hero-poet's plight.

*'my headstrong and heroic way'*

As Graves said at the beginning of Chapter 18 of *The White Goddess*, it would be a pity to 'reject the Scriptures as wholly irrelevant to poetry'. In his introduction to *Seven Days in New Crete*, Martin Seymour-Smith remarked: 'Then the lack of religion, poetry and feeling will lead to a collective insanity.'<sup>89</sup> And we could add that the deliberate ignorance of all ancestral lore, whether mythical or biblical, might well mean the disappearance of poetry, which loses its *raison d'être* if it remains enclosed within the limits of an aesthetic play with words and narrow expression of personal frustrations and desires (which Blake stressed when he made the distinction between visions and dreams).

In the poem, the poet supplies his reader with a metamorphic figure of being. He creates himself, and his reader, in time. This is indeed the very function of language: to set the *I* in an *I and you* relationship, unceasingly wrestling with the third person of absence. A convincing example of this is given in the Psalms, in which God is alternately directly addressed as 'thou' or referred to in the third person of transcendence. The Lord is the one who hears (116. 1) and also improves Man's hearing through His Word (40. 6). André Chouraqui translates this as: 'Tu m'as creusé l'oreille'<sup>90</sup> ('you have

hollowed my ear'). God is both reciprocity and absence, the soul's existential nakedness, which is what Graves retrieved in creating his Goddess:

But I am gifted, even in November  
Rawest of seasons, with so huge a sense  
Of her nakedly worn magnificence[.]<sup>91</sup>

The Muse is the object of an everlasting quest, an everlasting intuition of the unknown: 'It was a virtue not to stay'. Like the biblical God, she is either a second person or a third person, a refuge or a figure of awe, the womb and the tomb, a figure of rigour and mercy.

Graves had already caught a glimpse of such ambivalence, perfectly biblical, in 'In the Wilderness', a poem in which Christ is accompanied by the scapegoat (Leviticus, 16. 20–22): 'Comrade, with ragged coat, / Gaunt ribs – poor innocent'.<sup>92</sup> *Goliath and David* is the title of his second poetry collection. The eponymous poem suggests the reversal of values experienced during the war since David dies and 'Goliath straddles over him'.<sup>93</sup> The 'God Called Poetry' is a Janus-like character: 'I am YES and I am NO'.<sup>94</sup> In 'The Red Ribbon Dream', Graves borrows from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*: Time is 'Girdled around with the Slough of Despond',<sup>95</sup> which only language can overcome, with the reciprocity it establishes:

But a voice said 'Easily', and a voice said 'Come!  
Easily I followed with no thought of doubt,  
Turned to the right hand, and the way stretched out;  
The ground held firmly; I was no more dumb.

The voice is the voice of intuition since it arouses 'no thought of doubt'. Language opens a door into an unheard-of reality, 'For that was the place where I longed to be'.

Graves later wrote about 'The Universal Paradise' which can be reached by the poet in a state of trance. In this essay,<sup>96</sup> he quotes Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation*, a passage in which the poet of

unmitigated joy describes his wonder at seeing the world when a child: 'But all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared: which talked with my expectation and moved my desire.' Traherne adds: 'The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven.' The world is transfigured through the child's wonder. The world is new in the pristine innocence of the first glance at it. Thus the poet's capacity to wonder changes the ordinary world into the newly created world of Paradise. Graves claims that in our disenchanting world, the poet can reach the state of illumination through the poetic trance: 'intellect and habit starve out imagination'. 'Civilised man' with his classifying mind can no longer have access to the wonder of the universe: 'To gaze at a wild rose or buttercup for even a minute and find illumination in the sight, would never occur to him', and 'His spirit, also, has lost touch with the ideas of mystery, grace and love that originally informed it'.<sup>97</sup> Quoting Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality', Graves suggests that retrieving the lost unity of childhood through intuition, the poet can open a door into the wall of Time ('The Red Ribbon Dream') and find entrance into the 'small white-washed cell (furnished with only a table, a chair, pen, ink and paper) to which a poet may retire and write poems honouring her – my own peculiar Paradise'.<sup>98</sup> Paradise can be regained, albeit intermittently.

The poetic trance is 'active',<sup>99</sup> since it opens the 'gates' (the same word as used in the Psalms) to a new temporal dimension, the time of achievement, not the end of time but the time of the end, the time of the soul in the making. *Ehye ascher ehye*.

Graves seems to be very close to Ecclesiastes in the poem he first published in *Mock Beggar Hall* (1924) and called 'Knowledge of God': 'Weep, sleep, be merry [...] But cast no net for God.'<sup>100</sup> If we consider the poem 'The Door',<sup>101</sup> we can venture that the Goddess is the mystery of existence made visible; she is, as Christ is from the Christian viewpoint, the intercessor, the embodiment of God. She is the poetic trance itself, the figure of a visitation,

enlarging the universe:

When she came suddenly in  
 It seemed the door could never close again,  
 Nor even did she close it – she, she –  
 The room lay open to a visiting sea  
 Which no door could restrain.

She is the figure who releases the poet from ‘The Castle’,<sup>102</sup> in which the solipsist soul is shut up.

One of Graves’s poems (in *More Poems*, 1961) is called ‘The Visitation’<sup>103</sup> (from the episode of Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, Luke, 1. 39–41). The Muse is the intercessor:

Drowsing in my chair of disbelief  
 I watch the door as it slowly opens –  
 A trick of the night wind?

Your slender body seems a shaft of moonlight  
 Against the door as it gently closes.  
 Do you cast no shadow?

She alone is able to overcome the poet’s ‘disbelief’. He writes, in ‘Intimations of the Black Goddess’: ‘Hebrew prophets gave God sole credit for any miracles done through them; a poet gives the Muse sole credit for his poems. But God, for the prophets, was a national deity; the Muse, though originally a tribal goddess, must now be a personal one.’<sup>104</sup> She guarantees the poet’s access to the divine in times of ‘disbelief’. The figure of the Goddess is Graves’s personal tabernacle, his way of remaining religious although an ‘honest agnostic’. I remember that Beryl Graves, in Deyá, told me that *The White Goddess* had been for her husband a religious quest.

The figure of the Black Goddess stems from Graves’s reading of the *Orphic Fragments*: ‘Throughout the Orient, Night was regarded as a positive power, not as a mere absence of daylight; and black as a prime colour, not as absence of colour, was prized for capturing the Sun’s virtue more than any other.’<sup>105</sup> The poet also derived it

from the ‘Provençal and Sicilian “Black Virgins” who are ‘Sufic in origin’. The Black Goddess is Wisdom. Like the moon, she captures the ‘Sun’s virtue’. Graves describes her as sister to Ishtar, a figure of the White Goddess. The moon is cyclic time, death and resurrection, connected with the serpent but it is also, simply, the star which reflects the Sun’s light in the night. ‘And when the Shunemite bride, whom Solomon in his wisdom adores, says in the *Canticles*: “I am black, but comely,” her meaning is: “Though comely, I am as wise as any crone.” She adds, half-humorously: “The Sun has looked upon me.” And the Orphics, seekers after wisdom like Hebrews and Sufis, chose the Sun as their metaphor of illumination.’<sup>106</sup>

Graves’s mythic quest is a reconciliation of opposites, not only life and death, the most obvious, but also the intellect and intuition – the two ‘propellers’. Graves describes the Black Goddess – his figure of reconciliation – as the Goddess of love and good with an experience of contraries. She is the poet’s final reward and inner peace, ‘his more-than Muse’,<sup>107</sup> as he describes her, parodying John Donne’s ‘more than moon’.

This existential wrestling gives the poet the certainty that his words are flesh. He thus describes the poetic trance as ‘a world where words come to life and combine under the poet’s supra-conscious guidance, into inevitable and true rhythmic statements’.<sup>108</sup> The poet’s personal rhythm combines with the impersonal rules of prosody, but the poet’s personal rhythm is his genuine incarnation in words. This existential significance of rhythm is truly biblical, not only through Ezekiel’s account of the valley of dry bones but also as the essential meaning of rhythm in the Bible, ‘the prophecy of what is given to be heard’, the rhythm being understood as ‘the arrangement of the movement of speech’. This is a poetics of human life. ‘Pas le pan-pan des métriciens’, as Henri Meschonnic mischievously makes clear.<sup>109</sup>

With the Black Goddess, Robert Graves reached the Land of Promise – ‘your delectable broad land of promise’<sup>110</sup> – through the ‘Dance of Words’, allying personal rhythm with ‘traditional steps

and postures'.<sup>111</sup> Rhythm opens the world of possibility, converting the past into the future, and therefore opening a door into the genuine time of the human spirit at work. With the 'Dance of Words' we remember the Psalms, and David preparing a place for the Ark of the Covenant in Jerusalem (I Chronicles. 15), dancing and singing with joy while the Levites were carrying the Ark and setting it in the tent David had prepared. The Chronicler remarks that Michal, Saul's daughter, 'looking out at a window saw King David dancing and playing: and she despised him in her heart' (15. 29) In II *Samuel* 6. 14, 20, the case is even worse since David is reported to be 'girded with a linen e-phod', that is, almost naked!

The poet's 'Dance of Words' is a paradoxical conversion to joy, as is clear in 'The Word':<sup>112</sup>

'God' is a standing question  
That still negates an answer.  
The Word is not a question  
But simple affirmation,  
The antonym of 'God'.

Who would believe this Word  
Could have so long been hidden  
Behind a candid smile,  
A sweet but hasty kiss  
And always dancing feet?

Graves's mythopoetics, which he claimed rested on facts, therefore meeting the demands of the intellect, re-opened for him the way to faith ('my lifelong faith in the poetic trance'<sup>113</sup>), that is, to free intuition and wonder, an immediate, pristine, apprehension of life within. This is how the poet managed to reconcile religion and the intellect: 'You may not believe it, for hardly could I'.<sup>114</sup> The pumpkin, a decisive metamorphic element in fairy tales, provides verbal assurance that time can be regenerated and that the mind can recover its unity in spite of the intellect's classifying habits: "'You may hack me in slices, but I'll grow again.'" The poem can

certainly be read as a parable.

Poetic intuition restores the unity of being. It also redeems the present moment from chaos: ‘a miracle to believe; / And so was Adam born, and Eve’.<sup>115</sup> Graves actually aimed at making poetry possible in ‘times of penury’<sup>116</sup> as Hölderlin had already stated at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and he managed to reconcile wonder and reason. Wondering means coming to terms with the impossibility of finding, which Ecclesiastes described as the human plight, and contemplating life nevertheless. Graves’s outlook is typical of twentieth-century mistrust of any kind of superimposed dogma which might impede individual creation. Yet he left the door open for the right appreciation of the existential and ontological inheritance. He helped to keep it in memory, which is, I think, essential for poetry. All these mythic and biblical figures are a source of creative energy. They are part of the common ground of spiritual lore, and prove metamorphic enough, when stripped of the straitjacket of dogma, to found a community of thinking, and feeling, individuals – moreover believing in the power of language, of the ‘Word’. The task is ethical – it concerns us as individuals in the process of becoming and of making choices – and not only aesthetic, viewing the poem as object, from the outside.

*Université de Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle*

*This article is dedicated to Claude Vigée.*

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Biblical quotations in English, unless stated otherwise, are from the Authorised Version.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 448.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Graves, ‘Answer to a Religious Questionnaire’ (1950), in *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, ed. by Patrick Quinn (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000), p. 285.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Graves and Joshua Podro, *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (London: Cassell, 1953), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> See Giorgio Colli, *Ecrits sur Nietzsche*, trans. by Patricia Farazzi (Paris: Editions de l'Éclat, 1996; 1st edn, in Italian, 1980). See also Anne Mounic, 'Friedrich Nietzsche, ou l'épopée de la connaissance', *Temporel*, 3 (March 2007) <<http://temporel.fr/Friedrich-Nietzsche-ou-l-epopee-de>>

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 76.

<sup>9</sup> See 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 285.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Graves, 'Nine Hundred Chariots', Arthur Dehon Little Memorial Lecture, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, 14 May 1963, *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> *The White Goddess*, pp. 474, 475): 'Adolf Hitler said later, more succinctly: "The Jews are to blame for all our troubles." Both statements [the other is Sir James Frazer's: see below], however, were historically untrue. [...] Yet neither Frazer nor Hitler were far from the truth'.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (London: Cassell, 1946), p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Seymour Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1982; repr. London: Paladin, 1987), pp. 428–29.

<sup>14</sup> Carcanet is to publish a new edition, edited by John W. Presley, in December 2010. [Ed.]

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, 'Don't Fidget, Young Man!', in *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, p. 91.

<sup>16</sup> *The Nazarene Gospel Restored*, p. XIV.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIII.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XXII.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. XIX.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 833.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Graves, *On English Poetry* (London: Heinemann, 1922), p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> 'Nine Hundred Chariots', p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

- <sup>28</sup> Alexander Gilchrist, *Life of William Blake*, ed. by Ruthven Todd (London: Macmillan, 1863; repr. London: Everyman, 1982), p. 325.
- <sup>29</sup> 'Nine Hundred Chariots', p. 42.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- <sup>34</sup> Robert Graves, 'The Poet in a Valley of Dry Bones', *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 87.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.
- <sup>36</sup> Robert Graves, 'Intimations of the Black Goddess', *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 143.
- <sup>37</sup> Robert Graves, 'Technique in Poetry', *Mammon and the Black Goddess*, p. 69. In *Hebrew Myths*, Chapter 10, the following sources are enumerated in note 9: Genesis Rabba (fifth century, Palestine) 158, 163–64; Midrash Abkir (ninth century), lost Midrash quoted in the *Yalqut Shimoni*, 133, 135; Abot Dir (Abbi) Nathan (Vienna, 1887; repr. New York, 1945), p. 24; Sanhedrin (Talmud), 39a.
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Graves, 'The Uses of Superstition', *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, p. 336.
- <sup>39</sup> Robert Graves, 'The Bible in Europe', *Some Speculations on Literature, History and Religion*, p. 367.
- <sup>40</sup> 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 285.
- <sup>41</sup> Robert Graves, *Poetic Unreason* (London: Palmer, 1925), p. 117.
- <sup>42</sup> *On English Poetry*, p. 74.
- <sup>43</sup> *Poetic Unreason*, p. 242.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 285.
- <sup>45</sup> 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 283.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 285.
- <sup>47</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 55, 42–46, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 687.
- <sup>48</sup> *On English Poetry*, p. 134.
- <sup>49</sup> 'Answer to a Religious Questionnaire', p. 284.
- <sup>50</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 14.
- <sup>51</sup> Robert Graves, *Wife to Mr. Milton* (London: Cassell, 1942; repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 325.
- <sup>52</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton University Press, 1947; repr. 1969), p. 346. This statement

refers to Blake, *Milton*, Book the Second, Plate 37, 15–18, *Complete Writings*, p. 528.

<sup>53</sup> ‘The Bible in Europe’, p. 366.

<sup>54</sup> I am very grateful to Claude Vigée for all this precious information.

<sup>55</sup> ‘The Bible in Europe’, p. 366.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 363.

<sup>57</sup> Edwin Muir, *The Estate of Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 29.

<sup>58</sup> William Wordsworth, Preface, *Lyrical Ballads* (1800), ed. by R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 249.

<sup>59</sup> ‘The Bible in Europe’, p. 364.

<sup>60</sup> Again, I gratefully thank Claude Vigée for this information.

<sup>61</sup> Book the First, 24, 72, p. 510.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Graves, *Poetic Craft and Principle* (London: Cassell, 1967), p. 135.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>65</sup> William Blake, *Jerusalem*, Chapter 3, Plate 74, 10–14, *Complete Writings*, p. 714.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, Chapter 4, Plate 90, 11–13.

<sup>67</sup> *Poetic Craft and Principle*, p. 137.

<sup>68</sup> Henri Bergson, *L'évolution créatrice* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1981), pp. 178–79.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>70</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 345.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>73</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Le temps qui reste: Un commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains*, trans. by Judith Revel (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2000; Paris: Rivages Poche, 2004), pp. 131–32. The Italian philosopher, a specialist on Walter Benjamin, quotes *Gershom Scholem: Zwischen den Disziplinen*, ed. by Peter Schaefer and Gary Smith (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), p. 295.

<sup>74</sup> ‘his mysterious utterance’: Aeschylus, *The Libation-Bearers*, trans. by Herbert Weir Smyth (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 237, l. 816.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Graves, *Seven Days in New Crete* (London: Cassell, 1949; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 82.

<sup>76</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 343, and *Complete Poems*, ed. by Beryl Graves and Dunstan Ward, 3 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995–1999), II (1997), p. 63.

<sup>77</sup> Claude Vigée, *La lune d'hiver* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970; repr. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2002), p. 96.

<sup>78</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 474.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>80</sup> *Complete Poems*, II, p. 173.

<sup>81</sup> Claude Vigée, *Le passage du Vivant* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2001), p. 67.

<sup>82</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 285.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 314.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 477.

<sup>85</sup> *La lune d'hiver*, p. 138. 'In Jacob, the Time man, originates the manifold messiah whom his progeny will realise throughout history. Through each of his creative acts, the poet celebrates the repetition of this mystery, of which he offers an imitation. All poems, being created out of absence, chaos, loneliness, duplicate Jacob's wrestling with the angel.'

<sup>86</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 324.

<sup>87</sup> *Complete Poems*, II, p. 14.

<sup>88</sup> Robert Graves, 'Flying Crooked', *Complete Poems*, II, p. 47.

<sup>89</sup> *Seven Days in New Crete*, p. xxii.

<sup>90</sup> *La Bible*, trans. by André Chouraqui (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1985).

<sup>91</sup> 'In Dedication', *The White Goddess*, p. 5.

<sup>92</sup> *Complete Poems*, I, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>96</sup> Robert Graves, 'The Universal Paradise', *Difficult Questions, Easy Answers* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973,) p. 78; Thomas Traherne, 'The Third Century', *Centuries of Meditation* (Fintry, Scotland: The Shrine of Wisdom, 2002), p. 106.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77–78.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>100</sup> *Complete Poems*, I, p. 229.

<sup>101</sup> *Complete Poems*, II, p. 144.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>103</sup> *Complete Poems*, III, p. 19.

<sup>104</sup> ‘Intimations of the Black Goddess’, p. 144.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>108</sup> ‘The Universal Paradise’, p. 92.

<sup>109</sup> Henri Meschonnic, *Au commencement: Traduction de la Genèse* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2002), p. 15.

<sup>110</sup> ‘The Black Goddess’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 82.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Dance of Words’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 74.

<sup>112</sup> ‘The Word’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 135.

<sup>113</sup> ‘The Universal Paradise’, p. 92.

<sup>114</sup> ‘The Pumpkin’, *Complete Poems*, III, p. 353.

<sup>115</sup> ‘Dead Cow Farm’, *Complete Poems*, I, p. 39.

<sup>116</sup> ‘und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?’, Friedrich Hölderlin, ‘Brot und Wein’ (1800–01), *Poèmes/Gedichte* (Paris: Aubier, 1986), p. 344.

# A ‘Spirit Above Wars’: Robert Graves’s Self-Portrait as Soldier and Poet, 1915–29

*Dominic Hibberd*

Ask a student audience who ‘the war poets’ were, and you’ll get perhaps six or eight names, one of which will be Robert Graves. And that’s odd, because from 1927 onwards Graves ‘suppressed’ – his word – virtually all the poems he’d published during and soon after the war. The suppression wasn’t quite as complete as critics seem to think: he did allow about twenty poems to be reprinted in anthologies. So, until 1988, when his son William reprinted almost all the war poems, Graves’s status as a ‘war poet’ alongside his friends Sassoon and Owen depended on his prose memoir, *Goodbye to All That*, and whatever of him the anthologists chose to make available.

Most anthologists have presented him – an indeed the whole phenomenon of First War verse – in terms of Sassoon and Owen, especially between the sixties and early eighties, when six 1914–18 anthologies were published (there’d only been two in the previous thirty years). The three most-chosen Graves poems in that period were ‘Two Fusiliers’, which is about his wartime friendship with Sassoon; ‘The Leveller’, which was written in deliberate imitation of Sassoon; and ‘Recalling War’, which was composed some twenty years after the Armistice.<sup>1</sup>

In 1966 Edmund Blunden urged Graves to reconsider his war poems, saying they were ‘most original’, though they ‘do not seem to me to coalesce into a “Protest”’.<sup>2</sup> That comment, very typical of its period, seems to imply that a body of war poems which fails to coalesce into a ‘Protest’ somehow falls short of the ideal. Graves wouldn’t have wanted to get entangled in the ‘Protest’ debates of the mid-sixties. He didn’t reprint the poems – they could safely be left to the anthologists.

In effect he’d replaced his wartime self, the Graves of *Over the Brazier* (1916), *Fairies and Fusiliers* (1917), the wartime letters

and his unpublished 1918 book, 'The Patchwork Flag', with the Graves of *Goodbye To All That* (1929). Whether he did so in answer to some psychological need is a question beyond my present scope. His more obvious motives were to align himself with the attitudes of the late twenties, make himself seem wiser than he really had been, and write a book that would sell. The result was one of the great books of the war, even if parts of it were, as Sassoon and Blunden thought, 'self-glorification and fictionizing skite'.<sup>3</sup>

When people complained that a lot of *Goodbye* wasn't true, Graves replied that any true record of the war had to contain a high proportion of error because soldiers had been confused and ignorant. But he was surprised that the book was received as 'a violent treatise against war'.<sup>4</sup> The character many readers saw, and some still see, in *Goodbye* was even further from his younger self than he'd intended. Commentators on his work usually understand this in theory, but in practice they tend to treat the book as reliable. One has to go back to the wartime poems and letters to find the wartime Graves.

He wrote to a friend in October 1914 that by joining up he was violating all his 'most cherished anti-war principles but [...] "France is the only place for a gentleman now", principles or no principles'. So we can believe his claim in *Goodbye* that he argued for pacifism while he was still at Charterhouse, unusual though that must have been for a public schoolboy at the time. But as soon as Germany invaded Belgium, 'I forgot my pacifism'. 'I entirely believed that France and England had been drawn into a war which they had never contemplated and for which they were entirely unprepared'.<sup>5</sup> And here, I think, one gets a first example of what Sassoon described as 'fictionizing'. It's part of the myth of the First War that no one expected it and that the volunteers were all touchingly innocent. But no intelligent sixth former could have been unaware of British military preparations before 1914. They were widely discussed and very visible – and Graves himself says he'd heard talk of imminent war with Germany, and been

frightened by seeing army manoeuvres on Salisbury Plain.

As for the schoolboy's supposedly naïve opinion of German aggression, the old man's nearly sixty years later was scarcely altered: answering an American in about 1970 who had accused him of being 'square', Graves said bluntly that the war had been 'started by the German invasion of Belgium, without excuse; we fought to rescue Belgium and our French allies, and we fought honourably throughout'.<sup>6</sup>

Graves had begun writing poetry before he joined the army, but while he was in training at Wrexham in January 1915 he was told by Edward Marsh, the Georgian anthologist, that his style was fifty years out of date. That was a nasty shock, but in February Graves agreed, promising that once 'this ridiculous war' was over he would join the other young Georgians in trying to eliminate the 'obnoxious survivals of Victorianism'. In May he wrote one of his first war poems, 'It's a Queer Time', with, he told Marsh, 'your advice still ringing in my ears'.<sup>7</sup>

Years later, when the Georgians were thoroughly out of fashion, Graves said his new plain style had been learned from the formula for army messages ('Time, place, date – from whom, to whom – who, how, when, where, why – how despatched'). But this too was a Georgian method: Harold Monro recommended in September 1914 that poets should learn from the terseness of military despatches, and Wilfrid Gibson seems to have followed this advice in his first, pioneering war poems soon afterwards. Graves later referred to 'It's a Queer Time' as an example of how supposedly 'realistic' war verse could be written without front-line experience, and he added that Gibson had written 'imitatively' after realism had become fashionable in 1915. This was monstrously unfair to Gibson, who had started producing war poems before there was anyone else to imitate. In fact, Graves seems to have imitated *him* (most obviously in 'Through the Periscope').

Georgian language and the theme of gentlemanly honour are evident in the twelve war poems 'Written Before La Bassée' which form the second part of *Over the Brazier*. La Bassée was

the disastrous attack in September 1915 so vividly described – albeit partly from hearsay – in *Goodbye*. Readers of that account might well imagine the event was a turning-point in Graves's thoughts about the war. Even in 1915 he preferred to gloss over the fact that the most chivalrous poem in the 'Before La Bassée' group, 'The Dead Fox Hunter', must actually have been written *after* La Bassée, because it commemorates the death of Captain Samson during that engagement. It may be that some of the other twelve poems weren't composed until after the September fighting either – three were sent to Marsh in October, for example.<sup>8</sup>

The twelve poems have little to say about 'this silly / Mad war' as a whole. Silly and mad, maybe, and Graves does say – once – that 'To kill and fight is wrong', but he immediately adds, 'To stay at home wronger' ('The Shadow of Death'). The most conspicuous statement of values is 'The Dead Fox Hunter', which describes Samson as 'one who rode straight and in hunting died'; now Heaven must provide him with a Hunt, and 'the whole host of Seraphim complete / Must jog in scarlet to his opening Meet'. Few of the Great War's many patriotic versifiers could have rivalled *that*. The contrast between the poem and the harrowing account of Samson's death in *Goodbye* is a striking example of Graves revising his attitude to the war. Not surprisingly, some of his fellow-officers were 'very sick' at the poem, and he himself described it as a 'rotten thing' in October 1916.<sup>9</sup> The sixties way of coping with an embarrassing poem by an otherwise approved author was to read it as ironic, but Graves's tribute to Samson, whose courage he greatly admired, must have been meant seriously.

After La Bassée he kept his spirits up by reading and thinking about poetry, planning his first book and imagining what he was going to achieve in the vanguard of the Georgians. He told Marsh in October that 'an inspiration seems to have come to me of what the New Poetry is to be'. Marsh was sending him new publications, including Gibson's *Battle*, which Graves thought 'good, very good indeed compared with the sorry stuff that these armchair poets produce nowadays. The simplicity of the language

pleases me most'. When the second volume of *Georgian Poetry* arrived in December, Graves wrote eight pages of 'delight' to its editor; this letter was lost in the post, so he repeated his praises later, saying the anthology was 'perhaps my most treasured possession out here'. In January 1916 he commented warmly on the leading Georgian, Rupert Brooke: 'his is exactly the language I'm floundering to catch'.<sup>10</sup>

He first thought of 'C'est La Guerre' as the title for his book:

It has a laugh and an apology in it and expresses just what I want, an explanation – an excuse almost – for the tremendous change in tone and method and standpoint which you must have noticed between the first and [second parts of the book], a hardening and coarsening and loss of music.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile he'd discovered a poet in his own regiment. According to *Goodbye*, he met Sassoon in November 1915 and showed him some of the poems that were to appear in *Over the Brazier*.

He told me that they were too realistic and that war should not be written about in a realistic way. In return he showed me some of his own poems. One of them began:

Return to greet me, colours that were my joy,  
Not in the woeful crimson of men slain. . . .

This was before Siegfried had been in the trenches. I told him, in my old-soldier manner, that he would soon change his style.

Sassoon's diary confirms that the two poets did meet in about November 1915. So Graves can't have seen the poem he quotes from – and when he did see it his opinion of it was not as in *Goodbye*. Sassoon didn't write 'To Victory' until January 1916. When it appeared in *The Times* on the 15<sup>th</sup>, Graves told him it was 'a good piece of work'. 'It was very good I thought', he told Marsh in February. 'It couldn't have been better if he'd been actually in the trenches which he hadn't when he wrote the poem:

that trench-life sucks all the poetry out of one'.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless Graves did recommend the new style, although his manner would have been more young-Georgian than old-soldier. Georgian realism didn't yet appeal to Sassoon, who noted in his diary on 2 December that some of Graves's poems were 'very bad, violent and repulsive'. But in February Sassoon went into the line.

There is a common misconception among critics that the 'war poets' started as Georgians and soon had all that nonsense knocked out of them. Actually, for Graves, Sassoon and Owen, finding out what war was really like more or less coincided with their discovery of Georgian poetry, and the new style gave them what they needed – a plain, unrheterical, realistic language in which to express personal, earthy experience. That 'hardening and coarsening and loss of music' which Graves detected in his own work marks an increase, not a decrease, in his commitment to what he saw as 'the New Poetry' (by which he meant Georgian poetry as it was going to be). Just as he read the Georgians with new 'inspiration' after La Bassée – and just as Owen was introduced to Georgian verse by Sassoon while recovering from shellshock – so Sassoon went to the front while his ideas about poetry were being affected by conversations with Graves. All three poets changed their way of writing – but it's not true, despite innumerable statements to the contrary, that the change was caused simply by trench experience.<sup>13</sup> The starting point was Marsh's advice in January 1915 that Graves should update his style.

Graves passed the advice on to Sassoon, telling Marsh in March 1916 that Sassoon's poems were 'getting infinitely better than the first crop I saw, much freer and more Georgian. What a pity he didn't start earlier!', but in April Sassoon wrote 'Stand-to: Good Friday Morning', which Graves thought rather crude and blasphemous. From now on it was Graves who tended to think of Sassoon's poems as 'violent and repulsive'. Outright criticism of the war seemed to him pointless: it was ungentlemanly and would merely weaken morale. When he remarked in June that his friend

had ‘all at once struck what you have been searching for for so long’, he seems to have been referring to ‘A Letter Home’, a cheerful fantasy in the Roberto manner which Sassoon had written to him in May.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of ‘Protest’ in *Over the Brazier* is consistent with Graves’s letters in the first half of 1916. ‘I have learned to worship my Regiment’ (February). ‘I always enjoy trenches in a way, I must confess: I like feeling really frightened and if happiness consists in being miserable in a good cause, why then I’m doubly happy. England’s a good cause enough and the trenches are splendidly miserable’ (March). “‘I want to go home” – to France’ (May, from England). ‘I hear you’ve been risking your precious life again among them craters. I am pleased, damned pleased, you’re doing so well; wish to hell I was with you – go on risking, and good luck. It’s a man’s game!’ (June, from England, to Sassoon in France).<sup>15</sup>

In mid-July the two poets met just behind the line and diverted themselves by imagining post-war travels in the Caucasus and beyond, developing the ‘dreams’ Sassoon had started in his ‘A Letter Home’. It’s an indication of Graves’s extraordinary temperament that his ‘Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood’, a reply to Sassoon’s poem, was apparently written in the line next day, only fifty yards from the grisly German corpse described in ‘A Dead Boche’ – and ‘A Dead Boche’ was written immediately after the letter as a postscript. Graves says the bloated corpse was ‘a certain cure for lust of blood’. ‘A Dead Boche’ has usually been regarded as one of his most Sassoonish works, but I think – though I haven’t seen the MS – that it must originally have been aimed at Sassoon, who had longed to kill Germans earlier in the year; only later, I guess, did Graves convert the poem into an attack on warlike civilians by adding four introductory lines. Those four lines were perhaps added at Sassoon’s suggestion; at any rate Graves got rid of them when he reprinted the poem in 1927.<sup>16</sup>

Graves was wounded, almost fatally, on 20 July, but by mid-August he was fit enough to order about seventeen titles from

Monro's Poetry Bookshop. 'We're winning this Old War at last, aren't we?' he observed to Marsh, unaware, like most people, of what was really happening on the Somme.<sup>17</sup> By late August he was able to go to Harlech, where Sassoon joined him for a fortnight. In September – by which time the disaster on the Somme was beginning to be known – both poets went to Garsington as guests of Lady Ottoline Morrell.

It wasn't only Graves who rewrote his wartime self. By the time Sassoon came to write his own memoir, *Siegfried's Journey*, he'd quarrelled so badly with his former friend that he left him out of the story altogether. So Sassoon describes himself at Garsington that September as the only soldier in a house full of pacifists. There for the first time, he says, he heard the political case against the war, 'the beginning of a process of disillusionment'. It is only from Ottoline's diary that we know Graves was actually there too: she noted he was 'very possessive of Siegfried'.<sup>18</sup>

This Garsington visit isn't mentioned in *Goodbye* either. It didn't suit Graves to reveal that both he and Sassoon had first heard arguments against the war there. Ottoline's comment suggests that even at the time he saw and resented the pacifists' influence on his friend. So, in effect, he replaces Garsington with Harlech, portraying the two poets as already disillusioned when they were there together. Critics seem to have swallowed this, but the details he gives aren't very convincing, nor is his curious statement that he and Sassoon took a 'non-political' view of the war.<sup>19</sup> The reader's attention is distracted by a long satirical note which Graves says he wrote at the time; he doesn't add that he was doubtful about Sassoon's new satirical poems and didn't write any himself. He's preparing the ground for his role in Sassoon's 1917 protest, when the wiser comrade will hurry to the rescue, sharing the protester's views but seeing the futility of political action.

In a further attempt to show the two poets in agreement at Harlech, Graves says they defined the war in their poems 'by making contrasted definitions of peace. With Siegfried it was hunting and nature and music and pastoral scenes; with me it was chiefly children'. Sassoon was annoyed by this claim that he had

been writing lyrics when he'd actually been composing some of his harshest onslaughts on the civilian conscience. *Goodbye* is less reliable than Graves's earlier reminiscence, 'A Letter from Wales' (c. 1924), which records that 'a sense of unreality' began to affect the friendship at Harlech.<sup>20</sup>

*Goodbye* places their next meeting at Litherland in November (it was actually in December). Graves says that they 'decided that it was no use making a protest against the war', and that their place was in France with their men (both poets had in fact been thinking of service in Egypt). Sassoon objected to the statement about protesting, telling Blunden he could 'demonstrate what R.G.'s attitude was (timid and conventional) by his letters to me'.<sup>21</sup>

Neither Graves nor Sassoon were just to each other here. Sassoon was in fact beginning to be convinced that protesting might be worthwhile and that it was in any case the only honourable thing to do. Graves on the other hand felt honour-bound to return to France. He was still far from well, but at the end of 1916, with impressive courage, he volunteered to go out again. His trip to the front was his last and least distinguished, although he claims he managed to get an ill-conceived attack called off (it was this story which prompted Sassoon's comment about 'fictionizing skite'). His health soon gave way, and he was sent to recuperate in Oxford.

Now *Goodbye* introduces Garsington, where Graves goes for the first time and hears that 'there was another side to the question of war guilt' (he must really have heard that in the previous September and discussed it at length with Sassoon at Litherland). He adds in passing, rather too casually, that he, like 'most other young writers of the time', no longer believed in the war. He doesn't explain when or why that loss of belief had occurred, and it isn't obvious in his 1917 letters and poems. Sometimes he agreed with Sassoon; sometimes the voice of his Danish grandmother inside him said "'A mort les Boches" and "Delenda est Carthago"'. He told Marsh he was 'very apt to get fainthearted about the War, but I always get back to it as soon as I can again, such a tyrant is old Grandmother'.<sup>22</sup> What did he mean by

‘fainthearted’? Simply that he was afraid? Or that he was tempted to agree with Garsington?

He was appalled by Sassoon’s public protest in the summer of 1917 and worked hard to cover it up, although his role was perhaps not quite as decisive as he suggests in *Goodbye*. Sassoon scorned his appeals to “‘good form” and “acting like a gentleman”. [...] If you had real courage you wouldn’t acquiesce as you do’. This was an accusation of cowardice, and Graves’s reply hints that Sassoon himself had been cowardly – or at least ‘fainthearted’ – by dropping out of the fighting. ‘I believe [...] in keeping to agreements when everybody else keeps them and if I find myself party to principles I don’t quite like, in biding my time until I have a sporting chance of rearranging things.’ He would perhaps not have liked to be reminded that earlier in the year he had offered to wangle Sassoon a home posting like his own (‘You’d be stupid not to take it’).<sup>23</sup>

It was perhaps because Graves was afraid of being understood as declaring solidarity with Sassoon that he decided not to dedicate his next book to him, despite an earlier promise. He told him he was nervous of offending other individuals who had helped him, and explained, wonderfully unconvincingly, that the final dedication, to the Royal Welch Fusiliers, would ‘strengthen my expression of hatred for the War’.<sup>24</sup>

The political content of *Fairies and Fusiliers* is minimal and generally orthodox. War is not glorified, but is implied to be inevitable, with all its lies and horrors. Children playing soldiers are told that every generation is doomed to be ‘loyal and true in everything, / [...] / If only to keep safe those joys / That belong to British boys’. Their turn will come to fight in another, even more dreadful war, caused again by the ‘pomp and greed and rage’ of Kaisers and Czars’ (‘The Next War’). ‘The Legion’ describes two Roman officers – who are also Graves and Sassoon in 1916 – vowing to drive the barbarians out of Gaul. ‘Goliath and David’ tells the story of David’s death at the hands of the ‘spike-helmeted, grey, grim’ Goliath. And here I have to differ with critics who have understood this German-uniformed Goliath as a

personification of war, without reference to nationality. Graves's original readers would have recognised the spike-helmeted Prussian ogre of wartime *Punch* cartoons. And David, as the dedication to David Thomas suggest, represents Graves's view of the British volunteers of 1914–15: brave, noble-minded young amateurs standing in the path of a monster which had to be defeated.

Graves confided to Marsh ('Eddie, don't tell anyone') in August 1917, just after Sassoon's protest, that sentencing a conscientious objector to two years in prison had given him a sense of "fiat justicia" not untempered with satisfaction'. In the same month he refused to contribute to an anthology which he suspected would be pacifist in tendency, and he advised Sassoon to refuse as well. Appearing in such a book would 'bring discredit on the dear old Regiment'. By contrast, he had urged Sassoon in April to join him in contributing to E. B. Osborn's more warlike *The Muse in Arms*, proud of the chance to appear alongside Brooke and Julian Grenfell. Interestingly, in view of his later attitude to propaganda, he allowed the Department of Information to use 128 lines from *Fairies and Fusiliers* for a propagandist article on soldier-poets, saying it would be rather a good advertisement, and he advised Robert Nichols to follow other authors who were lecturing in America on Allied war aims.<sup>25</sup>

Two late 1917 poems record aspects of his frame of mind. 'The Picture Book', which must have been completed by November, when Sassoon read and liked it, describes a sadistic German book Graves had been made to read by his German nanny. Years later he suppressed this piece, partly for its 'anti-German sentiments', but in 1917 it seemed fair (presumably even to Sassoon) and it set up a contrast with the kind of children's book he hoped to produce with Nancy Nicholson, to whom he was about to become engaged. In September he read another new work, 'Night March', to Sassoon, who thought it 'a wonderful thing – his most sustained effort'.<sup>26</sup> 'Night March' is another salute to the Fusiliers, the Twenty-third, describing a battalion of them marching twenty-three miles to the Somme – in twenty-three stanzas.

Still proud to be a Georgian, Graves told Marsh he was beginning ‘to understand infinitely more clearly what Georgian poetry means, and what its going to mean by Gods grace’. He was glad to have introduced the two Georgians, Sassoon and Nichols, to each other, and it was he, not Sassoon, who told Marsh of ‘a new poet [...] just discovered, one Wilfred Owen’. He told Sassoon to ‘cheer up [...] Don’t send me any more corpse poems’, and he gave similar advice to Owen, whom he considered to be too much under Sassoon’s influence: ‘For God’s sake cheer up and write more optimistically [...] a poet should have a spirit above wars’.<sup>27</sup>

An adherent of the gentlemanly code could hardly start married life at home without being classified as permanently unfit. Graves volunteered once more, but he can’t have been too surprised to be told early in January 1918 that he could never fight again. By the end of the month he was married. In February he was sent to train cadets in Wales, where he and Nancy took a farmhouse, Bryn-y-pin.

The little rhymes that he wrote in the early months of his marriage may now seem trivial, but he took them seriously, believing he had found his true medium. If they were an attempt to forget, they were none too successful: themes of haunting, fate and death kept recurring. So did poems about the war: in ‘The Survivor Comes Home’ he confessed that the woods seemed to drip with death, as Mametz Wood had done in 1916. But he told Sassoon he was ashamed of the contrast between his own circumstances and his friend’s – for in the previous December Sassoon had made the decision *Goodbye* attributes to both poets at Litherland a year earlier, that protesting was useless, and he had gone back to be with his men.

Sassoon wrote an angry letter in June, saying Graves was incapable of ‘writing deeply’. Graves replied stoutly on the 9<sup>th</sup>: ‘[...] blast you, you old croaking corbie, aren’t I allowed for the honour of the Regiment to balance your abysmal groanings with my feather top rhymes and songs?’ And a few days later, to show he could croak just as well as Sassoon if he’d a mind to, he wrote

‘The Leveller’ (‘a trench poem [...] to show you I could write just like you’).<sup>28</sup>

‘I’ve almost got the new book together [...] it will be damned good in spite of occasional corpses that blunder up among the nursery toys. It shall be called *The Patchwork Quilt*, I think [...]’. ‘The Patchwork Flag’, as it was finally called, was complete by early August. Of the typescript and carbons, presumably made by Nancy at Bryn-y-pin, a single copy survives among Marsh’s correspondence in the Berg Collection, unnoticed for perhaps forty years by the army of Graves researchers. It is the only record of his output from late 1917 to July 1918. In the end, eleven of the forty-three poems were never published, including ‘Night March’, ‘The Survivor Comes Home’ and another verse letter to Sassoon.<sup>29</sup>

This ‘Letter to S.S. from Bryn-y-pin’ is a response to Sassoon’s anger in June. Its title echoes that of the 1916 ‘Letter to S.S. from Mametz Wood’. It opens with sympathy for Sassoon, ‘Last of the flock, poor Fusilier’. Graves pleads ‘*Guilty*’ to the charge that he’s been writing lightweight verse and trying not to think about the war.

‘*Guilty*’ I’ve no excuse to give  
While in such cushioned ease I live  
With Nancy and fresh flowers of June  
And poetry and my young platoon,  
Daring how seldom search behind  
In those back cupboards of my mind  
Where lurk the bogeys of old fear,  
To think of you, to feel you near  
By our old bond, poor Fusilier.

Not much ‘self-glorification and fictionizing skite’ in that. Graves is movingly honest.<sup>30</sup> But his attitude is very different from Owen’s, who had written only a week or two earlier that ‘All a poet can do today is warn’.

Fewer than a quarter of the poems in ‘The Patchwork Flag’ are

about war, and most of these are grouped in an awkward lump near the beginning. What had been a lively interplay between ‘Fairies’ and ‘Fusiliers’ in the 1917 volume now becomes an uneven ‘patchwork’, the failure of organisation reflecting Graves’s shellshock. That his political view of the war was still largely unaffected by arguments heard from Sassoon and Garsington seems to be apparent in ‘Peace’, written no later than June, in which he imagines the countryside after the war and wonders whether the spectre of militarism could return. Will the German eagle be caged and the British lion tamed –

Or will the young of that vile brood,  
The young ones also, suck up blood,  
Unconquered, unashamed,  
Rising again with lust and thirst?

It would be reassuring, and perhaps correct, to assume that Graves is here referring to warmongers on both sides. Yet this may be another poem that is easily obscured by modern assumptions. In the early summer of 1918 Graves would have been well aware that most British people would understand the ‘vile brood’ to be the German race. The newspapers were full of such phrases: Germans were represented as lustful, shameless and bloodthirsty, and there was a growing suspicion that the politicians wouldn’t press on to a complete victory, thereby leaving the enemy ‘unconquered’. Graves’s lines are open to that kind of reading, and the language has rather more in common with the rhetoric of that nastiest of jingo journalists, Horatio Bottomley, than with the 1918 work of Sassoon and Owen.

Sassoon liked several of the poems in ‘The Patchwork Flag’ – including, not surprisingly, ‘The Leveller’ – but he felt the book as a whole lacked ‘guts’ and ‘passion’. Graves replied that ‘poetry shouldn’t be all propaganda because a war is on’.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, he told Marsh in January 1919 that he had scrapped the book and finished with ‘the Fusilier kind of poem’, and a few years later he acknowledged that Sassoon had kept him from publishing ‘a very

bad book’.

As soon as the war was over, Graves told Sassoon that ‘Now is the time for real vigorous action in doing down the capitalists and politicians and the blokes who have gambled away our lives and money in this war – Are you standing for parliament [...]?’ But he had no intention of joining Sassoon as an active socialist, and he never had much sympathy for the ‘Bolshevism’ and ‘anti-militarism’ he thought his former comrade had been taught at Garsington. ‘I am holding up your old sentimental letters from Fricourt and Arras to blackmail you with if you get narsty’, he told Sassoon early in 1919. ‘Did you ever find heroics in my handwriting?’<sup>32</sup> Sassoon could have replied that he’d found plenty.

Looking back from 1929 Graves must have seen his earlier self as something of an embarrassment. It was time to say goodbye to all that. He’d been a Georgian, fervently committed to the Georgian cause, but now the critics, himself among them, were inclined to deride everything Georgian. He’d thought Sassoon’s protest ungentlemanly and had helped to cover it up, but now Sassoon’s outspokenness seemed more honourable than his own reticence. He’d been anti-pacifist and anti-German, and had described war as ‘a man’s game’, but now many people thought Britain had been almost as much to blame as Germany – and that code of honour he’d put so much faith in was coming to be regarded as one of the war’s causes. Despite his continuing devotion to his regiment, his military record had not been especially glorious. So he retold the story, concealing his Georgian origins, portraying himself as in step with – even ahead of – Sassoon’s scepticism, and adopting a cynicism which belonged more to the late twenties than to 1914–18.

Much of this article may seem a story of conformism and even deception. But these are among the skills of survival. Not all poets could ‘Protest’ and ‘warn’. Shellshocked, burdened with dreams and guilt, Graves survived, with his characteristic energy only temporarily dimmed. For this chameleon poet with ‘a spirit above

wars', a career as a great writer was only just beginning.

**Dominic Hibberd** has published biographies of two poets, Wilfred Owen and Harold Monro, and editions of their poems; *Owen the Poet*, a critical study; *Wilfred Owen: The Last Year*; and various editions, anthologies, and articles.

---

## NOTES

### *Abbreviations*

- BIS Robert Graves, *But It Still Goes On: An Accumulation* (London: Cape, 1930)
- EM Edward Marsh
- GT Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929). Page references are to the third (November 1929) edition.
- GT(A) The copy of the first edition of *Goodbye* dated 7 November 1929 by Edmund Blunden and annotated by him and Sassoon (Berg Collection)
- IBI *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O'Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
- MS-S Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1982)
- PAW Robert Graves, *Poems About War*, ed. by William Graves (London: Cassell, 1988)
- RG Robert Graves
- RPG Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Assault Heroic 1895–1926* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986)
- SS Siegfried Sassoon

This article is based on a paper given at the Robert Graves Centenary Conference, St John's College, Oxford, in 1995. I have rewritten several passages in the light of very helpful comments from Dunstan Ward.

Quotations from letters: published sources are given below where applicable. I have accepted editors' amendments, but in almost all cases I have seen the MSS, which are in the Berg Collection, New York

Public Library. Some of my quotations are, I think, published here for the first time.

<sup>1</sup> Anthologies edited by Brereton (1930), Nichols (1943), Gardner (1964), Parsons (1965), Hussey (1967), Black (1970), Silkin (1879), Balcon (1985). ‘Two Fusiliers’ is in six of these, ‘The Leveller’ in four, and ‘Recalling War’ in three. (More recently, Graves’s place as a ‘war poet’ has become less certain. Two anthologies – Stephen (1988) and Roberts (1998) exclude him altogether. Motion (2003) chooses only ‘The Legion’. The widest selections are in Hibberd/Onions (1986) with seven poems and Walter (2004) with eight. Giddings and Hudson (both 1988) have three each. ‘Two Fusiliers’ is in three of these last four anthologies, as is a new favourite, ‘Goliath and David’. ‘Recalling War’ is in two, but ‘The Leveller’, interestingly, is in none.

<sup>2</sup> IBI, 173.

<sup>3</sup> GT(A), 300. SS’s comment is provoked by one anecdote, but is applied to the book’s stories in general. Blunden’s comments are equally harsh.

<sup>4</sup> BIS, 41–42 (error), 16 (treatise).

<sup>5</sup> RPG, 117 (principles); GT, 88 (argued), 99 (unprepared).

<sup>6</sup> MS-S, 564.

<sup>7</sup> IBI, 30 (Victorianism), 33 (advice).

<sup>8</sup> BIS, 155 (messages); Monro, *Poetry and Drama* editorial, September 1914. Gibson’s first two war poems were published on 17.10.14. RG, *The Common Asphodel* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1949), 308 (imitatively); PAW, 50 (Periscope).

<sup>9</sup> RG to EM, 18.7.17 (sick), 18.10.16 (rotten).

<sup>10</sup> RG to EM, n.d. [October 1915] (inspiration), 10.11.15 (Gibson), 24.2. [16: letter dated 1915 but written from Le Havre, where RG was posted in early 1916] (treasured); C. Hassall, *Edward Marsh* (London: Longmans, 1959), 380 (floundering).

<sup>11</sup> IBI, 41.

<sup>12</sup> GT, 224 (crimson); RG to SS, n.d. [January 1916] (piece); RG to EM, 9.2.16 (sucks).

<sup>13</sup> One of the *Over the Brazier* poems, ‘Big Words’, is sometimes taken as an example of how trench experience led to a change of style, because RG added the deflationary final couplet after La Bassée. But the couplet is thoroughly Georgian and Brooke-like in style and effect.

<sup>14</sup> RG to EM, n.d. [summer 1917]: ‘you are responsible for giving me advice which I passed on to him’. RG continued such advising, telling SS on 13.9.17 to ‘make the plain words do the work of the coloured ones’. Both poets gave similar Georgian advice to Owen. IBI, 44 (crop); D. Hibberd, *Owen the Poet* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), 116 (morale); IBI, 52 (struck).

<sup>15</sup> IBI, 39 (February), 43 (March), 51 (May), 51–52 (June).

<sup>16</sup> IBI, 58 (yards). PAW, 83: when RG reprinted ‘A Dead Boche’ for the last time in 1927, he dropped the opening lines and restored the poem to what I assume to have been its original role as a postscript (his word) to the ‘Letter’. However, Dunstan Ward tells me the MS evidence is inconclusive.

<sup>17</sup> RG to EM, 14.8.16.

<sup>18</sup> *Siegfried’s Journey* (London: Faber, 1945), 22 (process); RPG, 162 (Ottoline). Jean Moorcroft Wilson tells me the Garsington visit must have been very brief; even so, it would have been an eye-opener for RG.

<sup>19</sup> GT, 288. Among the unconvincing details is RG’s assertion that he and SS talked about the Lloyd George coalition: the coalition hadn’t yet happened.

<sup>20</sup> GT(A), 287 (annoyed); PAW, 72 (Wales).

<sup>21</sup> GT(A), 112. SS adds that RG ‘definitely disapproved of my stronger war poems’. Several of SS’s other annotations accuse RG of timidity.

<sup>22</sup> GT, 307 (writers); RG to EM, n.d. [summer 1917].

<sup>23</sup> SS, *Diaries 1915–1918*, ed. by R. Hart-Davis (London: Faber, 1983), 192 (acquiesce); IBI, 85 (sporting); RG to SS, 12.5.17 (stupid).

<sup>24</sup> RG to SS, 13.9.17.

<sup>25</sup> RG to EM, 25.8.17 (justicia); IBI, 81 (discredit); RG to SS, 27.4.17 (Osborn); RG to SS, n.d. [from Wimbledon] (the propagandist article was by Sturge Moore); IBI, 89 (Nichols).

<sup>26</sup> RG to SS, 20.11.17 and n.d. [from Islip] (‘The Picture Book’); SS to EM, 22.12.17 (‘Night March’).

<sup>27</sup> RG to EM, n.d. [December 1917] (grace); IBI, 90 (Owen), 87 (corpse); *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. by Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 596.

<sup>28</sup> IBI, 95 (corbie), 98 (‘Leveller’).

<sup>29</sup> For the typescript and its history, dates of poems references to letters, etc., see my ‘“The Patchwork Flag” (1918): An unrecorded book by Robert Graves’, *Review of English Studies*, xli, 164 (1990), 521–32.

<sup>30</sup> Dunstan Ward is surely right in suggesting that the deep feeling in this poem partly comes from RG's recognition that his friendship with Sassoon can never regain its former intimacy.

<sup>31</sup> RG may have passed his opinion of Sassoon's 'propaganda' on to Owen, who said in December 1917 that for SS poetry had become 'a mere vehicle of propaganda' – a surprising comment, considering Owen's intense veneration for SS during the autumn of that year.

<sup>32</sup> RG to SS, November 1918 (blokes); IBI, 106 (sentimental).

## Sources, Collaborators, and Critique in *Antigua, Penny, Puce*

John Woodrow Presley

In his public readings of Robert Graves's work, Julian Glover says that *Antigua, Penny, Puce* was written in response to a bet that Graves couldn't put aside all his 'classical stuff' and write a *modern* potboiler or best-seller. Graves had a subject in mind, philately, which when combined with a satirical view of both sibling rivalry and popular literature, made an excellent canvas for a very popular novel.

In an earlier essay, 'Narrative Structure in Graves's Historical Fiction',<sup>1</sup> I described the circumstances under which Graves wrote the manuscript of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* and the irony which permeates the novel, and illustrated some of the narrative devices by which Graves moves the two major plot lines, the legal and the philatelic narratives. Of course, other themes appear in this most successful of the Seizin Press books (*Antigua, Penny, Puce* has remained in print with almost no interruption since the mid-1930s), including Graves's cynical attitude toward popular literature and its means of production.

Alone among his novels, *Antigua, Penny, Puce* is set in then-contemporary England, and is a novel of comedy and manners. Martin Seymour-Smith, in *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, says that in this novel Graves 'was satirising family history, family nastiness [...] some traits in the character of his brother John – who was predictably much hurt by it'.<sup>2</sup> Miranda Seymour finds elements of Laura Riding's character and of the character of Graves's sister, Rosaleen, in the novel's portrait of Jane Palfrey, and in *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* even suggests that the legal aspects of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* reflect Graves's legal concerns in 1934–1936 about his properties in Mallorca.<sup>3</sup>

Graves himself was certainly ambivalent about *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. For a while, he regarded it as a potboiler, apparently, and

intended to publish the novel under a pseudonym. At some point in the writing of the novel, he became decidedly more proud of his effort, and with good reason: the English edition, from Graves's Seizin Press, appeared in 1936, as did a Canadian first impression with a corrected text. *Antigua, Penny, Puce* was the most successful – by far – of the Seizin Press books. An American edition followed in March 1937. Since that time, though, it has been far overshadowed by *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. But *Antigua, Penny, Puce* has been in print, selling steadily, with editions in 1947-1948, 1968, and 1984 from Penguin. In 1936, Paramount indicated an interest in making a film of the novel, and though it never has been filmed, such interest has continued.

*Antigua, Penny, Puce* was also a critical success. Philip Larkin, in a letter quoted in R. P. Graves's *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura*, wrote that *Antigua, Penny, Puce* was 'unique among novels [...] for its variety of original invention, not to mention its humour'.<sup>4</sup>

For all his ambivalence, Graves worked very hard on the drafts of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. Graves apparently corrected the autograph draft three times, once with the same blue ink in which the draft was written, once with black ink, and once with pencil. The revisions are mostly stylistic – revisions within the boundaries of the sentence – rather than deletions or jugglings of whole paragraphs or episodes (as often with Joyce), but some alterations do show Graves's changing conception of the novel. The opening paragraphs were revised often and late; Graves apparently found it difficult to evoke immediately the odd combination of colloquial tone and ironic distance which the persona of the narrator developed during the composition of the novel.

But one difficulty, whatever his more general sources for the novel may have been, was that Robert Graves knew little about stamp-collecting and less about the legal backdrops for the actions he imagined for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*.

Graves had at least a schoolboy interest in collecting coins. William Graves first pointed out to me that the seed of the conflict in *Antigua*, the sibling conflict over the stamp-album, might be

first expressed in Graves's letter home from the front dated 20 September 1914. The letter, in pencil, is a will 'in case I get killed'. Exhibited by the Royal Welch Fusiliers at the St John's College Library in August 1995, the letter continues, 'doubtless father would like my sword & mother my school prize & boxing cups [...] Ros my share in the old coin collection'. It is only a short leap to substitute stamp-collecting for coin-collecting. Besides, as his poem 'The Philatelist-Royal' shows, Graves very early on had a comical view, or rather more specifically, perhaps a cold and cynical view, of stamp-collecting.

But in 1934–1936 the difficulty remained that, in writing a novel with a philatelic plot, Graves had no very specific knowledge of philately, either as hobby or industry. Therefore, he enlisted the help of friends and experts. The Southern Illinois University collections of Graves's manuscripts and letters are very revealing of the composition methods Graves adopted. Letters in the collections from Mary Phillips, wife of James Reeves, and Gordon Glover, ex-husband of Honor Wyatt, describe for Graves stamp auctions that they attended in London, along with enclosed stamp catalogues (which Graves annotated for his use in *Antigua*, *Penny*, *Puce*). On 15 October 1934, Stanley Gibbons Ltd, possibly the premier English stamp dealers, replied to a detailed questionnaire from Graves, answering questions about Antigua stamps and pre-war Gibbons albums.

Gordon Glover wrote to Graves on Sunday 16 February (probably 1935) to describe for him a stamp auction he had seen; he enclosed a packet of literature about stamp auctions and several catalogues, including the catalogue for the auction which he attended. His is a very detailed letter, with the name and address of the auction firm and detailed descriptions of the auction room, the action and methods used in the auction itself and even a freehand drawing of the room's floor plan. Excepting a chatty half-page about an eccentric pseudo-uncle of Glover's, this detailed description of an auction room goes on for four single-spaced pages of typescript. Glover's letter describes the expectant atmosphere before the auction begins, and includes quite a witty

description of the characters one might find at a stamp auction. For his first draft of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* Graves relied heavily on Glover's description, down to the timing of the auction and the colours of the furniture. (After finishing his assignment, Glover admits to being happy that he is not a stamp collector.)

Mary Phillips, also dispatched as Graves's observer, reports in a letter of 20 February that she attended an auction for air mail stamps, the auction itself being held not in a specialised auction room but in Pagani's Restaurant. Her letter is three pages of single-spaced typescript, very matter-of-fact, with much specific detail about the jargon used in philately, such as *covers* vs. *stamps* vs. *cards* as descriptors of items. She, too, enclosed a catalogue and, like Glover, annotated the prices brought by each sale lot. Doubtless her reportage also helped Graves as a sort of 'deep background' for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. It was Phillips, for example, who noted many of the signals used by bidders and the odd little observation that bidders who are uninterested in the lot being auctioned at a particular moment avert their eyes, away from the auctioneer's podium.

That these – and possibly others who helped Graves with such reports – were very valuable sources of detail for him can be easily demonstrated with just one of the many examples that found their way into the drafts. 'Many of them ran to shag and tweediness; some might have been City clerks, from their clothes. Few women. Three, to be exact. A gaunt, hyper-tweedy one with horn-rimmed spectacles, possibly the owner of a Borzoi' (p. 147) is in large measure directly from Glover's letter, the shag and tweediness a direct quotation in the first sentence. There were only two women at Glover's auction, but the second of the two was quite tweedy, wore the same glasses, and Glover speculated that she had probably left a Borzoi outside.

In writing *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, Graves apparently corrected the autograph manuscript three times, once with pencil. The revisions are mostly stylistic – revisions within the boundaries of the sentence – but some alterations do show Graves's changing conception of the novel. Very interestingly – and most frequently

in the legal or philatelic sections of the novel – not all the revisions are in Robert Graves's hand.

Graves prepared a hand-written list of five questions which was forwarded to Stanley Gibbons Ltd, 'Philatelists and Publishers', by John Graves on 14 October 1934. The Gibbons firm – no individual signature is provided – answered promptly on 15 October, with answers which proved extremely valuable to Graves. Briefly, there was no one-penny 'puce' stamp, since Gibbons did not use this adjective to describe colour, though there are one-penny stamps variously described as shades of red or mauve. Importantly, while Gibbons stamp albums had been issued with various topical organisations, a hand-written series of answers to Graves's questions indicates that at least one *catalogue* is organised into the divisions Graves needed and in the order he needed for his plot device: first the stamps of the British Empire, a section followed by stamps from 'foreign countries'. But these two documents also held one absolutely key piece of information for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*: no penny stamp had been issued before 1862, whatever the colour. And Stanley Gibbons, Ltd, misunderstanding the purpose of the questionnaire, were interested enough to urge John Graves to persuade the questioner to bring in the stamp that had given rise to the inquiry. Surely, this reaction convinced Robert Graves that the 'first' one-penny puce Antigua would be a believable prize over which his characters might litigate the fine point, as it turns out, of ownership.

Four letters in these Southern Illinois collections are from Harold Cooke, a stamp researcher and collector, author of several standard works on philately, who read the *Antigua, Penny, Puce* manuscript. He gathered information on Antigua stamps, especially the pinks, and on the Victorian habit and method of hoarding letters. Perhaps most tellingly, Graves accepted his suggestions for changing the auction room scenes in the novel.

On 9 May [1936] Cooke wrote to Graves complimenting him on the auction scenes and the collectors' jargon in his manuscript, suggesting two changes in diction, both of which Graves adopted, changing 'pocket rules' in the draft to 'pocket gauges' (p. 146) in

later drafts and in the published text, for example. Cooke also pointed out that the Antigua stamp would likely have been auctioned first – doubtless Graves had to ignore this fact for the sake of suspense in his scene – and that a rarity such as the Antigua stamp would first have been certified by the Royal Philatelic Society (Graves inserts just such an approval in later drafts). On technical grounds, Cooke objected to the auctioneer's description of the stamp's being 'duly franked' at the St John's Post Office, a phrase used only in the autograph manuscript. Cooke suggests instead that the stamp would be described as 'cancelled', and Graves adopts this term in all later drafts (154).

The manuscript had been transmitted to Cooke by Graves's brother. Harold Cooke's own research, in 1936, was on the current British stamps that were being produced by photogravure, certainly not Antiguas, but at Graves's request he contacted two Antigua specialists, neither of whom had written about the Antigua pink stamps. He reported on 22 June 1936 that a collection with a large number of Antigua pinks had been broken up some 20 years previously, and he was pursuing information on these stamps for Graves. Only one week later, Cooke wrote to Graves that this line of research indicated that no Antigua pink stamp was dated until around 1880, and he provided the cancellation number for St Johns – allowing Graves the final version of his description of the rare stamp at auction, 'it bears the familiar cancellation AO2' (p. 154). It is also in this letter that Cooke describes the Victorian habit of hoarding letters and arranging them by date, another important plot device for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, and he enclosed an actual specimen of the pinks for Graves's use.

The last letter from Cooke in the Southern Illinois University collection brings this correspondence to an end. The letter, dated 10 July 1936, lets Graves know the cost of the specimen stamp and reacts favourably, with offers of help, to Graves's apparent declaration that he intends to take up the hobby of collecting!

But by far the most crucial help came from W. A. Fuller, a London barrister, who served as a paid consultant on the legal

issues in the manuscript. Fourteen letters to Graves, from March to June 1936, provided advice on the courtroom scenes, on the legal plot-line, and on the legal distinction between ‘ownership’ and ‘possession’. (He even researched for Graves a *new* theory of ownership.) Fuller provided information about the legal liabilities of the auctioneer, and information about the procedure of injunction; he provided models of writs and injunctions, edited for use in the novel. Fuller also agreed to read the manuscript for legal verisimilitude.

Fuller, whose help with the novel quickly began to approach collaboration, was first put in touch with Graves by Mary Phillips; a 5 March 1936 letter introduces himself to Graves and indicates that a very nominal fee of only a few guineas would probably be reasonable. An undated letter in the Southern Illinois Collection is probably the next Fuller letter in this sequence, since in this longer note, from Brick Court in the Temple, Fuller indicates that he can answer only a few of Graves’s questions off-hand and will need some research time before answering the others. Fuller here indicates how an injunction is obtained (from a High Court Judge, not a magistrate) and indicates that there would be mechanisms simpler than injunction to stop the sale of a contested stamp. (This advice about the injunction is an ongoing theme of Fuller’s; Graves, one may note, continued his use of the injunction as a plot device, through all his drafts and into the published text.) Fuller also points out that Graves’s first ideas for the legal plot, including an order that would postpone the sale waiting for a rightful owner to claim the stamp and an action based on the claim of a third party to the stamp, are untenable. Fuller also indicates that the second trial would be heard in the High Court – a measure of Graves’s lack of legal knowledge – and suggests that mentioning his help in the foreword to the novel would almost certainly be a violation of Bar rules about publicity.

By 6 April, Fuller was laying out a detailed legal history of the stamp, from 1872 to 1936, with a section detailing the first legal action, the seizure of the stamp, and the second action. He includes a long tutorial on the legal niceties of ownership as

distinguished from possession and the rights of ownership. Graves's early conception of the plot of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* can be inferred from some of Fuller's remarks: he warns Graves that no auctioneer would so easily relinquish possession of a stamp so rare to an unknown person claiming title; Fuller suggests another approach involving solicitors' action, but Graves of course finally decided upon an even more dramatic 'theft' of the stamp ('recaption' in legal terms, as used in the novel). He also cautioned Graves that paying the shipping company or the insurance company one penny, the original value, would not in itself force the company to consider itself compensated for its property. Graves was quick to take Fuller's legal advice to heart: in this letter he suggests that the Whitebillet shipping company not be drawn as a limited company but as an unincorporated sole proprietorship, allowing any property rights to pass directly to Edith, as heir, rather than to what Americans would call 'the founder' of the Whitebillet line, as in the autograph manuscript, and making, later in the same draft, the nature of the Whitebillet firm the focus of Mr Justice Hogtie's first question before his summing up.

Fuller writes a much shorter letter to Graves on 15 April. Here he continues his tutelage on the distinction between possession and ownership; he repeatedly uses the word 'unassailable' to describe certain rights, and it is interesting to see Graves, in the autograph manuscript of the trial scenes, begin to use the same word to describe 'rights' and 'possession'. Fuller cautions Graves to choose as a model for his court scenes a civil action in the King's Bench Division, which would be very different from a criminal case.

One letter in the collection, from Graves to Fuller, arranges for Fuller to actually edit the extensive courtroom scenes in the novel, and in the same letter, Graves describes his plans to use court transcripts from the *Daily Telegraph* as models for scenes in the novel. In fact, the manuscript for Chapter 12, for example, has a news clipping run into the text of the draft. On page 23 of the manuscript for Chapter 12 is a five-line clipping, probably from

the *Daily Telegraph*, with the words ‘Mr Justice Finlay’ crossed out and corrected to ‘Mr Justice Hogtie’ and ‘Mr Wetherell’ corrected to ‘Mr Price’. The exchange clipped from the newspaper survived unchanged into the final text of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*: ‘Mr Justice Hogtie (sternly): You must not call counsel your “friend”. You will be good enough to restrain yourself and avoid being impudent in court. Mr Price: I am sorry, my lord’ (p. 194).

Apparently, while ‘modelling’ his scenes on newspaper accounts, Graves liked this touch, with its revelation of the Justice’s character, so much that he could not resist inserting it whole and using it verbatim.

On 26 April, Fuller had agreed to reading the manuscript. By May 3, he was returning the manuscript (of the court scenes, one presumes) to Graves, ‘corrected and amplified’, and worrying that he had made the chapter too long (Chapter 12 did, in fact, grow from one chapter in the first draft to three chapters in the final text). Some of the corrections Fuller made in the manuscript concerned the definition of ‘partnership’, the use of multiple questions in examining witnesses, questions of evidence balanced against questions of law, questioning one’s own witness, leading questions and other fine points. Most significantly, he has rewritten the judgment rendered by the court, added new and missing material, and deleted the issue of ‘concealed fraud’ with which Graves complicated Edith’s possession of the stamp. Graves duly dropped all mentions of concealed fraud from the manuscript.

By 20 May, Fuller was returning the manuscript of the second trial scene in *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. In his letter of transmittal, Fuller notes that he had to ‘rewrite’ the scene ‘entirely’ and says ‘I did the scene in the style of newspaper reports again! He even notes that he is sending *his* manuscript with the 20 May letter, and sending *Graves’s* manuscript back under separate cover. Among his other changes, Fuller gives Mr Merlin a new theory of possession, explaining to Graves that it is more plausible than Graves’s original ‘part and parcel’ argument, which appears in the manuscript. He has also added more historical details for the

Whitebillet line, and cautions Graves that his changes will require adjustments throughout the manuscript, since Fuller has not read the complete manuscript a second time after making his comments. He offers to make a final reading of the proofs if Graves thinks it would be helpful.

The Southern Illinois University Collection contains several loose pages of manuscript in William Fuller's hand. Among them is Fuller's version of the opening paragraphs of the second trial chapter. This Fuller manuscript is in fact virtually identical to the text as published, with only a few stylistic changes and additions by Graves. For example, in sentence one the time is changed to 'yesterday' in the text, and the identifiers 'now the Marchioness of Babraham', 'a rising author', and 'theatrical' are added by Graves to Fuller's draft, as is the phrase 'described as a secretary'. Similarly, in sentence two the time is changed to 'December' and the words 'and astonishing' are added before 'figure of £137,000' (£135,100 in Fuller's manuscript). In sentence three of Chapter 21, only the phrase 'alias Mavis Jongh' is added, along with the word 'very' (pp. 284–285). It is quite clear, from a comparison of Fuller's manuscript of the trial scene with the published text, that his manuscript served as an intermediate draft of this scene, and that Graves made only very minor diction and stylistic changes before the proof stage. And if that seems unlikely, consider the long section beginning with 'Dealing with the point raised so dramatically' (p. 286). This entire paragraph is printed unchanged from Fuller's manuscript, and the exchange between Justice Hogtie, Mr Merlin, and Mr Schreiner which follows, until the appearance of Mildred Young in court (pp. 286–288), has fewer than five changes of Fuller's text, and these are mainly one-word additions. These eight pages of Fuller's manuscript are remarkable proof of just how extensive and important his 'advice' became to the legal scenes in *Antigua*, *Penny*, *Puce*. A similar analysis of the autograph manuscript of the first trial scene will show, though it is not so clearly mentioned in Fuller's letters, that portions of at least six pages are in Fuller's hand.

Fuller's letter of 21 May 1936 is particularly interesting. By

now, more than one manuscript was in the mail, and some confusion begins to arise. Fuller restates his warning of possible libel actions if Graves mentions a court doctor, presumably when Edith Whitebillet faints (Graves subsequently deleted his draft reference to a 'Dr Purdew'). He is pleased that Graves has solved some problems of police procedure by changing the draft to specify that the police who arrest Oliver are from Jane's theatre company, and Fuller suggests a new fee of ten guineas. Fuller's remarks in this letter suggest that the character of Mr Justice Hogtie is a caricature of a 'Charles J' who was involved in the 'Norman Lee case', which Graves had apparently been following; Fuller discusses Charles's sudden change toward the case when a certain witness, a 'Mrs. Richards', entered the court. Fuller also encloses a writ that he has filled in for the case of Price vs. Young.

On 28 May, Fuller provides some research results regarding the laws that govern the manufacture of tobacco products, assuring Graves that there is no such law as the 'Adulterated Foodstuffs and Tobacco Act' mentioned in the chapter on 'Folly's Resurrections'. (Apparently, in 1936 it might actually have been possible – at least legally – to make new cigarettes from old discarded butts.) Fuller also provided a precedent for the injunction Graves apparently continued to insist upon, and answered that he would be very grateful if Graves dedicated *Antigua, Penny, Puce* to him.

The interlocutory injunction Graves uses to stop the first auction is again the subject of Fuller's 8 June letter. He includes some eight pages of details and provides Graves with several alternatives for the form and effect of various injunctions (Graves chooses one of these, making the injunction one taken against Oliver and his agents and servants, including the auction firm; the text of the injunction as printed (p. 158) is identical to a text provided in Fuller's hand, except for the first names of Harrow and Hazlitt). Amusingly, another piece of advice Fuller provides here is that he does not believe Graves has libelled Stanley Gibbons Ltd, so there is no point in his avoiding the use of the firm's name in the novel. In the autograph manuscript, Graves

uses 'Tannery Ribbons' to name a stamp album; in the typescript it is 'Anthony Ribbons', but in the final text it appears as 'Stanley Gibbons'. In the last letter from Fuller in the Southern Illinois University collection, dated 15 June 1936, Fuller once again warns Graves that his novelistic use of the interlocutory injunction may not seem credible.

Thus ends, rather weakly, a remarkable correspondence, some 71 pages of letters and many, many manuscript pages in Fuller's hand revised in Graves's hand, or sections in Fuller's hand incorporated into Graves's pages. There are, in addition, many pages of later typescript annotated and revised in Fuller's hand.

The dedication of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, 'To /WILLIAM FULLER/ in gratitude', is indeed as understated as Fuller might have wished – to satisfy the rules of the Bar on publicity. And it certainly gives no hint of the major role that he – and Graves's other collaborators – had in the creation of this very funny, very successful novel.

The novel's final resolution hints of further cycles of legal storms over possession of the Antigua one-penny. As the narrator remarks, the legal narrative is unresolved: 'in any case we have satisfied ourselves that the newspaper reports quoted give a fair account of both the trials that occur in this book, and if the Judge perhaps gave a wrong decision in the first of these, well – with the greatest respect – judges sometimes do' (p. 311).

Chapters 5 and 6, the most fantastic and the funniest section of the novel, underwent a great deal of revision. Here, where Graves develops Jane's theatrical success and her scientific study of drama, aesthetics, and sex appeal, many pages are glued composites, with lengthy insertions written later in black ink. There are substantial interlinear revisions in the sections dealing with Jane's varied career, from dancer to actor to founder of Folly's Resurrections cigarettes (made from the butts dropped in theatre lobbies). This very funny sequence apparently was among the most difficult sections for Graves to write, demanding sudden changes in tone to match the development of Jane's character. There is some evidence, in the Southern Illinois University

collections of Graves's manuscripts and letters, that even this section of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* used objective material, or at least required extensive research. This evidence includes, for example, another newspaper clipping about a 'Mrs. Ford' and her 'Memories of her 65 years in Theatres' (this clipping, too, probably from the *Daily Telegraph*).

In the years since childhood, Jane has become a figure in popular theatre. After studying acting, Jane had great success playing a sequence of characters, including Doris Edwards, Madame Blanche, Leonora Laydie, and Nuda Elkan (an exotic dancer). For this last character, Jane 'studied the mechanics of sex appeal, and collected stupendous fan mail, including proposals of marriage or worse' (p. 67). Jane's approach to theatre is rational and workmanlike:

Jane had studied all the ways in which, while keeping technically within the letter of the Lord Chamberlain's regulations about nudity on the stage, one appeared, most of the time, to be wearing absolutely nothing at all. Jane was not lasciviously inclined, but she had no romantic sense of modesty: she wanted to know how to get an audience sweating hot and cold, and she wanted to make the experiment herself. (p. 67)

The money Jane makes from these 'experiments' goes to support her friend from childhood, Edith, who is working to perfect a sort of 'robot' that could be used to replace human actors altogether. In the meantime, Jane chooses her 'foils [...] from the queue at a Labour Exchange', in order to stage 'a dreadful mix of obscenity and piousness' called *The Barber's Pole*.

Eventually, Jane's use of 'foils' is so successful that she creates an entire theatre company from the male and female characters she developed, each one played by one of the 'interesting but socially maladjustable' patients of a Dr. Parmesan. Jane Palfrey Amalgamated is a company composed completely of these types. 'The troupe had taken so kindly to their personalities that Jane had eventually permitted the seven originals to change their names by

deed-poll to the ones she had given them, though of course on condition that if they ever broke their contract they were to change them back again' (p. 78). With 'their artificial obsessions that they were exactly what Jane had told them they were', all live together, including one 'specimen' with six very useful personalities, each with 'different accents and styles', each of which is 'quite stageable'. As the members of the company become more popular, Jane creates details of their fictional private lives for the press.

The focus on Jane's business acumen allows Graves also to poke fun at some new aspects of 1930s celebrity. Jane's stars gain publicity and profit from 'a new method of advertising that Jane initiated. Other theatrical stars wrote only in praise of silk stockings, cigarettes, whisky and the like; but the stars of Jane Palfrey Amalgamated always had something cruelly double-edged to say' (84). The link between theatrical celebrities and the press is manipulated for both profit and malice by Jane when she allows her actors to upstage Oliver's wedding reception with their over-the-top behaviour and faked cases of food poisoning (which of course the 'actors' believe to be real – just as they believe their fictional identities to be real).

The focus on the theatre also allows Graves to develop his commentary on popular art and artists. For example, Jane has a theory of farce which is very similar to Graves's own: 'Jane had a theory that the test of good stage farce was its impossibility in real life. This theory blinded her to the fact that in real life impossible situations do occur' (p. 103–104). This definition will seem familiar to readers of Graves's 'The Devil's Advice to Story Tellers', of course. While actions taken from life might not be extreme enough for Jane's plots, she does take much of her dialogue from real life, from situations she has provoked, or from surreptitious recordings of dinner table conversation (p. 89). Jane will not allow her actors to vary their lives or parts in the slightest, and their contracts require them to adopt, 'for all social purposes, the names and personalities she had allotted to them for off-stage use'. She has a very reductionist theory of the audience's interest in actors: theatre-goers

are not interested in Uriah Heep, or Bugs O’Gorman, *as such*. It is the highest common factor of all these villainous parts, namely the personality of the actor, his natural off-stage existence with all its individual human detail, that makes the real appeal. But acting is a purely imitative art, and the qualities that make our ordinary, efficient actor do not make an interesting off-stage character. (pp. 75–76)

Obviously, the logical conclusion is to create ‘interesting off-stage characters’ for the actors to inhabit.

She had first to invent the appropriate off-stage personalities for her company of ten, complete with circumstantial private histories, temperaments and mannerisms. Then she had to find ten actors who roughly fitted these personalities and were ready to be them just for the fun of the thing, and/or because they were tired of their own dull selves. Finally, when these personalities had become second nature to them, she had to teach them how to let second nature shine through their stage performances. (p. 77)

Eventually, Jane’s techniques – all stemming from her youthful dreams of filling a stage with marionettes (later, with Edna’s help, the dream turns to robot-actors) – transfer perfectly to the motion picture industry. After Jane and ‘The Emu’ become partners in the film business, while they are waiting for their studios to be built, they ‘learn their job practically at Elstree and begin picking up cameramen and technicians’ (p. 244). They create a successful film, *Apes and Peacocks*, but Jane knows the next movie can be better still, ‘when the Company had learned to accommodate itself more spontaneously to screen technique’.

Even Jane’s approach to stage humour is rational. She reads *Three Men in a Boat*, but not ‘merely for amusement. Jane read practically nothing for amusement; nearly everything was for information.’ Jane and Edith agree, for example, that jokes aren’t funny.

Edith, a scientist, could not believe in jokes as objective phenomena. Jane meant that jokes were part of her professional stock-in-trade, something to break down the audience's self-possession with, not to laugh at. [...] 'Popular humour cannot aim too low,' she once wrote to Edith. 'Jerome K. Jerome was one of the few English humorists who has ever realized this. (Surtees was another.) Jokes about cheese and stuffed trouts in riverside inns, and sea-sickness. But these jokes need a background of really sickening sentiment. The older and more awful the jokes, the more cloying must be the accompanying treacle.' (p. 69)

Jane goes on to analyse the technique as used in *Three Men in a Boat*, which she admires. To combine opposites, sentiment and grief with farce, 'needs courage – courage and perfect shamelessness'. To amplify her point, Jane adds, 'Dickens had both. *Pickwick Papers* is built on the same principle of opposites.'

To illustrate Jane's methods, consider one example of her 'creations'. One of Jane's characters, Owen Slingsby, is based on her brother Oliver: with her notebooks and memories and constantly asking herself how Oliver would 'behave in such and such circumstances', Jane has built up the persona and even the history of Owen Slingsby.

He had been successively a boy evangelist, a temperance worker, an elementary school master, a ship's steward and a salesman in a Bond Street picture shop [...]. He wrote, too, in an amateur way. He was now supposed to be hard at work on a first novel; first novels are always semi-autobiographical, so one would soon know even more than one knew now about Slingsby's past. His talk and mannerisms were taking on a satisfactorily distinctive tone, and Jane always kept him in the height of fashion. She had decided that he would be revealed in his novel as the natural son of the golf-professional at a fashionable links and the Club-house caretaker's sister. But [...] he was in character and mannerisms the living image of her brother Oliver. (p. 81)

In fact, Jane can't quite reproduce in Slingsby the 'irritable movements of the hands and head' she remembers in Oliver; hence the meeting before 'The Stamp Collector', and hence the request for half the proceeds of the stamp collection, both at first

simply calculated attempts to irritate Oliver and record the results.

To add insult, ‘Owen Slingsby’ has been writing *Confessions of a Cad*, ‘his autobiographical first novel’, based of course on Oliver’s life (the chapter headings include ‘I Commit Perjury’ and ‘I Poison My Wedding Guests’). This is the occasion for a long aside on the legal technicalities of libel, as is Oliver’s first attendance at the Burlington Theatre to see ‘Slingsby’ act. ‘The *Confessions*, which was a hurried collaboration between Jane and Algernon Hoyland, sold so well, so well, so very well, that even a few booksellers found time to read it in their annual holiday’ (p. 249). As one bookseller says to another:

Take the *Confessions of a Cad*, now: it will not *live*, it is not wholesome, it is not humorous, it is not well written, it does not depict decent characters, and yet it ran away with the whole Spring season! That’s the devil of it. We’d have been in the red without that book, Jackson. It paid for our passages out here [...] for this new Panama tie of mine [...] for a small flutter at the Casino tonight. I tell you, Jackson, I feel – I feel like a fancy-man living off the immoral earnings of a woman of a certain class. (p. 250)

Other characters in *Antigua*, *Penny*, *Puce* changed, too, during Graves’s composition of the novel. Oliver, the brother and unsuccessful novelist, is a classic ‘also-ran’ in life and in school, never quite making first eleven in anything; Graves adds details which make him even more ineffectual. In the first draft, the books on Oliver’s shelf are by Henry James, George Meredith, W. H. Hudson, Joseph Conrad, and Virginia Woolf; the final text changes the list to Conrad, Hudson, Mary Webb, Eric Linklater, Sheila Kaye-Smith, and the Powys brothers, a group by and large less impressive, and indicating the superficiality of Oliver’s tastes. Though Graves deletes a few oblique references to public-school platonic homosexuality from early versions, emphasis on a bedside photo at Charchester firmly establishes Oliver as a mother’s boy – damning, but less so than the early version would

have it. The final paragraph in Chapter 4, which apologises in fine nineteenth century style for lingering at Charchester, is a late addition but affirms that a knowledge of public school ‘bloods’ is necessary to understanding Oliver.

Oliver’s character is presented much more simply than is Jane’s. He has a seventh floor flat near Battersea Park, on the wrong side of the river. The pictures and books in his apartment show him to be one of those doomed always to be Second Eleven in achievement and in tastes. His ambition is to be considered ‘a good all-round man’. Though Oliver has kept his mother’s Dutch miniatures, Rowlandson caricatures, first edition of Spenser, pre-Reformation silver pyx, and fourteenth century French Book of Hours and a carved ivory Madonna and Child, these he keeps in a trunk; it would never have occurred to Oliver to substitute ‘these genuine pieces of art for the college photos, Alpine scenes, Medici prints and schoolboy prize cups with which he has decorated his rooms’.

Since leaving Charchester, Oliver has pursued a career as a novelist, but has not achieved any great success:

Jane’s chief criticism of Oliver’s first two novels (foreign travel and Riviera life) when she had read them in typescript – and they never went any further than that – was that he got all his characters too soon off the mark. She told him he should introduce them one by one, not throw a great dinner party on the first page and expect the reader immediately to master the identify of everyone present and pigeonhole all the various scraps of conversation for future reference; especially when on this or that nuance, belike, the fate of the story would turn. (p. 94)

To Oliver’s assertion that he doesn’t ‘write them merely for money’, Jane accuses him of being a very inferior sort of writer indeed. Her very Gravesian typology of writers is worth quoting in its entirety:

The first way is to give the public what it wants, just as it wants it – the method of the popular entertainer. Then there is the way of writing without any consideration for the taste of the public: and not complaining if the public is ungrateful. That [...] I must call the method of the eccentric. I admire the conscientious eccentric as much as I do the conscientious popular entertainer: I like to see things published occasionally that are completely unreadable. But you, Oliver Price, are the third sort of writer, the sort that tries to feed the public what he thinks the public will think it ought to like because it's just a little superior. You're the sort that says, 'I don't write merely for money', meaning, really, 'I don't want to choose between being either famous in the present or else famous in the future. I want it both ways.' For which, Brother, both the intellectual reader and the ordinary vulgar reader will unanimously despise you. (p. 95)

When, later in the novel, Jane sends her Australian cousin to switch bookplates in Oliver's copy of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, the reader learns just how abominable a novelist Oliver is when the cousin reads a sentence from Oliver's novel in progress: "‘Nay,’ cried the good bailiff of Hochschloss, ‘all folk who journey through this bailiwick must first drink the health of my Lord the Duke: in mead, be they poor; in good Rhine wine, be they of the better sort’" (144). His manuscript, we eventually learn, reminds Edith, who is also Oliver's love interest, of *Ivanhoe* – but the comparison inevitably offends Oliver. Oliver has also written a play, 'a political satire all about Fascists and Communists in a place called Angletania, which was really England'. His play has been turned down by four managers. 'They're all hopelessly the same, won't try anything new,' he complains.

Oliver is a very workmanlike writer, at best a journeyman who counts words. 'It was his habit, every morning when he started work, to write the date in the margin as an encouragement to himself. He arrived at twelve hundred words a day: which meant about seven thousand a week, because he did not work on Sundays – an old scruple' (p. 225). Ten weeks to write seventy

thousand words, another ten weeks of revision, Oliver once figured, ‘but it had taken him three times as long, polishing and polishing’ (p. 225). Not exactly an inspired writer.

When Oliver publishes his novel, ‘he had to pay to get it published and was grossly overcharged’. The publishers ask for even more money for advertising costs, but still the book sells only ‘forty-five copies in England and seven in Canada. It is always a mystery in such cases who the forty-five buyers are.’ Jane thinks she knows who they are:

Probably [...] forty-five old ladies who come very slowly into forty-five bookshops exactly at closing time and say to the forty-five assistants: ‘Please, young man, I want a nice interesting book of the kind that won’t keep me awake at night’. [...] And the forty-five assistants reply: ‘We have the very thing for you, Ma’am. *A Session of the Diet*, by O. Price. It’s one long yawn.’ (p. 246)

In case Oliver’s novel doesn’t die of its own merits, ‘The Emu’ spends ‘four days at the Institute of Medieval Studies looking up minor historical points’ and locates fourteen anachronisms. Jane finds ‘seven faults in grammar and three textual contradictions’.

Not much of a harvest really. An average drama of real life contains just as many anachronisms, hundreds of grammatical faults, and a textual contradiction every two or three minutes. But fourteen anachronisms, seven glaring grammatical faults, and three flat textual contradictions look pretty bad when listed in a review under the heading: ‘History, Fiction – and Hash.’ (p. 247)

Since Jane has ‘an instinct against anonymous abuse’, she signs the review – which she has placed in a leading Sunday paper by a friend – ‘Owen Slingsby’, the name of the character she based on Oliver in the first place.

One could easily continue, with so much of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* and its appeal centered on such an utterly cynical view of

commercially successful novels and plays and films. Perhaps this is Graves's view of such success. He wrote the novel, as he confided to his diary, 'during [a] money-shortage as a means of extracting higher royalties from Harrison Smith for *C. the God*'.<sup>5</sup> But he worked very hard to get the details regarding the trials and the auctions and the history of the one-penny stamp *exactly* right. And, of course, Graves had just achieved both critical and popular success with the greatest of his historical novels, *I, Claudius*.

It is in the context of his own methods and aims for composing *Antigua, Penny, Puce* – the calculated choice of subject, the wholesale adaptation and adoption of details from his friends' letters, the collaboration with William Fuller, the absorption of current newspaper accounts of trials into the very manuscript of the novel – that the irony of the contrasting attitudes and methods of Oliver and Jane may be most appreciated. With the cynical and ironic attitudes it displays toward both the 'serious' novelist and the calculating but manipulative playwright – not to mention the cynicism betrayed by its own remarkably similar methods of composition – *Antigua, Penny, Puce* can be read as a thoroughly self-reflexive comic critique of the popular and commercial in the mid-1930s.

*Illinois State University*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again, I wish to thank the staff of Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, for access to the SIU Robert Graves Collection. I am grateful for their continuing help.

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John W. Presley, 'Narrative Structure in Graves's Historical Fiction', *Gravesiana*, 1.3, (June 1997), 292–304.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 17–18, 230.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura* (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Graves's 1935–39 Diary (University of Victoria, British Columbia); quoted by Seymour-Smith, p. 252.

# Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves: The Question of Collaboration

Mark Jacobs

The question of the nature and extent of collaboration between Laura (Riding) Jackson and Robert Graves arises in the first place because, ever since the appearance of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1927) and *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies* (1928), the giant share of who-wrote-what has been awarded to Robert Graves; or the books have been misascribed as ‘by Robert Graves and Laura Riding’, or simply assigned to ‘Robert Graves’s, despite both works appearing as by ‘Laura Riding and Robert Graves’s, and despite the authors, either singly or together, protesting that the proper order of names is as it appears on the books’ dust-wrappers, spines and title-pages. In the Foreword to *A Pamphlet* they say:

At the beginning of a previous book, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, we carefully described it as a word-by-word collaboration. We did this because it was obvious to us that the vulgarity of a certain type of English reviewer would be encouraged by the combined circumstances that the first author was a woman and that the second was a man whose name was perhaps better known to him than that of the first; and because we were interested to see how far this vulgarity would persist in spite of our statement.

They list seven newspapers and journals which ‘succumbed’ to the ‘vulgarity’ of quoting the book as by ‘Robert Graves’ and conclude by insisting that the *A Pamphlet* is also a ‘word-by-word’ collaboration. But despite this declaration in 1928, as decade followed decade, right to the present day, both books are frequently cited as ‘by Robert Graves’, occasionally as ‘by Robert Graves and Laura Riding’, and often as ‘by Robert Graves (with Laura Riding)’. This last is a favourite, but in the Riding/Graves

case it is a particularly misleading, bibliographic convention, employed not only by bibliographers such as Higginson (1966, rev. 1987), but by the Oxford, Cambridge and other various ‘histories’ and ‘companions’ to modernist literature. Even when, on a number of occasions, such ‘scholarly’ productions have been approached by Laura (Riding) Jackson and others to amend their listings, they have by and large either ignored her request or, impertinently it may be thought by some, questioned it. Thus many of those listings may still be seen, even in their re-issues, as they were in their original state of publication, misinforming yet another generation of students and scholars and obfuscating the true balance of collaboration.

Between 1927 and about 1940 the blame for the reversing of the two names or for the disappearance altogether of the first-named (Laura Riding) lies squarely in the chauvinist camp of reviewers – joined, however, by some critics, notably William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) and John Sparrow in *Sense and Poetry* (1934) – but after that the practice becomes much more insidious, with Graves scholars and biographers insistently implying that such work-collaborations primarily belonged to him. One typical quotation from Martin Seymour-Smith – Graves’s children’s tutor at one time and then his biographer – should suffice for the moment. It is from *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (1982), to which later biographers are readily drawn.

The two collaborations [*A Survey* and *A Pamphlet*] with Graves are better written, and attracted much more general attention. Certainly Graves helped teach her to write more lucidly. He also served her as a source of information. Gottschalk [Riding’s former husband] met Graves on a visit to England in 1926 and gained the impression that he wrote most of the ‘collaborations’; the evidence, documentary, stylistic and otherwise, confirms this.<sup>1</sup>

And this, a little further on:

[T] heir respective contributions are about equal, although the book is ultimately more his than hers, simply because he possessed a sound literary background whereas she did not. They agreed to call it a ‘word-by-word’ collaboration; and so it was.

The organization of the book’s argument, and the lucidity of its style, are his. Her own solitary prose efforts make this abundantly clear.<sup>2</sup>

And much more pushing on one side of the scales to the same effect. He fails to mention that the whole of the final chapter of *A Survey* is a revised and edited version of her essay ‘T. E. Hulme, The New Barbarism, & Gertrude Stein’ which appeared in her *Contemporaries and Snobs*, written at the same time as *A Survey* and published in 1928.<sup>3</sup> He avoids it either because it is an embarrassment to his own argument – compare the ‘style’ of this chapter with earlier ones, for instance – or because he never read the whole of *Contemporaries and Snobs* – there are several indications that he may have read only a part of the first essay in the book. If one wishes to put just a small piece of evidence back in the scales to weigh against Mr Seymour-Smith, apart from the statement in *A Pamphlet*, there is a simple indication of Graves’s change of heart in matters poetic in his *Poems (1914–26)*, actually published in 1927. Having previously allowed his poems to be reprinted by anthologies over the years, in the Note to this volume he expresses his suspicion of anthologies. I have, he says, ‘given the benefit of the doubt to too many merely “anthology pieces.”’ This was written before *A Pamphlet* was published.

Seymour-Smith literarily murdered Laura Riding throughout his book on Robert Graves and was applauded by his reviewers. Later commentators, such as Richard Perceval Graves and Miranda Seymour, quarrel with him in minor matters, but accept his views on Laura Riding generally. They and other critics are at pains to point out certain earlier work of Graves, such as *On English Poetry* (1922), as indicating that he was responsible in the main for the collaborative books.

I think the reverse is true, that Laura Riding’s critical intellect is

to the fore in the composition of the two books. Graves was a poet of talent before he met Laura Riding, and there is no reason to doubt that they leant on each other in their collaborative prose work, but Graves's work before 1927 has nothing in common, in terms of the principles and 'style', with the two books in question. Just as his poetry changed after he met Laura Riding, as is widely acknowledged – and few will deny that he wrote some of his best poems during the years of their association, such as 'Warning To Children', 'In Broken Images', 'Flying Crooked', 'Lost Acres', 'It Was All Very Tidy', 'The Terraced Valley', etc. – so did his prose, as with *Mrs Fisher*, *Good-bye to All That*, and, of course, the Claudius novels among others. All these books, and a number of his others, contain acknowledgements to Laura Riding for her help: for example, in the Foreword to Graves's *Collected Poems* (1938), p. xxiv, and in the extraordinary 'Epilogue' to *Good-bye to All That*, both quoted below.

Critics tend, because of their training, to look backward to trace early seeds of ideas encountered in an author's subsequent work. It is fairly easy, certainly, to look back from *A Survey* and see that Graves had published four critical works (if *Lars Porsena* is included) by 1927, as well as several books and pamphlets of poems, whereas Laura Riding had published one critical essay (in America, in 1925) and two volumes of poetry. Similarly, it is natural that there are locatable passages in Graves's earlier critical books that touch on points later explored in *A Survey* (although few if any of the principles in *A Pamphlet*, it should be noted). After all, Graves is discussing poetry then, before 1926, as does *A Survey* later. But there the similarity ends. The methodical principles of *A Survey* have nothing in common with his earlier books. However, as that gently humorous Foreword to *A Pamphlet* anticipates, the 'vulgarity' of certain reviewers would dispose them toward discounting Laura Riding both as a woman and as because she was the lesser known of the two authors.

If critics and scholars look forward from *A Survey* instead of backward to Robert Graves's earlier criticism, a different picture emerges. If, for example, we take *A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*

(the seeds of which are to be found throughout *A Survey*), we can see why the two authors notoriously became thought of by editors to be over-scrupulous about where they permitted their poems to be anthologised. The central point of *A Pamphlet* is its argument against the wholesale production of anthologies that encourage readers and poets alike to see poems as isolated entities, one-offs, whereas true poems are a continuum, a process of discovery and a revealing of meaning ('truth' as the authors determine it in *A Survey*) in the poet's life and world. To publish a poem singly in an anthology misrepresents that continuum, misrepresents the poet. So, for example, to publish a poem under the anthologistic category of, say, 'Nature', in which any number of Riding's and Graves's poems might fall, would present the poets as having an affirmative concern with nature, as being 'nature poets', loosely identifiable with any number of other poets, Wordsworth, for instance. But in the case of Riding and Graves, nothing could be further from the truth. Both wrote poems indicating the relative 'stupidity' of nature in contrast with the human. Far worse, anthologies encourage poets themselves into writing 'pretty' poems, simply for the sake of public appearance (this is at the heart of their devastating critique of Yeats's 'Innisfree'), instead of devoting themselves to the real business of poetry, the 'real business' being, as *A Survey* puts it, the 'making' of poetry.

*A Pamphlet* is a hard-argued case against poets allowing their work to appear indiscriminately in any anthology and against anthologies generally (there are exceptions) which, they say, bedevil the very idea of what true poetry is. Their principle in post-*Pamphlet* years was to permit their poems to appear in anthologies only when they could be assured, in agreement with the editors, that the selection of poems was theirs, and they could choose in which other poets' company they were to appear. This is the principle guiding their acceptance of Michael Roberts in his *Faber Book of Modern Verse*, where Roberts was cooperative, just as it is the principle behind their refusal to appear in Yeats' *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, where Yeats wasn't.

Robert Graves's earlier critical works, *On English Poetry* (1922),

*The Meaning of Dreams* (1924) and *Poetic Unreason* (1925), rely in great part on his interest in psychology following his meeting W. H. R. Rivers, also a friend of Siegfried Sassoon, at Craiglockhart, as described in *Good-bye To All That* (Chapter xxiv). Nothing in *A Survey* or *A Pamphlet* indicates the slightest interest in psychology. The word is mentioned only once or twice (in *A Survey*), and then somewhat disparagingly. Indeed, one could go through each of Graves's earlier books and argue that *A Survey* is written *against* his views then, rather than from them. His argument, for instance, in *On English Poetry*, extended in *Poetic Unreason*, that a poem is an escape from irresolvable emotional conflict and that it tricks the reader into agreement by use of shock tactics, of unexpected verbal manoeuvre, has no place in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, and in fact is argued against, as in the discussion of Ezra Pound's work (but also the work of the Sitwells and others). The main point of the Riding-Graves argument against Yeats's 'Innisfree' in *A Pamphlet* is that it is all smoke and mirrors – the mere 'wish-fulfilment mechanism of the ordinary fatigue-dream' which 'does not hold together' (p. 97).

If we look forward we can see that both poets' later views on poetry, literature and criticism are traceable from *A Survey*, and from their stance on anthologies in *A Pamphlet*, and are developed from the two books, not from any earlier work, with the possible exception of Laura Riding's first essay, *A Prophecy or a Plea* (*The Reviewer*, April 1925), the general principle of which, that a poet's job is to make something new, uncover new 'meaning', is consonant with the general principle of *A Survey*. Their complaints against many of the poets featured in *A Survey* (see the chapter 'The Making of Meaning', for example, especially their criticism of Ezra Pound) may be seen as understood, developed or extended in their subsequent books. Their individual prose work, however, went in different directions. Graves most notably turned his back on polite English society with the publication of *Good-bye to All That* and he locates the change of his direction in life in the advent of Laura Riding:

And yet the silence is false if it makes the book [*Good-bye to All That*] seem to have been written forward from where I was instead of backward from where you are. If the direction of the book were forward I should still be inside the body of it, arguing morals, literature, politics, suffering violent physical experiences, falling in and out of love [...] instead of here outside, writing this letter to you, as one also living against kind – indeed, rather against myself.

[...] How she [Nancy Nicholson] and I happening by seeming accident upon your teasing *Quids*, were drawn to write to you, who were in America, asking you to come to us. How, though you knew no more of us than we of you, and indeed less (for you knew me at a disadvantage, by my poems of the war), you forthwith came. [...]

That was the beginning of the end, and the end and after is yours. [...] <sup>4</sup>

Graves here clearly discounts, as well as his own earlier work, the general course of his life's preoccupations up to 1926, when he and Riding first met. Meanwhile, Riding had published her *Contemporaries and Snobs*, where much of what is writ small in *A Survey* can be seen in detailed form, remembering that both books were written at the same time, and published within a few months of each other, as Graves reminds us in a letter of 1927 to Sassoon:

Laura's *Contemporaries and Snobs*, a very severe show-up of modernist criticism and snob-poets, comes out in a few weeks. So does our joint *Survey of Modernist Poetry*. The former is the better book, the latter the more courteous.<sup>5</sup>

Then followed *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928), in which she examines variously the nature of the poet's self and its reality (as opposed to what is generally and everywhere thought of as 'reality', that is, the surrounding world in all its various forms, a theme she takes up from the two books in question and 'A Prophecy or a Plea'). During the same period, Graves, busy on

other projects, published *Lars Porsena* (1927), *Lawrence and the Arabs* (1927), *Mrs Fisher* (1928), *The Shout* (1929) and *Good-bye to All That* (1929), none of which focus exclusively, if at all, on poetry. Both authors, of course, were busy writing and publishing poetry during this three-year period, as well as preparing the Seizin Press, but it was Riding who continued to drive home the principles of *A Survey* and *A Pamphlet*, not Graves, who did not return to poetic criticism until the *Epilogue* volumes began to appear in 1935, and then under the guidance of Riding, the editor.

That chronological publishing sequence at least suggests that Riding was the critical force, rather than Graves, behind the two books, a possible further indication being that after the break-up of the partnership in 1940, he soon permitted his poems to find their way into various anthologies whereas she stuck to the highly selective and collaborative principles of the *Pamphlet* for the rest of her life, despite some poems reprinted in anthologies either without her knowledge or against her wishes. As for Graves's later criticism, some two-thirds of his influential *The Common Asphodel* (1949) acknowledgedly consists of work originally written jointly with Riding or under her editorship. It can also be shown (space does not permit here) that the rest of Graves's later work, such as *The Crowning Privilege* (1955), *Oxford Addresses On Poetry* (1961) and *Mammon and the Black Goddess* (1965), drew heavily from the critical principles laid down in *A Survey*, particularly, for example, for the comments he makes on poets such as T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and W. H. Auden, where the arguments are not developed much, if at all, beyond the critical stance of *A Survey*. It might seem here that the exception is *The White Goddess* (1948), but this too has critical passages in line with *A Survey*, with regard, say, to the advantages of romantic over classical poets and much else. But as I suggest elsewhere, the formation of *The White Goddess* takes up yet another story within the story of the Riding-Graves partnership.<sup>6</sup>

It needs to be said, even at this late date, that neither critics nor biographers of Graves have truly read, nor have they understood, to any degree beyond the merely superficial, Riding's work,

whether poetry or prose. Seymour-Smith claimed to have done so, but he refers in moderately knowledgeable detail to only one of her essays, 'The Damned Thing', which seems to have taken his fancy: the piece is from her *Anarchism Is Not Enough* (1928, 2001), and Seymour-Smith reproduces its thesis in his book *Sex And Society* (1975). But beyond that his comments, however authoritative they may sound, are actually generalised and faulty. The same is true of earlier critics, such as Douglas Day among others. Both Seymour-Smith and R. P. Graves in their respective works are, beyond any doubt, anti-Riding, often virulently, both taking their lead from a vicious picturing of her presented by Thomas Matthews in 1977 in *Jacks Or Better (Under The Influence* in the London edition). Matthews had his own axe to grind, but in the representations of Laura (Riding) Jackson in this book it can clearly be discerned, if readers are alerted to the fact, that he, Matthews, was present at none of the crucial scenes he describes, although his adroit journalism tries to make it appear he was. In one such depicted scene, for example, told as though he was present as witness, he was, in fact, in New York. This, too, highly unpleasant as it is, is a story within the story, but not recountable here. In brief, critics and biographers have not done their job of even-handed investigation. Had they done justice to both authors they would not have been so quick to ascribe *A Survey* and *A Pamphlet* as falling within the intellectual sway of the Graves canon.

And this is the point after all. For all the intricate knowledge that has built up on the subject of Robert Graves, all the intimate biographical detail brought to light, as background to the work he produced between 1926 and 1940, (the 'Laura Riding years' as they have even been called), critics, scholars and academics in effect reject the evidence both from Graves's own published statements, and from any number of witnesses to his verbal statements, of the immense esteem in which he held Laura Riding. He, as she, was perfectly insistent on how the two books in question should be viewed as true collaborations, and he as she is equally insistent that the order of the names as they appear is the

true order. He is also candidly honest, in his books of the time, in his gratitude for the care she devoted to helping him with his work generally, in lending it her critical acumen. Add to this much other testimony of his to her personal grace and intellect and we begin to see that Graves's critics and biographers have done him no service at all in labelling him as obviously *stupid* when it came to the subject of Laura Riding. For *stupid* he must indeed have been if he was wrong about Laura Riding's role in his life for fourteen years and if they are right in dismissing her.

Two quotations from Graves should suffice to illustrate the point. The first is the one from the Foreword to his *Collected Poems* (1938):

In 1925 I first became acquainted with the poems and critical work of Laura Riding, and in 1926 with herself; and slowly began to revise my whole attitude to poetry. (The change begins half-way through Part II [of this volume].

The Foreword concludes:

I have to thank Laura Riding for her constructive and detailed criticism of my poems in various stages of composition – a generosity from which so many contemporary poets besides myself have benefited.

Graves's 'many' included not only friends such as James Reeves, Norman Cameron, Jacob Bronowski, and several other writers who contributed to *Epilogue*, but also relative 'outsiders' who engaged with them at different times, such as Ronald Bottrall, George Buchanan and Winifred Holmes.

The second Graves quotation is drawn from an exchange which scholars have either avoided for what it says or have been altogether ignorant of: the joint Riding-Graves essay 'From a Private Correspondence on Reality' in *Epilogue* III, 1937:

I am aware that your consciousness is of a final quality and that you are yet someone immediate and actual. How do I know this?

By a process of elimination, I should say: I have always had a blind but obstinate will to discover a consciousness of this quality and a realist's conviction that it was to be found in my time, and a painful frankness with myself that it was not my consciousness, and a physical intuition that it would be a woman's. And the process of elimination points to you, with a fantastic kind of logic. But there is nothing fantastic in my conviction that you think finally: because the recognition your thought invokes in me is not blind, but becomes clearer at every step.

[...] And so I have looked to you for the way out: mere negation, or belief, or speculation, I could have accomplished myself.<sup>7</sup>

With other acknowledgements through the intervening years, there is nothing ambiguous about either of these two quotations, as lucid and intelligent as they are sincere – ample testament of Robert Graves's respect for Laura Riding.

The problem was, and always has been, that academic patience with knotty problems is short-lived. This defect in critics, including scholars and academics as well as plain readers, was actually explored at length in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* in Chapter VI, 'The Making of the Poem'. For instance, in the context of a discussion on e. e. cummings, the authors refer to the 'sales-principle' of poetry, whereby the more readable or comprehensible a poem is, and the more it sells, the more it will be accepted as a 'good' poem:

The trouble is not with the reader or with the poem but with the government of criticism by the sales-principle, which must make an average standard of public taste allowing for the most backward reader of each of the three reading classes corresponding with the three different degrees of popular education. [...] [A]t the present time, regardless of the possible classification of a poem as *good* or *bad* according to the standards it suggests, it is enough for the critic to call a poem

*obscure* to relieve himself of the obligation of giving a real criticism of it.

Here is an example, in the first eighteen lines of what might be called a modernist poem, of the ‘obscurity’ which would probably cause it to be put aside by the critic after he had allowed it the customary two-minute reading (for if the poet has obeyed all the rules [as laid down by criticism], this is long enough to give a rough idea of what the poem is all about – and that is all that is generally wanted). Or if by chance the critic is ‘advanced’, serving such a limited public that his criticism is mere literary snobbery, he may pretend to understand it and dislike it equally, because he does not understand it; or, if he does, he may dislike it all the same because it is ‘too simple’ (a common charge against the ‘obscure’ poem when its obscurity is seen to have been only excessive clearness).

Now, the continual complaint against Laura (Riding) Jackson since her work first appeared in collected form (*The Close Chaplet*, 1926) is the charge of ‘obscurity’. The poem the authors proceed to use as an example of the ‘obscure’ poem is, rather mischievously, a previously unpublished one of hers, ‘The Rugged Black of Anger’, which is unassigned authorially. It begins,

The rugged black of anger  
Has an uncertain smile-border.  
The transition from one kind to another  
May be love between neighbour and neighbour;  
Or natural death; or discontinuance [...].

The authors defend the poem at length against the charge of ‘obscurity’, or the reaction of ‘blank incomprehension’ as it might be, and take their readers through the necessary work of expanding the poem to reveal its meaning, without damage to its integrity, using a technique which has similarities to their examination of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 129, demonstrating, for

example, that both poems resist alteration or changes to their meanings. What is evident is that Laura Riding (but Robert Graves, too) faced that deadly charge of ‘obscurity’ as early as 1927 and dealt with it calmly and with equanimity. She could not have guessed perhaps that she would have to deal with it all the way to the last years of her life.

Had critics believed Graves as actually meaning what he said about Laura Riding’s importance to him – in her own right, as well as to him personally until long after their association ended (he informed Douglas Day in 1963 that she was the most underestimated poet of the twentieth century, albeit Professor Day chose to disagree) – they might have looked to her work for further elucidation of some of the difficult problems thrown up by *A Survey*.

Also elucidated by her later work would be the rationale of the two authors’ apparent isolation from and apparent standoffishness with their contemporaries, which was a complaint made by the Sitwells, Grigson and others, for example (complaints, too, about their strictures against a number of poets, and against anthologies, were widespread after the two books were published). Properly informed critics, and biographers as well, would perceive, for instance, that the fairly mild, at any rate well-mannered, critical stance in *A Survey* against T. S. Eliot (among others) is in effect a gloss on Laura Riding’s more outspoken commentary running through *Contemporaries and Snobs* – the book, it must be repeated, she was writing at the same time as working on *A Survey* – in which she berates Eliot for, among other things, formulating the doctrine that the creative act of writing a poem must occur simultaneously with the critical act, that is, that the poem must be written from the critical centre of consciousness and must not act as though it is independent.

While *A Survey* restrains itself to a mere pointing at Eliot’s ‘anti-Jewish’ stance in ‘Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleistein with a Cigar’ and the ‘disintegration’ of his poetry from ‘Prufrock’ to ‘The Waste Land’, in *Contemporaries and Snobs* Laura Riding goes into much more detail. For example, in the first of the three

sections of the book, 'Poetry & the Literary Universe' (pp. 108 – 109), she has this to say:

If, then, in spite of everything, literature was to go on at all, it had to be wilfully modern; it had to coincide with its age not by the accidents of personal authorship but by a calculated critical method. Aristotelianism brought up-to-date could therefore settle the problem of contemporary literature better than any new philosophical solution. [...]

In such an aesthetic the prevailing system of knowledge becomes the self-knowing Reason. Science is the modernized Self of reality (T. S. Eliot's thomistic God); not Baconian science, which was merely a human method of knowledge, but science as sophisticated substance superior to time and space qualifications, which are the marks of nonsensical, poetical facetiousness in humanity. Advanced contemporary poetry is, as may be verified, facetious, poetical and full of sophisticated knowledge: poetic snobbism is directed chiefly against the humanity, the infantilism, of the poetic mind. And poetry excuses itself by giving itself this ironic title: 'The Private Life of the Atom, A Dream Fantasy'. Poetry must, that is, be a joke at its own expense, a mature exercise in juvenility. It must no longer live in a time when

'Life went a-maying  
With Nature, Hope and Poesy.'

It must rather approach that informed but idiotic bird-wittedness which is the chief charm of the nursery-rhyme. Mr. Eliot's *Waste Land* is the great twentieth-century nursery-rhyme.

[...] The poet renounces his citizenship in gross humanity and joins that dim social class which lives in the genteel retirement of a few superior critical journals.

As she points out earlier (p. 84):

Intelligence, the historical fallacy, is the philosophical means by

which the individual makes his literal time catch up with the figurative synthetic time of the totality of matter. Advanced contemporary poetry is thus breathless with scholarship – the *Waste Land*, a poem of four hundred and thirty-three lines, has one learned reference to every eight of these; but it is not breathless with intellect – there is no sign of intellect *per se* in the *Waste Land*. For as soon as an independent mental act needs to substantiate itself historically it ceases to be independent and it ceases to be intellect. It is only rather evasively intelligent.

Such passages as these are the background to the authors' stance towards Eliot throughout *A Survey*. Compare what Laura Riding says here, for example, with what the authors say about 'Burbank with a Baedeker'. Look also at the second section of *Contemporaries and Snobs* – the essay entitled 'The New Barbarism & Gertrude Stein', which first appeared in *transition*, in June 1927, and which the authors revised as the 'Conclusion' to *A Survey* – for a fuller explanation of some of the topics covered there.

The main principle driving *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* forward is to be found in the first five pages of *Contemporaries and Snobs* and is centred upon Laura Riding's thesis that the 'presence of excessive criticism in a time is a sign that it fears its own literature' (p. 16). To put it another way, for a poet to be acceptable in a world over-freighted by criticism he or she must pass the tests of criticism but must not act as a rugged individual, a wholly 'self-reliant' person, in whom each poem is a new, unknown thing, coming from nowhere except the poet's 'blind persistence' in making sense out of nonsense. Criticism enforces a 'Shame of the Person', which is the title of this first section.

At the very least, Graves scholars should be aware of this essay. So far, none has quoted it. This is not to argue that Laura Riding contributed more or less than Robert Graves: both brought to *A Survey* their own strengths in the 'word-by-word' collaboration. It is, however, to argue, that Laura Riding gave shape and form and extensive treatment to the principles underlying *A Survey*, and

they are principles not to be found in Graves's earlier books but which are at the heart of Riding's earlier 1925 essay, 'A Prophecy or a Plea'. And they are to inform her work and her life not just for the next fourteen years during her close working partnership with Robert Graves, but until her death. They were shared principles, too, a point Graves made repeatedly and insistently, as late as in this letter to a friend in Cambridge in January 1934:

I certainly remember that you and I talked about the Sonnets at Litherland, but only about the story of the Sonnets: it is simply untrue that I ever made such analysis of any particular Sonnet. I could not have done so, because it was Laura Riding who originated this exegetic method, i.e., chose the Sonnet not because I had discussed the Sonnet with you or anyone, but because we wanted a 'good' poem to work on that was at the same time a familiar one and presumably intelligible to a plain reader. We worked the whole thing out together at great labour and in pursuance of L.R.'s idea, in the Spring of 1926.<sup>8</sup>

Such mutually-embraced principles explain in large part why other firmly established poets of the time looked askance both at the Riding-Graves critical advocacies, and their working poetic practice, as threatening mainstream conventional poetic wisdoms. Those principles also account for much of what happened during their partnership and later. No one should doubt that each brought to that partnership her and his virtues of knowledge and understanding, and that both flourished happily, by both his and her account, for fourteen years. To diminish either one with regard to the other is a wilfully churlish disregard of the historical record as well as of the obvious affection and love they had for each other.

*Nottingham Trent University*

---

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p.138.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Riding, *Contemporaries and Snobs* (London: Cape, 1928) pp. 123–199.

<sup>4</sup> *Good-bye to All That* (London: Cape, 1929), p. 444 (this ‘Dedicatory Epilogue’ is omitted in the 1957 edition and later).

<sup>5</sup> *In Broken Images: Selected Letters of Robert Graves 1914–1946*, ed. by Paul O’Prey (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> *Essays from Epilogue 1935–1937*, ed. by Mark Jacobs (Carcanet 2001), Introduction.

<sup>7</sup> *Essays from Epilogue*, pp.163–64.

<sup>8</sup> Private collection.

# One Story and One Story Only: Robert Graves's American Reputation

*John Woodrow Presley*

A few years ago, I was asked by the managing editor of the Dalkey Archive Press to consider writing an article on Robert Graves's reputation in America for one of the Press's journals. The precise wording of the request is instructive: 'Why do so few Americans read, or know about, the works of Robert Graves?' The assumptions stand stark: was this editor correct? And if so, what are the reasons for this situation?

Graves's reputation in America as a novelist might be stronger than his American reputation as a poet; many readers of a certain age, once they are reminded that Graves wrote the *Claudius* novels, seem to have a moment of recognition. An ironic reaction, since Graves always maintained that his popular and prize-winning novels were written solely to support his life in Mallorca and his work as a poet. His using the word 'potboiler' and the critical reception of books such as *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* and *The Original Rubaiyyat of Omar Khyayaam* did not help establish his prose works – apparently the BBC production of *I, Claudius* established the few facts of Graves's prose work known to American readers in general.

And even Graves's biographers are, in fact, ambivalent about his poetry. Richard Perceval Graves, after noting that the *Claudius* novels are still widely read and that *Goodbye to All That* 'remains required reading for all students of the First World War', seems much less optimistic about the poetry:

It is *The White Goddess*, which, alongside a handful of Graves's poems, will from time to time have to be translated into more modern English, and will carry his name down the centuries into some remote future.<sup>1</sup>

In the revised edition (1995) of his Graves biography, Martin

Seymour-Smith summarises his view of Graves's work, adding that it had been obvious to those who 'read between the lines' of his 1982 edition, although he suppressed it.

The view is, in brief, that he wrote most of his best poetry between the years 1920 and (approximately) 1950, should never have published *The White Goddess* (as he himself wondered), but because of it eventually fell into a trap the nature of which he had, early (1922) and with wonderful wit, warned himself, in 'Epitaph on an Unfortunate Artist'.<sup>2</sup>

And what has been the effect of this 'high placed' critical ambivalence on Robert Graves's poetry in American academe?

A search of the Modern Language Association International Bibliography for the most recent ten-year period shows a total of forty-eight pieces of scholarship done on Graves in that time – articles, books, chapters, dissertations. Eighteen of those pieces were chapters in Patrick Quinn's *New Perspectives* volume and Ian Firla's *Historical Novels* collection (this last published in Germany). Seven pieces were published in the UK (but not many Americans or their libraries subscribe to *PN Review* or *Cambridge Quarterly*). Ten of the entries do not mention Graves in their titles, so his work is probably of only passing notice in these works. Only three American presses are represented and, most alarmingly, there are no doctoral dissertations listed.

Contrast these results with the results of a ten-year search for W. B. Yeats, which yielded 503 items.

If one searches the standard databases for doctoral dissertations, one will find fourteen listings for Robert Graves in the last ten years. Only one of these dissertations lists Robert Graves in the title – and it was done at the University of York in 2007. In contrast, there are 117 entries for T. S. Eliot and ninety-one for Ezra Pound.

This lack of academic interest exists in spite of the fact that Graves's poetry was praised early on by American critics and despite Graves's friendship with an American icon, Robert Frost.

John Crowe Ransom praised *On English Poetry* in Allan Tate's magazine *The Fugitive*, and considered him to be much more accomplished a poet than the High Modernists so in vogue at the time.

We know that Graves considered America a prime market for his work: in the 1950s he began publishing in America in the *Nation*, the *New Yorker*, the *Hudson Review*, and the *Atlantic Monthly*, to name only the more prestigious journals. In 1958 Graves toured America for a fortnight (what he called in a letter 'just a smash and grab money-raid'). He lectured at Mount Holyoke, for example, and made a not-entirely-successful first appearance on American television – alongside Gypsy Rose Lee – but also lectured at many other prestigious venues such as Dartmouth, Brandeis, Michigan and Texas. In later forays, Graves read in Pennsylvania, New York and Washington, squeezing in meetings with agents, lecturing to the American Academy and Institute of Arts, and receiving, from Robert Frost, the Gold Medal of the National Poetry Society of America. In 1963, Graves spent three weeks in America, a tour during which he delivered the Arthur D. Little Memorial Lecture at MIT, which he later published as 'Nine Hundred Chariots'.

But it was during this period, when Graves's reputation in America was becoming that of a major poet, that Randall Jarrell published his 1956 *Yale Review* article 'Robert Graves and the White Goddess', casting the longest, darkest shadow over Graves's academic and critical reputation in America. It was Jarrell who first advanced the minimalising thesis – grounded in somewhat amateur Jungian psychology – that the White Goddess myth grew out of Graves's personal experience with women. Jarrell summed up his thesis rather viciously:

by making the accidental circumstances of your life the necessary conditions of all lives, you have transformed yourself from an accident-prone analysand into an emblematic Oedipus.<sup>3</sup>

This simplistic, accusatory assumption has had the effect of

tempting everyone – certainly almost every American – writing on Graves to feel justified in an unproductive, and, to many readers, unseemly, fixation on biographical information, whether real and quotidian or speculative. Jarrell's thesis has become a licence to become more interested in the details of an admittedly eccentric life rather than in working with the poetry as poetry. In America, the temptations of the 1956 Jarrell thesis have become more seductive as the years have passed.

Early American academics writing on Graves were most certainly affected by the Jarrell thesis, but wrestled more obviously with the issue of Robert Graves's stature as a minor or major poet. And, for subsequent academics and would-be academics, these early volumes are sometimes the only scholarly works readily available to them (most obviously affecting undergraduates, of course). Using Milner Library at Illinois State University as a fair example of a large, public, research-intensive doctoral institution, one might consider Milner's Graves holdings (and it is relevant to this choice of example that Illinois State's Ph.D. in English Studies has been lauded as a model by the Modern Language Association).

When I arrived at Illinois State in 2003, Milner Library held 55 books by Robert Graves in its collection – poetry, prose, letters, conversations. Milner began its collection in 1920 with *Country Sentiment*, and its last poetry volume is *Collected Poems 1975*. Milner has copies of all three major biographies, but its collections contain only ten volumes of criticism, most published or written in the 1960s. James Mehoke's odd *Robert Graves: Peace Weaver* dates from 1980, as does Robert H. Canary's volume on Graves in the Twayne series and Keane's *A Wild Civility*.<sup>4</sup>

I will not bother to argue here for more funding for academic libraries, though that is certainly not an irrelevant topic. With limited resources, public university libraries must choose their book-purchasing priorities carefully, and literary reputations are reflected in faculty and student use, and are therefore reflected in the choices of where libraries will spend their acquisition dollars.

But more important are the critical opinions in these limited

collections. Throughout the 1960s and well into the 1970s, American critics and literary publishing houses were reluctant to accord Graves the status of a major poet. J. M. Cohen's *Robert Graves* was originally published in Edinburgh, but in 1961 Grove Press in New York made it a title in their Evergreen Pilot Books series. Like most of these early scholars, Cohen spends much of his effort on Graves's mastery, but eventually faces the question: is Graves a major poet? Cohen compares Graves to his 'contemporaries', Rilke and Edwin Muir:

He is however a poet of lesser reach than the poet of the *Duineser Eligien*, who was not content to accept a 'world of discontinuance' but endeavoured to interpret all experience afresh in his myth of the angels. It is rather with Muir that he stands, though Muir is always the more classical poet.<sup>5</sup>

This is in stark contrast to the fact that by the summer of 1961, Graves's reputation was at its highest point, at least in England. He had been elected Professor of Poetry at Oxford, *More Poems 1961* was a triumph, with glowing reviews in *Poetry Review*, the *Spectator* and the *Guardian*.

The author of another of these early studies, George Stade, in his *Robert Graves* (a 1967 title in the Columbia Essays on Modern Writers Series) is remarkably ambivalent when he concludes that 'Robert Graves is a minor poet of major proportions' (whatever that means).<sup>6</sup>

Among these early critics was Douglas Day, an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia when his *Swifter Than Reason* was published. Day was very clear-eyed about Graves's reputation in America.

If it knows of him at all, the general public regards him as a writer of ingenious, if occasionally dry, historical novels [...]. Although his poetry is well known in England, it is (except among specialists, and a small corps of lay enthusiasts) largely ignored in the United States [...].<sup>7</sup>

Day advances possible reasons for this state of affairs: ‘partly because of Graves’s attitude toward the public [...] and partly because of neglect or misunderstanding on the part of critics of contemporary poetry’.<sup>8</sup> And with his third reason, Day addresses the textual issues. ‘There is a final obstacle between Graves and the critic, and it is a large one: the matter of texts’.<sup>9</sup> For each of his collected versions of his poems, as we know, Graves suppressed many earlier poems and frequently ‘drastically revised’ other early versions, with these revisions sometimes extending over several volumes. Even in 1963, any critic working with any of Graves’s poems had to be very aware that the poet’s ideas about that poem either may have changed or might change drastically, as represented in any collection after the poem’s original appearance. As Day put it,

Unfortunately, his critics have seldom done this, with the result that Graves has generally been described as a man whose poetic technique and attitudes toward life have remained almost unchanged and without development since the beginning of his career to the present. This notion is, of course, an absurd one [...].<sup>10</sup>

Daniel Hoffman’s *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* was published in 1967, when he was Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. Hoffman notes the textual difficulties, as had Day, and adds another difficulty to working on Graves’s poems, arising from the fact that Graves had himself provided his own criticism of the poetry, down to ‘the phases of his career and the poet’s estimate of the worth of his own work’. Another common difficulty may first have been noted by Hoffman, what we might call the White Goddess Effect. Hoffman believes that ‘the effect of its rigid doctrine upon Graves’s poetry seems to me to have been, after an initial liberation of imaginative energy, a narrowing of subject and a repetitive treatment’.<sup>11</sup>

In *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (published in 1969, and

distributed in America by Oxford) Michael Kirkham overtly testifies to the textual problem, the self-criticism problem and a new issue – the Laura Riding Problem. The first page of Kirkham’s book describes Laura Riding’s objections to an early version of Kirkham’s ideas, as they appeared in an essay in the *Minnesota Review*. Kirkham points out to the reader that as a result, he had not been ‘able to include for revisions those portions of the article to which she has taken exception’ even though he had responded to Riding’s charge that he was underestimating and simplifying her ‘role in Graves’s intellectual life’. Kirkham even tries to forestall any more Riding objections when, in Chapter 4, he carefully points out that ‘This by no means exhausts the subject of her “influence”, but a thorough investigation would have taken more space than was available to me’. Kirkham goes on apologetically and, he says, admiringly, to speak of the need for a book on Riding. He is, by the way, equally diplomatic about the issue of Graves’s reputation, pointing out that he has ‘avoided classifying his work as either “major” or “minor”, arguing that these are ‘vague categories usually implying standards extrinsic to literary judgment’.<sup>12</sup>

Apparently, the Riding Problem for critics began with a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1962, but she continued her ‘objections’ well into the 1980s, editing, correcting and attacking those who dared write about Robert Graves and her. Perhaps the most documented or explicitly described of these attacks is her 68-page reaction, entitled ‘Vilification Corner’, regarding Seymour-Smith’s Graves biography, in which, Seymour-Smith says, Riding labelled Graves ‘a moral cripple’, with ‘only the appearance of a moral normal [. . .] a being of freakish exceptionality in borrowed human identity’. Seymour-Smith may have been the first to use the phrase ‘Laura Riding Mafia’, citing this group’s description of him as ‘the devil’ or ‘evil’ or at the least ‘a forger’. He says that ‘a thousand and more such heavily corrected pages are in existence’ and that ‘a small amount of this ghastly stuff has been published in obscure journals edited by people with money but no judgment’.<sup>13</sup> In support of my thesis here, I would point out that at

least one of these journals used for this purpose in 1974, the *Denver Quarterly*, is precisely the sort of journal collected by American university libraries, and the sort read by American students of literature.

Neither Riding's constant, ever-vigilant assertion of conspiracies, her constant assertions that Graves had stolen from her *The White Goddess* and *King Jesus* and *The Nazarene Gospel Restored* (among other titles), nor her tactics went unnoticed in the United States. (I was warned about trying to write on Robert Graves for this reason, even as a graduate student slaving in the rare-book rooms in Illinois. When I discovered in these collections a few manuscript drafts of Riding's work – with Graves's drafts of his work on the verso sides – it was as though I had discovered a live grenade in the vaults of the university.) So, at least some people were dissuaded from writing on Robert Graves's or on Laura Riding's work. Her last of these public attacks was published after her death in 1993 – it had been written in 1975.

Other issues arose in the 1960s and 1970s that may have made Graves a less-than-popular subject for study by American academics. First wave feminists of those decades considered Graves a powerful, central thinker, even a founder of their movement. Richard Perceval Graves quotes a letter to Graves from Elizabeth Gould-Davis in 1973: 'I suppose you know that you are a God of the new Movement here'.<sup>14</sup> Not a good connection to make in America's academe of those decades, where at least as late as 1976 graduate students in English using feminism-informed approaches to dissertations were still criticised and academically harassed.

Another negative connection was in regard to the occult. Colin Wilson, who had taught in 1969 at the Dowling Mediterranean Institute, wrote 'at some length' about *The White Goddess* in the second chapter of 'what would become his classic work', *The Occult*. Wilson sent drafts of that chapter to Graves, and apparently Graves was as accepting of this context for the interpretation of his work as he was accepting of the feminist context.<sup>15</sup>

This association with the occult has grown over the years: as readers of the Robert Graves Online Discussion Forums know, the New Reformed Order of the Golden Dawn, one of the larger neopagan organisations, has an e-mail discussion list devoted to *The White Goddess*. And one of the posters there has written a well-researched and well-considered 250-page manuscript on Robert Graves and Wicca. These connections, along with stupid rumours about Robert Graves and the drug trade in the Mediterranean, were retailed in the United States. And immediately after the uproarious 1960s and 1970s, American academics, given the depressed academic labour market that first bottomed out in English literature in 1974, were understandably conservative when choosing topics for dissertations (or any other research).

There are, I believe, still other reasons for the lack of American academic interest in Graves's work. I have written before about the deleterious effects of the Untermeyer anthology on American perceptions of Graves's work.<sup>16</sup> First appearing in 1920, Louis Untermeyer's *Modern British Poetry* was designed to be used in both graduate and undergraduate surveys of British poetry, and its 'New and Enlarged Edition' appeared first in 1964.<sup>17</sup> The Untermeyer anthology is the anthology that most likely introduced the poetry of Robert Graves to the generation of poetry scholars and teachers who are now senior faculty members – and at the most productive points of their careers – in the United States. Graves's work appeared in every edition of Untermeyer, beginning with the 1920 edition – four Graves poems, along with a very short introduction referring to Graves as 'one of the three rhyming musketeers'.

By the time the 1964 edition appeared – its bad proofreading seemingly centred on the Graves section – the Untermeyer collection had dominated in sales and influence for almost five decades, and Graves's poetry was in its mature years. Sixteen Graves poems appear in 1964, preceded by a still very condescending introduction, even if the introduction had grown in length. Others have written about Graves's well-known hostility to

anthology-collectors, and to Untermeyer's in particular, so perhaps Untermeyer's tone may be easily explained. But Graves's reputation has suffered for generations, I believe, as a result of this introduction.

In brief, Untermeyer uses trivialising phrases such as 'rustic simplicity' and 'buoyant fancy' or 'a surplus and careless fertility, with little effort, scarcely with thought' to describe Graves's poetry. From his at one time closest colleague among the War Poets, Untermeyer distinguishes Graves thus: 'fortified by a lighter and more whimsical spirit, where Sassoon is violent, Graves is volatile; where Sassoon grew bitter, Graves was almost blithe in his irony'.<sup>18</sup>

Untermeyer uses 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' and 'The White Goddess' to bolster a perspective that would diminish Graves's reputation for decades. 'Although Graves truculently derided the obscurantists [. . .] his own poetry is not always easy to comprehend.'

[I]n order to appreciate its cryptic lines the reader must have an acquaintance with mythology, the many-titled queen-goddesses, the kings who must die and be reborn at the winter solstice [...] and an understanding of *The White Goddess*.<sup>19</sup>

This is, as I have argued elsewhere, a reductionist and naïve view of the many ways readers may experience Robert Graves's poetry which, I would argue, communicates a complete message with or without the arcane knowledge Untermeyer believes the reader must first bring to the poems. But Untermeyer's thesis, that Graves cannot be understood without reading first all Graves's mythography, has kept readers away from Graves for a half-century and more.

Nor are any of the newer anthologies breaking step with Untermeyer, I'm afraid. The newest, and increasingly popular *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* is perhaps even more condescending to Graves than is Untermeyer's collection. The Norton anthology idolises Riding, to Graves's loss, even when it

gets the facts wrong, as when it gives Riding credit for inspiring William Empson to develop his methodology in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*.<sup>20</sup>

The *Norton Anthology* includes thirteen Graves poems (twice as many D. H. Lawrence poems are included, and twice as many Auden poems). It is an interesting, not particularly eccentric set of poems, including the omnipresent ‘Down, Wanton, Down!’ along with ‘The Devil’s Advice to Story-Tellers’ and the only nod to the goddess story, ‘To Juan at the Winter Solstice’; and one might note that the latest poem included is ‘My Name and I’ from *Poems and Satires 1951* which, while entertaining, it is not a very important Graves poem. The seven paragraphs of the introduction focus again on the First World War years, and on the Laura Riding years. The Norton editors, Richard Ellmann and Robert O’Clair, argue that Graves is not a High Modernist, given his emphasis on intelligibility, and therefore not-quite-mainstream. His influence on poetic form and craft is reduced to ‘his [. . .] frequent epigrammatic tidiness’. The editors consistently use very genteel diction to describe Graves’s poetic aims, and all the while argue for the centrality of *The White Goddess* to an understanding of Graves (contradicting, of course, their point about Graves’s intelligibility):

In advancing his thesis Graves was almost always urbane, and most readers – apart from specialists, who are quite properly outraged by Graves’s speculative foolhardiness – value the book, both for the light it casts on some of Graves’s most beautiful poems (especially ‘To Juan at the Winter Solstice’), and also as a thesaurus of poetic motifs.<sup>21</sup>

This sentence sums up much: Graves’s poetry can be explained by *The White Goddess*, and in his scholarship he is, after all, ‘foolhardy’, so the academic specialists are correctly outraged. But Graves was ‘almost always urbane’. This language is the very exemplar of condescension, I would submit.

Some of this condescension can be explained as a result of the

way American academics have organised the teaching of modern American poetry (or have organised their perceptions of the history of poetry). Modern poetry began to be taught in American universities in the late 1930s, but these courses were offered in earnest only after the Second World War. The first of these taught that the American tradition was descended from Walt Whitman – but, in fact, these courses used the framework of the New Critics and tended quickly to focus on poets whose work lent itself to this approach, such as T. S. Eliot and other High Modernists (to use the language of these courses). Against this High Modernist, academic poetry, periodically any number of poets and schools of poetry which actually did claim Whitman as a progenitor might be taught: the short-lived New York school founded by Kenneth Koch, the Black Mountain poets, including Paul Blackburn and Robert Creeley (who happily admitted to the influence of Robert Graves), and the ‘language poets’ like Charles Bernstein and Cindy Buffalo. Over the years, the High Modernists tended to be the anthologised poets, but after the 1960s anthologies like *The New Naked Poetry*, which was meant to be a teaching anthology, appeared to give cachet once again to the Whitman-esque poets and they began to be taught alongside the High Modernists. So thorough is their influence now that the language poets with their origins and interests in Laura Riding’s work are responsible for the rather surprising popularity of Riding’s poetry and writings on language.

It is rather difficult to situate Graves in any of these currents. He is certainly no descendant of Whitman; nor is he a kinsman of Eliot, though the two admired each other’s work. His closest affinity is with Robert Frost, for whose *Selected Poems* Graves provided an introduction. It is certainly worth noting that while American poetry courses place Frost among the company of Eliot, Williams, Stevens, and Pound, applying the tenets of the New Critics to Frost is in fact a bit of a violent, anti-poetic action. Treating ‘After Apple Picking’ as a stand-alone lyric, for example, when it was clearly meant to be one poem only in the collection *North of Boston*, may make the poem teachable in the paradigm of

the New Critics, but it loses its external connections. And the loss of Frost's aims and aesthetics and ideas, not to mention its biographical connections, is a high price for entrance to the American teaching canon. Perhaps for some of the same reasons, these same preconceptions about American poetry, American academics find Graves difficult to site within the field of British poetry. It is not at all uncommon to talk with American academics teaching modern British poetry who know little about Graves and who in fact simply do not include his work in their courses.

It is, in fact, much easier to find an American with a Ph.D. in English who studies the semiotics of tattoos, or the rhetoric of stress, or the meaning of the regional vocabulary of the public spaces of cemeteries, than it is to discover one interested in the work of Robert Graves. (Not long ago, I was introduced to a new English Department chair as 'a Graves scholar'. The pause was palpable – clearly she was trying to decide what question to ask about cemeteries.)

Now, outside the classroom, criticism of Graves's work becomes more disparaging (and, ironically, much less like the work of the New Critics) with every passing year. One might consider a group of reviews and articles that appeared around 1995, the centennial year of Graves's birth, and a year in which new biographies and new editions of biographies appeared.

In his review of the biographies, Denis Donoghue begins with the astonishing sentence 'Scholars have been blowing on Graves's embers since he died in 1985'.<sup>22</sup> (Donoghue may be Irish, but he holds the Henry James Chair of English at New York University, and is a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Review of Books*, arguably the most important and influential literary review in the United States.) He dismisses Seymour-Smith's biography as 'joyless' because Seymour-Smith recognised that 'the poet, the centre of it, was tedious'. Miranda Seymour, Donoghue says, is too fixated on the women in Graves's life, too pro-Riding.

That Donoghue calls Graves's literary criticism 'sordid' illustrates another issue with Graves's reputation. But Donoghue demonstrates his 'regard' for Graves's poetry by a long section

describing how he would have organised Graves's 1975 *Collected Poems*. He demonstrates his regard for Graves the man by criticising the biographies for not focusing enough on the contradictory, the vindictive, the small-minded in Graves's life – all while parading an accusatory tone and displaying his entertaining skill with diction: 'nymphological disquiet' is one of his creations. One finds this tone in much of the writing about Graves in the major newspaper and review outlets, both in the United States and in the U.K. It amounts to little more than gossip and flaunting of the reviewer's assumed moral superiority, but for readers it is nearly unavoidable.

In a similar review in the *Wall Street Journal* of 24 October 1995, after opining that

Graves's reputation has declined [...]. Graves appears to be in danger of being known primarily as the author of the historical novels upon which the hit television series 'I, Claudius' was based.

the reviewer, Jamie James, continues a fairly positive review of the Seymour biography.<sup>23</sup> But he cannot resist using the word 'gynaecolatry' to describe *The White Goddess* and what he calls its 'purported' thesis. And, like some other reviewers and critics, James is startlingly unfeeling in his descriptions of Graves's last years.

Some of these attitudes are also evident in another Seymour review in the 20 November 1995 issue of the *Nation*, by James Longenbach, a Wallace Stevens scholar. Longenbach, committed to study of the High Modernists, argues that the Seymour biography is flawed by its bias against Laura Riding, so beloved by American poets. Longenbach argues that Riding's 'poetry is unique', and has 'been championed not only by Graves' but also by Auden, Davie, and Ashbery. Nonetheless, even after praising Riding at length, Longenbach declares both Riding and Graves to be minor poets, Graves especially a minor poet 'who turned out love poems almost by rote'.<sup>24</sup> Nor can Longenbach, like so many

other American critics, resist the moral superiority reflected on to himself when he accuses Seymour of soft-peddling ‘Graves’s reprehensible behaviour’ and then retells two episodes regarding Graves’s children, Riding, and his mother, Amy Graves – the reviewer himself attempting to prove, by his overt moral posturing, the truth of the ‘reprehensible’ label he has placed on Graves’s imputed words and actions.

To his credit, Longenbach lauds the Graves love poems, and the early work. He makes the perhaps useful remark that the ‘body of work will need to be winnowed severely, however, if future readers are to see its real value [. . .] after a while, one daffodil looks pretty much like another’.<sup>25</sup> And it may well be that critics hoping for a broader reputation for Graves now need to winnow. Having established a *Complete Poems*, perhaps critics should focus on close reading of the best, the most Gravesian poems in order to argue for the teaching, publishing, studying of these poems.

Though written in 1988 and mentioning prominently only the Seymour-Smith biography and the first volume of the R. P. Graves biography, Robert Richman’s long article in the *New Criterion* is actually a summation of Richman’s view of Graves’s poetry and prose. Richman begins admiringly, speaking of Graves’s ‘extraordinary productivity [. . .] on a scale we associate more with the previous century than with our own’ and Graves’s ‘reputation as a rebel’ and his ‘fame as a cranky individualist’. But Richman too goes quickly to the biographical, arguing that this ‘posture as a rebel’ can only be viewed as ironic, lingering over his thesis that Graves ‘craved guidance’ and over some of the ‘1960-ish’ rumours about Graves, hallucinogens, and the ‘liberated sexual atmosphere’ in Deyá.<sup>26</sup>

Richman seems fixated on the Graves-Riding relationship, even quoting Tom Matthews’s very acerbic account of that relationship. In fact, like so much of the American scholarship on Graves, fully one-third of Richman’s ‘review’ rehearses and repeats the seemingly sordid and the ‘hooks’ on which hang so many barely Freudian interpretations of Graves’s life and work: the ‘mania for

purity' of Amy Graves, the 'bizarre' behaviour toward Riding, the oft-repeated imputed fears of sex and women. It is here, of course, that Richman quotes, most approvingly, the Jarrell thesis 'that Graves's poetry, along with the theory of poetry he constructed around it, was a sublimation of his life with Laura Riding'. Of Jarrell's thesis, Richman writes, 'There is little reason to disagree'.

Richman believes that the White Goddess is an invention, 'the author at his crankiest', its rejection by so many 'anthropologists and literary critics alike' only more reason for Graves 'to intensify his devotion. It was the same kind of devotion he had evinced for Riding, who appears for Graves a rare embodiment of the long-lost Goddess'. The novels, too, were 'means of correcting the false history propagated by various anti-Goddess forces'.

In fact, Richman does credit Graves with 'his advocacy of the plain style' and with the 'refreshingly heady swagger' of *Goodbye to All That*, but he is very dismissive of the fiction, citing Graves's 'refusal to develop original plots or psychologically persuasive character'. Richman is impressed that the novels are popular despite their 'extremely short imaginative reach'.

Richman's reading of the 1975 *Collected Poems* is even more critical, and many of his comments on these are easily recognised as common American critical opinion, but more clearly stated:

[O]ne is struck by how fine some of them are. But one is also struck by how much the verse sinks from the weight of the 'one story and one story only,' especially the later poems [. . .] the bulk of Graves's verse is marred because he persists in addressing the Muse directly instead of allowing the poem to invoke her implicitly. If Graves had not been so often compelled to be literal – that is, anti-symbolical and anti-metaphorical – he probably would have been freer to take on a wider range of emotional and thematic concerns in his verse.<sup>27</sup>

'In Her Praise' is an example, Richman says, of Graves 'discussing his conceptions of the Goddess, rather than presenting

his emotional response to her'. 'Three Times in Love' and 'Crucibles of Love' and 'Depth of Love' are poems in which 'love's power is depleted by Graves's purely intellectual apprehension of it'. To be fair to Richman's ideas, he admires 'A Love Story' for its 'symbolic landscape' and its 'rare chance to get an extra-literal sense of the poet's internal emotional state'. He admires the 'resonant, charged language of 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' and the more generalised female figure there – 'she' could be any woman (one might note here that Richman's ideas about this poem are in sharp contrast to the views of the editors of the two anthologies discussed earlier, all of whom use 'To Juan at the Winter Solstice' as a prime example of Graves's obscurantism). Those poems that succeed are charged with imagery, but 'more common is Graves's literalism, which spoils many of his love poems'. For Richman, most of Graves's best poems pre-date his 'post-Thirties absorption in the Goddess'. He reads 'The Cool Web' as setting the stage for this absorption, but in expressing 'gratefulness for the protection from reality that language affords' it is 'exquisitely written'.

Richman's cruel final judgment is, ironically, based on this admiration for the early work:

[H]is worship of the Goddess prevented him from securing major status as a poet, largely because it led him to adopt an anti-metaphorical, anti-symbolical stance toward poetry (He once characterized this in a letter as his habit of discussing things 'truthfully and factually'). The limited imaginative range of his work – the 'one story and one story only' obviously owes everything to her [the Goddess] as well.<sup>28</sup>

Richman clearly shows the bias of the American literary establishment in his analysis: a fixation on biography and on the Jarrell thesis, to list just two examples. But one is drawn to his insightful analyses of the poems. This combination of skilful close reading and Jarrell-based bias is particularly damaging, one might say, to Graves's reputation in America. Richman's last close

reading here is a reading of ‘Through Nightmare’, which he interprets as ‘a lament for the unfulfilled promise of this enormously gifted, and tragically tormented, writer’. A resounding sentence, but one which embodies both the deleterious biographical bent of American writers on Graves and the assumption of minor status that American critics have accorded to him.

Can those of us who study Graves reverse this assumption and its effects? I would argue that the answer is yes. I applaud, for example, the connection made between the Robert Graves Society and the War Poets Association; as many such connections as are possible with larger groups will provide broader venues for presentations of Graves scholarship. I also applaud the society’s growing reliance on the internet. All that can be done to make Graves scholarship simpler and faster, with internet access to diaries and collections that are now scattered around the world, and all that can be done to help Graves scholarship more rapidly appear in print (especially on the internet) should be undertaken.

While doctoral students are ‘the coin of the realm’ in academe, and Graves scholars should do all that is possible to encourage younger scholars to take up work on Graves, I would argue that it will also be very helpful, with the larger population of readers, if we focus on teacher preparation courses. If teachers working in the lower grades have been taught to rely on Graves’s work as much as they rely on the High Modernists (after all, Graves’s language and ideas are more accessible, by design), these younger readers will grow up with an appreciation of Graves’s work and with ideas about that work that are not now being taught.

Can Robert Graves scholars encourage the use of Graves in non-literature courses? Graves’s work might be a very effective starting point for courses in history, mythology, or archaeology. Even courses in leadership or business ethics might find *I, Claudius* useful for their purposes, for example.

Is it time to ‘winnow’ the Graves canon – especially to help in regard to teacher education programmes?

Is it time for more books and articles on Graves’s influence on

other writers? Or more studies of the traditions of Goddess poets or of the many, very serious poets overtly following bardic traditions?

Is it time to take Graves scholarship to larger venues at every possible opportunity to do so? With popular culture groups growing so rapidly, shouldn't *The Long Weekend* and *The Reader Over Your Shoulder* and others of Graves's works be of great interest? Some of these venues may seem far-fetched: for example, with the rapidly growing academic study of travel and tourism, is Graves's experience in Deyá of interest?

Can Robert Graves's work be used as evidence or illustration of arguments in larger causes, such as in arguing against the commodification of prose by today's publishers and retailers? I have argued that one reason Graves's reputation as a novelist has suffered in America is that he never became a 'brand' that marketers could expect to produce one more detective novel, one more historical novel, one more novel set in Rome or Jerusalem – every Graves book seemed different from the one before, with the hugely meaningful counter example of the two Claudius novels. And of course, Graves's work can be used to argue against the lack of historical approaches to poetry and its traditions in modern and postmodern scholarship.

Graves readers and scholars must attempt to counter the sorts of scholarship and reviewing that I have discussed earlier in this paper. Letters to editors might be a good start with the journals aimed at the widest audiences, and many scholarly journals encourage post-publication dialogues in subsequent issues between their authors and other scholars who disagree. Such public discussion can be very effective, and may be more and more needed, as British journals and newspapers seem to be beginning to take on the same attitudes as have the American journals. Witness the news stories of the reappearance of Aemelia Laraçuen in 2006<sup>29</sup> and a number of reviews of new work in mythology that have used Graves's *The Greek Myths* as a straw man, and a straw man discussed in very dismissive terms.

Graves scholars should look for ways to help in the efforts to

bring Graves's work to the attention of wider audiences. The BBC *I, Claudius* production remains the most popular production ever broadcast on American public television, and until recently the VHS and DVD versions of the production (which very generously included the BBC documentary about the Charles Laughton attempt to film *Claudius, The Epic that Never Was*) were the most popular items for sale in their fund-raising catalogues. Graves scholars should be doing all we can to bring those productions back to American audiences – I have never received a clear answer about the fact that the BBC's production is not re-broadcast – and all we can do to support the making of other Graves movies, plays – and operas and ballets, for that matter.

Possibly most heretical: is it time for Graves scholars to make connections with the Laura Riding Jackson Foundation? Riding scholars have, admirably, spoken at Graves conferences, and there should be more such interactions, especially in America, where the Laura Riding Jackson Foundation is located, and where Riding's work is so highly regarded by American poets and critics. And there may in fact be much to learn from the Laura Riding Jackson Foundation, with its Writers Workshops for students in grades 9–12, a series of workshops that, in cooperation with College Applications Consultants, have reached over 600 student writers (and future readers or scholars). In addition, the Foundation sponsors a series of readings for the public and the popular Vero Beach Book Festival, which between 2005 and 2007 brought 125 writers, including Nobel and Pulitzer prize winners, to an audience that during those three years totalled over 20,000 people – and the Festival was covered by CSPAN2, a national public television network. All these activities help forge connections with the greater public for Laura Riding and her work, as they might also do for Graves – or at least serve as a model to do so.

Robert Graves is known in America, but most typically only by an older generation who learned about his work from the BBC. Clearly many of this older generation went on to read more of Graves's work – as evidenced by the number of Graves books in

print. But many of this generation stopped after reading *Goodbye to All That* and *I, Claudius* (in this past week, a gentleman with an M.A. from Yale asked me, in all seriousness, if Graves had ever written anything else). And a younger generation has not been taught Robert Graves in school, even in college. In the last year I interviewed a young woman who holds a doctorate, and who teaches survey courses in modern British poetry – she had ‘heard’ of Graves, had read a few of his poems, but never mentions his work in her courses. These examples, and my reading of American publications about Robert Graves and his work, combine to make me very pessimistic about the future of Graves’s reputation in America, unless the Graves community can increase the amount of Graves scholarship, can counter the current assumptions about Graves in the popular and literary press, and can successfully reach out to wider audiences to make Graves’s work more widely known and appreciated.

*Illinois State University*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940–1985* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995), p. 513.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. xii.

<sup>3</sup> Randall Jarrell, ‘Robert Graves and the White Goddess’, *Yale Review* (1956), in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. by Mary Jarrell (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), p. 175. (Page numbers in text refer to this 1999 collection.)

<sup>4</sup> Patrick J. Keane, *A Wild Civility: Interactions in the Poetry and Thought of Robert Graves* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), p. 117.

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Canary, *Robert Graves* (Boston: Twayne, 1980); George Stade, *Robert Graves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Day, *Swifter than Reason: The Poetry and Criticism of Robert Graves* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. xx.

- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. xx.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. xiii.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. xiv.
- <sup>11</sup> Daniel Hoffman, *Barbarous Knowledge: Myth in the Poetry of Yeats, Graves, and Muir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. xii.
- <sup>12</sup> Michael Kirkham, *The Poetry of Robert Graves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 274.
- <sup>13</sup> Seymour-Smith, p. ??
- <sup>14</sup> Richard Perceval Graves, p. 481.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 481.
- <sup>16</sup> John Presley, 'Robert Graves: El Poeta y Su Reputación', in *Robert Graves: Una Vida De Poeta* (Madrid: Círculo de Bellas Artes, 2002), pp. 87–115.
- <sup>17</sup> Louis Untermeyer, ed., *Modern British Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1964).
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 382.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 383.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard Ellmann and Robert O'Clair, eds, *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1988), p. 9.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 567.
- <sup>22</sup> Denis Donoghue, 'The Myths of Robert Graves', *New York Review of Books*, 43, no. 6 (4 April 1996), 27–31 (p. 27).
- <sup>23</sup> Jamie James, review, *Wall Street Journal*, 24 October 1995, p. D8.
- <sup>24</sup> James Longenbach, review, *Nation* (20 November 1995), 633–640 (p. 634).
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 634.
- <sup>26</sup> Robert Richman, 'The poetry of Robert Graves', *New Criterion* (October 1988), 1–12 (p. 1), <http://www.newcriterion.com/archive/07/oct88/richman.htm> [accessed 11 October 2004] (Page numbers in text refer to the online version.)
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 11.
- <sup>29</sup> Richard Brooks, "'Goddess" reveals bizarre affair with Robert Graves', *Sunday Times, Times Online* <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article783994.ece> [accessed 20 December 2008]

# Privileging the Personal

*Matthew Betts*

***Robert Graves: A Life*** by Bruce King

London: Haus, 2008. 266 pp. £16.99/\$26.95. ISBN 978 1 905791 94 1

While Bruce King's *Robert Graves: A Life* is the first biography of the poet to be published in over a decade, it is the fourth book of its kind to appear in a period of less than thirty years. This new account of Graves's life follows Martin Seymour Smith's *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (1982), Richard Perceval Graves's three-volume biography (1986, 1990 and 1995) and Miranda Seymour's *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (1995). As a distinguished scholar of postcolonial literature who has published widely on major contemporary writers like Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul and Nadine Gordimer, the author of *Robert Graves: A Life* differs from his subject's previous biographers, each of whom, to quote King himself, wrote from 'outside the university world' (p. 219). This is not to say that King's study is written in an especially academic style since, in many ways, it reads more like a popular biography than a scholarly one, but rather that its author demonstrates a literary historian's awareness of the various cultural contexts that shaped and were shaped by Graves's life and work. These contexts, which include modernism, colonialism, feminism and gay history, significantly open out the restrictive 'one story and one story only' that Graves told about himself and point towards engaging new ways of studying a body of writing that has remained largely ignored by the academy.

King is refreshingly attuned to Graves's habit of 'revising history to justify himself' and works from the principle that a critical sense of 'what he obscured and why [...] helps towards understanding his writings' (p. 9). More so than any of the previous biographies, King's book focuses on Graves's 'schoolboy homoeroticism' (p. 25), his close association (and identification) with a 'well-known circle of homosexuals' (p. 38)

during the First World War and his later, sometimes homophobic attempts to distance himself from these episodes. With this in mind, King explores the idea that Graves may have been a repressed homosexual and that this, along with his imperious mother, may have directly informed both his predilection for domineering women who occupied a 'masculine role' and his subsequent formulation of the Goddess myth. At one point, for example, King cites Graves's relationship with Nancy Nicholson and argues that 'It is possible to see his sudden marriage at the age of 23 to a feminist who dressed in men's clothing and wore her hair short as a way of transferring his acknowledged homoeroticism onto a woman' (pp. 60–1). While speculative, the questions that King raises about his subject's sexuality are valid and productively complicate the avowed heterosexuality of Graves's muse poet persona. By extension, this radical perspective facilitates gay readings of a hitherto unequivocally 'straight' theory of poetry.

King's treatment of *I, Claudius* is equally enabling, as he draws suggestive parallels between the historical events described in Graves's novel and the growing opposition to Western imperialism in India during its composition in the 1930s. According to King, 'Graves had many Indian friends throughout his life' and when writing *I, Claudius* 'he would have been conscious of its relevance to the movement to make the British quit India' (pp. 116–17). Again, this kind of detail is important because it implicitly challenges the perceived insularity and ahistoricity of Graves's work while highlighting its relevance to contemporary theoretical debates. Also striking is the way that King draws on his knowledge of postcolonial literature to reveal that, despite Graves's hostility towards the 'idols' of modern poetry, he expressed public admiration for writers 'from the former colonies' (p. 196) like Derek Walcott and the Indian poet Keki N. Daruwalla, who were at the time considerably less well known. Similarly, King argues that 'Graves's seeming lack of any relationship to the internationalist Modernist movement is deceiving', since 'his writing and thought have many of the same

influences although he took them in different directions' (p. 140). Among these common influences, King cites the aestheticism of the *fin de siècle* and the growing interest in supposedly 'primitive' cultures at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since Graves's critical neglect has been largely attributable to the various oppositions (both real and imaginary) that have always existed between him and the more canonical modernists, this reminder of their shared intellectual background reaffirms his place among the most innovative literary minds of the period.

While King's study is at its most successful when underscoring the lesser-known aspects of Graves's life that enlarge and enrich our sense of his writing, it is, perhaps understandably, given its biographical rather than critical standpoint, less satisfying when dealing with his poetic achievement and, indeed, the poetry itself. King regards Graves first and foremost as 'a romantic who wrote about himself' (p. 5) and makes a case for viewing his poetry as a form of 'autobiography' (p. 60) that 'inspired those who saw art as personal' (p. 216). This, for King, is what sets Graves apart from modernists like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound who promoted (without necessarily practising) a more impersonal aesthetic. Though not inaccurate, such a view tells only half the story and, in some respects, the less interesting half. What makes Graves such a strange and captivating poetic talent, after all, is not so much his romantic sensibility, but rather the fact that he couples this with an unusually rigorous attention to form and sense in a way utterly unlike any other modern poet. Though he moved away from the overt Freudianism of his early poetic theories, Graves always held fast to the argument he made in his first prose work, *On English Poetry* (1922), that the poet 'creates in passion, then by a reverse process of analysing, he tests the implied suggestions and corrects them on common sense principles so as to make them apply universally' (*On English Poetry*, p. 13). This universalising tendency in Graves's poetics is what gives his lyrics the dry, 'emblematic' quality that Donald Davie identified in an important article from the early 1960s and what differentiates them from the more unbridled romanticism of, say, Dylan Thomas's verse.

One senses that King himself finds the unqualified ‘romantic’ label an awkward fit at times, since he fleetingly refers to ‘the satirist who was *also* present in the romantic poet’ (p. 182) and even makes the observation, ‘For a *supposed* romantic he can be very classical’ (p. 47) [emphases mine]. At one point he goes so far as to acknowledge that Graves’s ‘concise lyrics, though of autobiographical origins, have the economy and finish of impersonal objects’ (p. 140), thereby rendering problematic his fundamental distinction between Graves and the ‘impersonal’ modernists. Nothing further is said, however, about this crucial tension and its relation to Graves’s place on the map of modern poetry. By privileging the personal over the impersonal dimensions of the poet’s art rather than showing their interdependence, King occasionally risks casting Graves in the role of a kind of proto-confessional poet, when, in actuality, his mature poems contain little (some might argue too little) of the circumstantial detail or frank personal revelations that characterise the autobiographical lyrics of a poet like Robert Lowell, for example. King allows for this point by arguing that a full understanding of ‘the allusions [to Graves’s life in the poetry] requires knowledge of his relationships’ (p. 60). This may be true and there are certainly many illuminating moments in King’s book where he reveals the messy personal events behind the impersonal sheen of Graves’s verse. At the same time, however, one cannot help but feel that it also invites readers to view the poems not as richly suggestive lyric events in their own right, to adapt Lowell’s famous adage, but as autobiographical documents *about* the private events that gave rise to their composition. This wouldn’t necessarily be a problem if the latter approach hadn’t been the dominant mode of criticism in Graves studies since scholars began writing books about the poet almost fifty years ago. But then the author’s purpose here, as I keep reminding myself, is primarily biographical rather than critical, and while seasoned Gravesians will find few surprises in its pages, for those who are new to the author and his work King’s compact and cogent study provides a valuable point of entry into what remains a fascinating but

dauntingly large field.

**Matthew Betts** was awarded a PhD for his thesis on Robert Graves from the University of York, where he has also taught British and American literature.